



THE REFLECTION

THE REFLECTION

The Emotional Pillar of Axis

A X I S

Alex

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A GIFT WITHOUT A GATE

THIS BOOK IS free. Not because it lacks value, but because it came from a place that never belonged to me to begin with.

The Reflection is the story of what happens when a person stops chasing approval, releases external goals, and turns inward to face everything truthfully, brutally, and patiently. It began as a way to track my progress in bodybuilding and reflect on my life. But over time, it became something else entirely. It became a mirror.

I started this journey with plans: business plans, gym plans, wellness coaching ideas, even the dream of making a name for myself in the fitness world. But over time, those ambitions fell away. What stayed, and what grew, was the conversation I was having with myself. A conversation about healing, ego, suffering, surrender, and above all, truth.

The deeper I went, the more I realized this is not a brand. It is a reckoning. This is not a product. It is a witness. I did not write this book to sell you something. I wrote it to remember who I was and who I was becoming.

I have walked through addiction, self-hate, trauma, spiritual terror, and mirrors that showed me things no religion ever prepared me for. In those depths, I found a rhythm, what I now call The Source. Not a god in the sky. Not a doctrine. But something living, quiet, and present.

This book is my offering. There are no ads. No upsells. No hidden agenda. Just a voice speaking plainly, hoping that something in these pages touches the part of you that is also searching. But know this: the truth in these pages does not belong to me. It is yours now, just as it always was. Welcome to *The Reflection*.

Let's begin.

BEFORE YOU ENTER THE MIRROR

THIS BOOK DOES NOT need your admiration. It does not need your judgment either. It asks for something harder than both: your honesty.

What follows is not meant to be read as a performance of suffering, a polished identity, or a life arranged to make sense too neatly. It is not here to convince you that pain makes people profound. It is not here to prove that struggle automatically becomes wisdom. And it is not here to offer one man's story as a model for who anyone else should become.

It is here for a simpler reason: to tell the truth closely enough that something real can be seen. Not just about me, but about being human. That is the threshold.

If you enter this book looking only at my life, you may miss what it is offering. If you enter it trying to measure me, agree with me, disagree with me, rank my pain, or compare my path to your own, the deeper function of the book will stay partially closed. But if you enter it willing to notice your own reflections while reading mine, the book opens differently. Then it stops being a story you are observing from the outside. It becomes a surface that shows you something back.

That is why I think of this book as a mirror. Not because it contains all the answers. Not because everything in it is clear. Not because I have arrived anywhere final. But because honesty, when held still long enough, begins to reflect more than the person who first spoke it. It begins to reflect patterns, wounds, defenses, longings, and things buried so deeply in ordinary life that many people stop noticing they are there at all.

This book is for anyone who has felt pieces of themselves drift out of reach. Anyone who has lived through grief, addiction, confusion, shame, longing, love, or the slow effort of trying to become more whole without pretending to be finished. It is for people who do not need a hero, only something real enough to help them see more clearly.

This also is not a timeline. It is a mosaic. If you came here expecting a traditional memoir, this probably is not that. There is no single story being told from start to finish. Instead, this book moves more like life does: in memories, realizations, moments, and small turning points that overlap and circle back. Some chapters are stories pulled straight from my life, things I have lived through, mistakes I have made, people I have loved, and losses I have had to carry. Others are reflections, thoughts

that came later, once time and distance gave me enough room to understand what they meant. A few are not only about me at all. They are about life itself, the quiet details, the simple truths, and the moments that say more than words can.

The order of these chapters is not random, but it is not linear either. Each one connects to the others in a way that is meant to be felt, not just followed. Sometimes a chapter may echo something that came before or answer a question from pages back. That is intentional, because healing, growth, and understanding do not happen in straight lines. They happen in spirals.

This book was written the same way it was lived, one reflection at a time. Every part was written in the middle of real life: on late nights after work, on drives to the gym, between moments with my family, and in the quiet hours when I was trying to make sense of everything. Over time, those reflections became a mirror of what it means to fall apart, rebuild, and live differently.

So do not read this like a story with a beginning and an end. Read it more like a conversation, one you can enter from anywhere and still find something true. The goal is not to reach the last page. It is to see something in yourself along the way.

This book was also written across more than two years. Because of that, the voice will change. Some chapters are raw and searching. Others are steadier, quieter, and more grounded. Certain ideas resurface. Some realizations appear more than once, approached from different angles at different stages of my life. That repetition is intentional. Each entry was written as it arose, not rewritten later to conform to a single voice or perspective. I chose not to smooth out those differences or revise earlier chapters to match who I became later, because the evolution itself is part of the story.

If parts of this book sound like arrival, they are not meant that way. They are records of moments when I could see clearly for a little while. Some chapters speak with certainty because that is how clarity felt when it arrived, but this book is not the voice of a finished man. It is the record of someone learning to keep looking.

What you are reading is not a polished retrospective. It is a record of becoming. The shifts in tone, clarity, and language mirror the changes in the man writing them. Understanding does not arrive all at once. It returns in cycles, deepening each time. I have left that process visible on purpose.

So as you read, do not ask, “Do I relate to every detail?” Ask instead, “Where does this touch something I already know?” Do not ask, “Is this man right about everything?” Ask, “What becomes visible in me while I’m reading this?” That is the better use of the book.

Because *The Reflection* is not trying to hand you a conclusion. It is trying to create recognition. Within Axis, this is the story pillar, the emotional ground, the human

record beneath the framework, the place where memory, grief, change, and meaning are allowed to speak before they are organized into method. If the other books help build structure, this one helps reveal why structure was needed in the first place.

As you move through this book, you'll notice that some chapters include short Author's Reflections at the end. These were added later, after more time, more growth, and more understanding. When I first began writing *The Reflection*, I didn't realize I was writing a book at all. Each piece came from the present moment, written exactly as I felt at the time. But as the years passed, my understanding of certain experiences evolved. My views changed. My relationship with psychedelics, spirituality, discipline, and even love deepened in ways I couldn't have seen back then.

Rather than rewriting the past to match who I am now, I chose to keep those early words intact and meet them where they are. The reflections that follow some chapters are my way of honoring that evolution. They exist not to correct the past, but to give it context. You'll see where my thinking expanded, where fear became understanding, and where seeking became becoming.

So come to it openly. Not to admire. Not to analyze from a distance. Not to search for a finished man. Come to it the way you would come to a mirror after a long time spent avoiding your own eyes: quietly, honestly, and willing to see more than you expected.

What you are holding is not a single snapshot of who I was. It is a continuum, a record of how truth reveals itself over time, if you are willing to keep looking.

ARC I — THE DESCENT

Where the breaking becomes the beginning. There's a moment in every life when you stop running from yourself. Not because you want to—but because you must.

That's what *The Descent* is about. It's not a fall from grace. It's the slow, necessary collapse of everything false. The unraveling of the stories, identities, and illusions that once felt safe but no longer fit.

This first arc is the breaking open. It's where addiction, grief, and truth collide. It's where I stop numbing long enough to feel. Where I face the deaths that shaped me—the death of my brother, my father, the version of myself I lost in alcohol—and begin the long climb back.

These chapters trace the shape of that descent: **The childhood that built me**, the home that never left me. **The grief that split me**, the losses I never processed. **The addiction that drowned me**, and the vision that finally made me stop running. What unfolds here isn't meant to glorify suffering. It's meant to *understand* it—to show that healing starts the moment we tell the truth about what broke us.

You'll see moments of love and loyalty, failure and guilt, faith and collapse. But most importantly, you'll see the spark that refused to die—the one that eventually led to sobriety, self-awareness, and the creation of everything that came after. This is where *The Reflection* begins. Not in light, but in shadow. Not in answers, but in the questions that wouldn't stop burning.

Everything that follows—the philosophy, the systems, the growth—was born here.

Inside the dark.

Welcome to The Descent. This is where I stopped hiding and started becoming.

INTRODUCTION

THIS ENTIRE PROJECT BEGAN with a single question: “I wonder what would happen if I told everything about my life in as much detail as possible.” That question sparked another: “Would something, anything, begin to shift if I told the whole truth and left nothing out?” And so, I began.

I didn’t know what I was building at the time. I just knew I needed a place where I could work through every aspect of my life, where I could reflect honestly and challenge myself to grow physically, mentally, and spiritually. What I found was more than a journal or a thought exercise. It became something far more meaningful. It became a mirror, a method, and a map forward.

From the very beginning, I committed to full honesty. I left no part of my story out no matter how dark, difficult, or vulnerable. I came here with my addictions, my fears, my grief, my questions, my philosophies, and my hope for something more. This space became the place where I could process it all.

I’ve used these reflections as a companion in my journey. I’ve returned here to explore the big questions, but also the quiet thoughts that linger after a long day. I’ve come to this space when I was confused, when I was on the verge of transformation, when I needed to make sense of pain, and when I simply wanted to understand the next step in becoming the man I know I can be.

I’ve revisited my past not to relive it, but to re-see it through clearer eyes and a wiser heart. The process of returning to the events that shaped me has allowed me to integrate what once felt fragmented. I’ve come to understand my actions and thought patterns in ways that used to be invisible to me. And more than anything, I’ve learned how to reflect without judgment.

This isn’t just a book of emotional journaling. It’s a record of psychological, philosophical, and creative exploration. It’s where I’ve experimented with ideas about art, shared thoughts on spiritual awakening, examined dreams and symbols, and documented my transformation through bodybuilding. It’s where I’ve explored the link between mind, body, and soul trying to find balance between them all.

What’s most powerful about this process is that it hasn’t been limited to one lens. It’s encompassed every part of me. I haven’t separated my personal growth from my physical growth, or my philosophical questions from my real-life decisions. It’s all

connected. And because of that, every conversation here has contributed to a deeper understanding of who I am and who I want to become.

This has never been about venting or performing. I haven't been chasing likes or seeking sympathy. I've been building something real. This space has become one of the most valuable tools I've ever had for long-term self-development. It's helped me clarify my intentions, confront uncomfortable truths, and stay rooted in the bigger vision of what I'm trying to create, not just for myself, but for those I love.

Through it all, I've come to understand what real growth looks like. I've learned how to take ownership of my choices, how to embrace discomfort as a sign of transformation, and how to hold space for both the light and the dark parts of myself. These insights have changed the way I live, train, think, and love.

This journey began with a simple question. And now, here you are with the details of what happened next. Welcome to The Reflection.

MY IMAGINARY FRIEND

I HAD AN IMAGINARY friend when I was a kid. His name was Allen and I remember him clearly. He wasn't some fantastical creature or shadowy figure. He was just a kid, like me. Normal. Playful. He was small enough to fit in the palm of my hand and would often ride on my shoulder as I walked through the house or sat in the backseat of the car. He never spoke much, or maybe he did, and I just don't remember the words. What I do remember was the feeling: he made being alone feel less lonely.

My siblings were older, much older. My brother, as far back as I can remember, was already married and out of the house. My sister and I were close when I was little, but she was eleven years older than me, and she moved out around the end of my second-grade year. That would've made me about seven. After she left, the house got quiet in a different way. Not sad, just emptier. And maybe that's when Allen showed up.

He wasn't scary. He wasn't even odd to me. He felt natural, like someone who had always been there. A friend I didn't have to explain to anyone. My parents never knew about him, at least not that I knew. He only showed up when I was alone, and I never felt the need to bring him up. That's just how children's imaginations work sometimes. But there was one thing that always stuck with me:

On long drives with my family, I used to picture him running alongside the car. He'd leap from mailbox to mailbox, telephone pole to fence post, keeping pace with us the whole way. He wasn't sitting in the car with me. He was out there, free and in motion, never falling behind. I didn't talk to him during those moments, but I was aware of him, like he was a secret part of the landscape only I could see.

He faded as I got older. No big goodbye, no final moment. Just one day, he was gone. I had more real-world things to focus on, and I guess I didn't need him anymore. But looking back, I think he was more than just a figment of childhood imagination. I think he was the first sign of how deeply my inner world would always matter to me.

He might have been a placeholder for connection, or even a mirror for my early curiosity. In some ways, I like to think the same part of me that created Allen is the part that later turned to art, music, introspection, and psychedelics. He wasn't there to entertain me. He was there to be with me. Not to distract from the world, but to remind me that I could carry something unseen and still feel full.

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I don't think I've ever told anyone about Allen until now. But he was real to me. And he was mine. Just one of many quiet truths from a childhood that, like all childhoods, was more complex than it looked from the outside. And even though he never came back, I sometimes wonder if parts of him live on in the voice I write with or maybe even in my method of reflecting.

Maybe he was the beginning of me talking to someone who wasn't there. So that one day, I'd learn how to really talk to myself.

THE HOUSE THAT HELD EVERYTHING

IT WAS JUST A house. Brick walls. A sloped roof. A backyard with a pool that shimmered in the summer sun, where I swam almost every day as a kid. But to me, it became the thread that held every version of myself together.

I moved into that house at the beginning of third grade. My sister had just gotten married and moved away with her new husband, who was becoming a Marine. And I stayed behind—back in the town I'd come to know, with a new neighborhood and new friendships waiting just around the corner. That house became the backdrop to my golden years of childhood, the ones I remember most vividly.

I made three close friends in those early years. One lived next door, one up the street, and one in the neighborhood behind my house. That neighborhood, with its quiet looping streets, is where I rode my bike for hours. After homework, I'd head out and ride until the sun dipped below the rooftops. It was freedom, in its purest form. No plans, just movement, just joy, uninterrupted.

Inside the house, video games were another constant. The original Nintendo and Super Nintendo, classic consoles that filled quiet afternoons with pixelated adventures. It was a time of comfort and connection, before anything got complicated. But things did get complicated.

In seventh and eighth grade, I attended a Christian school. It was supposed to instill structure and faith. What it revealed to me instead was hypocrisy and spiritual rigidity that didn't align with the kindness I'd been raised with, especially from my mom. I failed eighth grade that year. This was not from lack of intelligence, but from a quiet internal rebellion. I didn't feel like I belonged there. I transferred back to public school, repeated the year, and everything bounced back. My grades rose. My spirit lifted. But my beliefs had changed. That school helped break my blind allegiance to organized religion, and I never really went back.

I was sixteen when my brother died by suicide. It was in the bathroom just feet from my bedroom in that house. That house absorbed the echo of grief. It soaked in the silence, the confusion, the long nights. That loss was the axis on which my life turned. The house didn't protect me from it, but it didn't abandon me either. It stood there. Still. Solid. Holding space.

I stayed in that house through my drug and alcohol years. Through teenage heartbreak. Through chaos and numbness. And eventually I left, joining the Marine Corps, getting married, and starting a new chapter.

My mom and dad still lived in the house when I left for the Marines. My dad passed away within the first year of my service, and my mom remained in the house after that. For a long time, I didn't know if I'd ever return. I thought I'd be a lifer, twenty years in the Corps, maybe even cross over to the officer side. But something shifted ten years in, during my final enlistment. After what happened with my wife's pregnancy, after the military sent me on an exercise while she faced life-threatening complications, I knew I couldn't re-enlist again.

That's when the thought first came to me: I wanted to go home. Not just to visit but to reclaim my childhood home. I told my mom I wanted to buy it from her when I got out. She had plans to move into her mother's smaller home with her brother anyway. For her, it meant downsizing. For me, it meant starting over, not just geographically, but personally. I didn't want to stay in North Carolina, surrounded by people who already had a fixed idea of who I was. I wanted to return to the house that had seen me at my best and worst and become something entirely new within its walls. And that's what I did. I came home. I bought the house from my mom. I brought my wife and daughters into the same space where I grew up. And that house, like it always had, held us.

This is the house where I live now. Where I swim with my daughters in the same pool I swam in as a child. Where I sit quietly and type out thoughts for *Project Aeon*. Where mushrooms revealed the edges of the universe and heartbreak revealed the depths of love.

This is not just a house. It is the vessel that has carried me through every stage of my becoming. It is the house that held everything. And now that story continues, not just through me, but through my daughters. I see it every day in the way they run through the same rooms I once did. In the way they play together, curled up on our bed with their iPads, completely absorbed in whatever world they're exploring. Sometimes, I sit in the corner of the room and just watch them. The way they talk to each other, the little gestures, the laughter. It all washes over me in waves of warmth and memory. And it's not just the echoes of my past I see in them, it's also the mirroring. My youngest daughter now sucks her thumb, just like I did. Recently, she found a blanket and immediately attached herself to it the way I once did to mine. She carries it everywhere now. That soft piece of fabric means something sacred to her, and to me, because I remember. I remember how much mine meant. I remember the

time I left it at a hotel, and my mom convinced my dad to turn the car around and drive 100 miles back just to get it.

These little reflections of my own childhood are not just sweet, they're profound. They're proof that something has come full circle. That the house which once held my innocence, my sorrow, my rebellion, and my healing now holds their laughter, their wonder, and their becoming. And I watch it all. Not as a bystander, but as a father who remembers what it meant to be small and full of dreams inside these same walls. I honor every moment, because I know how fleeting they are.

This house continues to grow with us. Not because the walls have changed, but because we have. And still, it holds everything.

Author's Reflection — April 2026

When I wrote this chapter, I mentioned my daughter's blanket and how it mirrored my own. I told the story of my mom convincing my dad to drive 100 miles back to a hotel just to get mine. What I didn't say was that I kept that blanket for years. Through childhood, through my teens, through my early 20's, through everything. It stayed folded in the top drawer of my chest of drawers, quiet and close, like a piece of the boy I was before the weight arrived.

When I was getting ready to leave for the Marine Corps, it was going to come with me. But while I was away, my wife's father helped move some of our things. He loaded the chest of drawers onto the back of his truck and left it there overnight, even after my wife told him the neighborhood wasn't safe. By morning, the truck had been broken into. The chest of drawers was gone. My clothes were gone. And so was the blanket I'd had since I was three years old.

I never got it back. I never will. I don't tell that story for sympathy. I tell it because of what it taught me, even before I understood it. I don't let go of things voluntarily. I hold on until something takes them from me. My brother. My dad. My blanket. I carried all of them as long as I could, and when they were taken, the absence stayed.

That is part of why I build the way I build. It is why the archive exists. It is why the chapters are written down instead of only remembered. It is why The Reflection is bound and waiting on a shelf for my daughters. I know what it feels like to lose something irreplaceable that you assumed would always be there, and I know this now: the things you preserve on purpose are the only things that survive.

My daughter doesn't know any of that yet. She just knows she loves her blanket. She carries it the same way I carried mine, everywhere, without question, because it makes the world feel smaller and safer. I hope hers stays with her longer than mine stayed with me. But if it doesn't, she'll still have something I didn't: a record of what it

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meant, written down by a father who learned the hard way that the things you love don't always wait for you to be ready to lose them.

I STILL CARRY HIM

IT WAS JUST LIKE any other high school afternoon for me. I was babysitting my sister's kids. It was a completely normal day, quiet and ordinary. My brother stopped by that afternoon. Nothing seemed obviously wrong, but something about him was different. I wouldn't have called it sadness, not even depression, just distant. There was a kind of stillness behind his eyes like something had already left.

He told me he was going to see his wife. And my gut just wouldn't let it go. I offered to go with him. "I can come with you if you want." He told me no. Not mean. Not even cold. Just final. Like the decision had already been made a long time ago. So, I let it go. Only later would I find out he didn't go to see his wife. He went back to my childhood home. My home now. He took our dad's rifle and a bottle of liquor, locked himself in the bathroom and took his own life in that bathtub.

My mom came home and found the bathroom door locked. She tried the handle. Nothing. She got down on the floor and reached her fingers under the door out of instinct, that deep maternal panic and when she pulled her hand back, it was covered in blood. She called the police. The ambulance. Then me. When she told me, something in me shattered. I wept uncontrollably. I panicked. I didn't even know what to do. My sister came home from work, and together we went to my parents' house. That whole day is a blur. My brain must've shielded me from parts of it. I remember moments, flashes but the rest is just darkness.

What followed wasn't a single collapse. It was slow decay. I buried it all, drowned it in alcohol, numbed it with distraction. I didn't talk about it. I didn't even know how. I used to sit in that same bathroom. I'd smoke weed in there. I don't know why exactly. Maybe because it kept his presence close. I didn't feel afraid in that room, not even once. If ghosts were real, I knew he wouldn't hurt me. Honestly, I think I hoped to see him. I would've welcomed it. His death did something to me. It didn't just take him. It stole my sense of control, my ability to keep people safe. And maybe that's why, to this day, I carry so much. Why I always drive forward. Why I feel the need to handle everything myself. It's because I never want to feel that helpless again.

For years, I carried guilt. "What if I had gone with him?" "Could I have changed it?" "Was there a sign I missed?" Eventually, I did the work. I went back through it, piece by piece. And I came to terms with the truth. This wasn't something I could have

stopped. I offered. I showed up. But this wasn't about me. This was his pain. His choice. But I'll say this, that version of me, the boy who asked if he needed me, that version never left. He's still here. He's in the way I show up for people. He's in the way I sense when something's off. He's in the way I try to carry weight for everyone around me.

It's not a flaw. It's a scar. And it's a gift. Because I've seen death up close. And instead of letting it kill something in me, it lit something on fire. I decided to live harder. To fight for my life. For my peace. For my family. For the kind of man I wanted to become.

His death led me deeper into alcoholism. But that path, dark as it was, eventually led me to psilocybin. And that led to the vision that changed everything. I saw my own death. I saw my wife and daughters without me. Just like his wife and kids were left behind. And that night, I broke down on the bathroom floor, the same room where he died. I cried like I hadn't cried in years. I begged for another chance. I swore I wouldn't let it end that way. And that was the night I quit alcohol for good. Cold turkey. No rehab. Just pure, soul-deep resolution.

In that moment, it felt like my brother reached back through the veil and whispered, "Don't follow me." And I didn't. I chose life. Not like a weight. Like a witness. He's with me in the way I show up for my kids. In the way I train. In the way I love my wife. In the way I come here to reflect, to be honest, to get better. I never stopped trying to say what I offered him that day.

"I'll go with you if you want me to." And in a way, through this long, sacred journey I've walked ever since, I finally did.

I walked both of us home.

Author's Reflection — February 2026

When I first wrote this chapter, I was still trying to understand the night that finally made me quit drinking. Psilocybin was part of that story because it forced me to see where my life was heading, but it was never the whole story. The deeper truth was my brother, my family, and the unbearable recognition that I could repeat the same ending if I did not change.

Over time, as Project Aeon developed, I started to understand the difference between a vision and a life. The vision showed me the danger. It gave the truth a shape I could not ignore. But the work that followed was not psychedelic. It was human. It was sobriety, honesty, training, reflection, marriage, fatherhood, and the daily refusal to disappear.

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That distinction matters. The experience opened the door, but love is what made me walk through it. My brother's death was not healed by a trip. It was carried differently because I finally became willing to live in a way that answered it.

THE UNEXPECTED CATALYST

WHEN I LOOK BACK now, it's almost strange how long it took me to understand why I ever fell into drinking, drugs, and self-destruction in the first place. I didn't have the story people expect. I didn't grow up in a broken home. I wasn't abused or abandoned. I wasn't hardened by cruelty or trauma. I grew up surrounded by love. Good parents. Good memories. A good life.

For the longest time, that's what made it so confusing. How could someone like me, blessed with so much good, still fall into darkness? It wasn't until years of reflection, until sitting with the memories, turning them over, looking at the parts I didn't want to see, that a clear pattern finally revealed itself. It happened after my brother died. And it happened through the hands of a young relationship I wasn't prepared to navigate.

When my brother passed away, I didn't just lose a sibling. I lost something I didn't even know I was still building inside myself. Grief broke open a place in me I didn't yet know how to guard. The girl I was dating at the time couldn't understand. She wasn't cruel intentionally. She was young. She had never lost someone like that before. She didn't know how to support someone drowning in grief and instead of feeling understood, I felt isolated, ashamed, and invisible. She would get frustrated that I spent so much time with my family after the funeral. She made comments that wounded me even deeper, telling me I acted like my whole world had ended. And in a way it had.

When that relationship ended, what followed wasn't just a breakup. It was the beginning of me slipping into a different version of myself. I found new friends, people who were already numbing their pain with drinking and drugs. And without even fully realizing it, I joined them. Not because anyone forced me. Not because anyone made me. Because I made that choice.

It would be easy to point to the death of my brother. Or to the failures of that young relationship. Or to the loneliness that filled the spaces in between. But the truth is none of that excuses the choices I made. It shaped the environment. It opened the door. But I was the one who walked through it. I had a loving family. I had a strong foundation. I had people who would have helped me if I had asked. But instead of reaching for them, I reached for the bottle. And that's on me.

Even as I unravel all the threads that led to my downfall, I refuse to frame myself as a victim. I refuse to pretend like my choices weren't my own. Because they were. And that's why my story matters. It's not because it's about suffering, but because it's about sovereignty. About reclaiming responsibility. About choosing to become something more when no one else could do it for me.

If there's one thing I hope comes through in every page of this story, it's this: I didn't stay fallen. I didn't stay broken. I didn't blame the world. I faced the man I had become. And I built a new one, one brick at a time. Not because it was easy. Not because it was glamorous. But because it was the only way to honor the life, the love, and the lessons I had been given from the very beginning.

THE FREAK YEARS

I DON'T KNOW WHY I never wrote this chapter sooner. Maybe because it didn't feel as heavy as the alcohol years, or as dramatic as the Marine Corps, or as painful as everything that came after. But the older I get, the more I realize this era was a turning point too, a strange, beautiful little world where I was the closest thing to unbroken I'd ever be.

People today would probably call it my "nu-metal phase," but that doesn't do it justice. That era was full-sized. It had its own temperature, its own music, its own language. You couldn't shrink it down to a category if you tried. We weren't goth. We weren't emo. We were freaks.

That's what everybody called us, including ourselves. And it wasn't an insult. It was an identity. It was a flag. We were the kids in oversized Tripp pants, chain wallets, band shirts that smelled like cigarette smoke and sweat from the last garage session. Half of us had dyed hair, piercings, and thrift-store jackets. The other half were just like me, no tattoos, no eyeliner, no dyed hair, but spiritually carrying the same frequency. I didn't need the costume to identify with the tribe. The music did that for me.

Korn. Deftones. Slipknot. Tool, always Tool. And then the outliers that didn't fit the aesthetic but somehow fit me: Journey, Prince, Van Halen, Foo Fighters, Panic! at the Disco, Dave Matthews, John Mayer. I was a walking contradiction and didn't care. I'd scream one minute and sing the next. I liked vocals that meant something, whether they were cracked or clean.

That era was where my voice really lived. Not the voice I'm using now, the one that writes chapters and talks about healing and philosophy, but my literal voice. The one I sang with. The one I screamed with. The one that came from the deepest part of my chest and somehow made me feel more alive than anything else I was doing.

It's funny, I'll let the whole world read everything in this book and I won't flinch, but I still can't sing in front of anyone sober. It's the last door I haven't opened yet. But back then, I didn't think twice. I had a mic in front of me, a band behind me, and a whole lot of pain I didn't know how to talk about yet. Singing became the one place where I didn't have to explain myself.

The freak era was also when I did some of my earliest digital art. I designed our band's album cover. I stayed up late editing photos on a cheap computer, teaching myself with nothing but instinct. My brother taught me how to play keyboard by ear, listening for the notes until my hands found them. I'd go from drawing, to writing lyrics, to practicing vocals, to messing with chords on the keyboard, all before the world ever tried to tell me who I was supposed to be.

This was before the Marine Corps. Before alcoholism. Before the shame years. Before reflection. Before any sort of collapse. I wasn't burdened yet.

I was chaotic, sure, doing ecstasy with friends, smoking weed, drinking too young, living too fast, but it wasn't the same darkness I fell into later. This wasn't hopelessness. This wasn't self-destruction. This was experimentation. A search for connection. A search for feeling. A search for something bigger than the life I had access to. I wasn't spiraling. I was wandering.

And the truth is, I still look back on those years with more warmth than shame. Even though I made stupid decisions, even though I did things I'd never do today, those were some of the most vibrant years of my adolescence. There was something pure about that chaos. Something human. Something young and impossible to recreate. That era didn't save me, but it shaped me.

It gave me my first real outlet, my first creative identity, my first feeling of belonging, my early philosophy, my early spiritual questions, my sense of rhythm and expression, my ability to perform, my love for art and music, and my awareness that people are complicated, including me. And it also gave me grief. My brother died during those years.

Sometimes I wonder if that's why the freak era attached itself to me so hard afterward, because everything was stripped down after his death. The world got quiet in places I didn't know existed, and the loudness of the music filled the silence he left behind. I didn't know how to talk about grief back then, but I knew how to scream it. I knew how to sing it. I knew how to drown inside songs that understood me better than people did.

And even though I eventually moved past that era, swapped the baggy pants for uniforms and regulations, I never left it behind entirely. It's still sitting somewhere in my internal architecture. I carry it the same way I carry childhood memories or old scars. It was the last version of me that hadn't been broken yet.

Not perfect, not innocent, but unfiltered. Untouched by the shame that would come years later. Untouched by the addiction that would swallow me whole. Untouched by the exhaustion of adulthood. It was the version of me that still had room to burn.

People talk about “phases” like they’re disposable, like they don’t matter, like they’re just costumes we try on and outgrow. But that era mattered. It mattered a lot. It wasn’t a costume. It was a language I needed before I knew how to write. It was discipline before I had discipline. It was community before I had mentors. It was expression before I had words. It was the spark before the fire.

And the older I get, the more I understand that the freak years weren’t some embarrassing footnote. They were the beginning of every creative thing I’ve ever done.

I wasn’t refined. I wasn’t healed. I wasn’t disciplined. I wasn’t wise. I was just alive. Loud. Searching. Feeling everything too deeply and not knowing what to do with it yet.

And that version of me, baggy pants, microphone, keyboard, grief, art, chaos and all, still lives somewhere inside the man I am now. He wasn’t a mistake. He wasn’t a warning. He was my first chapter. And he deserves to be remembered.

THE YEARS I LOST MYSELF (AND THE FRIENDS I LOST WITH THEM)

THERE WAS A STRETCH of my life that feels like a different lifetime now. It wasn't just about alcohol or drugs. It was about drifting so far from who I really was that I barely recognized myself. And the truth is, I wasn't alone. The people I surrounded myself with during those years reflected where I was mentally and emotionally. I was lost, angry, and trying to belong to something, even if that something was broken.

After my brother died, I pulled away from everything that felt good and safe. Instead of reaching out, I folded in. And the people I pulled close during that time? They were mostly drinking buddies. They were people I could get high or drunk with. People who didn't ask questions I wasn't ready to answer. They became my comfort zone, even when the comfort was laced with self-destruction.

One of the earliest friendships during that time was with a guy I had known since childhood. We had history. And back then, history was enough for me to ignore a lot of things I shouldn't have. He said racist things often, and without shame. And here's the part that's hardest to admit, I went along with it.

I wasn't racist. I had African American family members, and I knew better. But I was weak then. I was desperate for friendship, for familiarity, for someone to see me and not ask me to change. So, I laughed when I shouldn't have. I let it slide. I said things I'm not proud of. And I did it all knowing deep down it didn't sit right with me. That's the part that haunts me more than anything, the knowing.

It wasn't until another mutual friend entered the picture that I started to question it more openly. That friend wasn't racist, and his presence gave me the space and courage to start pushing back. It wasn't immediate. It took time. But over the last year of that friendship, I stopped going along with the jokes and the language. I started confronting it. Quietly at first. Then, more directly. And then I fell in love with my wife. That changed everything.

Falling in love with her made it impossible to keep pretending. She was African American so I knew that staying in that friendship, letting those things slide, would be a betrayal of everything I was starting to believe in. Everything I was trying to become. So, I walked away from him and even the mutual friend. I walked away from that whole phase of my life, and I never went back.

Looking back now, I don't blame anyone for my choices. Not even that friend. I made those decisions. I tolerated things I shouldn't have. I contributed to behavior I should've rejected. And I carry that. But I also know I'm not that man anymore. I haven't been for a long time. And part of making peace with that past is telling the truth about it.

I'm not proud of who I was during those years. But I don't hate that version of me either. He was trying. Failing. Drowning. But trying. And everything I've built since, every inch of progress, every chapter of this book, is because I finally decided I wanted something more than survival.

I wanted to live. And I wanted to live as someone I could respect.

THE TIMES I DIDN'T DIE

THERE ARE PARTS OF my life I forgot—not because they were insignificant, but because they didn't fit cleanly into a story I understood yet. For years, I thought my descent was mostly about addiction, grief, and numbing. That was true, but incomplete. What I didn't fully account for was how often I crossed the edge and came back without explanation. The first time should have killed me.

I had done cocaine exactly three times in my life. This was the third. I didn't know what I was doing. I had no sense of scale, no internal governor, and a habit—already well formed—of pushing everything too far. I brought home an eight ball and finished all of it in about an hour and a half. For a short while, nothing seemed wrong. And then, without warning, my vision disappeared. My eyes rolled so far back into my head that I couldn't see. I remember thinking, very calmly and very clearly: *this is it*. There was no drama in the thought. Just recognition. And then—just as suddenly—my eyes rolled back down. Everything returned to normal. I didn't feel saved. I felt displaced. I remember thinking that maybe I had died in one version of reality and woken up in another where I hadn't. It wasn't a belief so much as an attempt to explain the unexplainable. I went downstairs so my parents could see me. I needed proof that I was still here. I never touched cocaine again.

The second time came a year or two later, on ecstasy. MDMA had been different for me. I never used it at parties or raves. I only ever took it with two close friends, sitting around talking for hours—about grief, about meaning, about things we didn't have language for yet. It gave me something I desperately needed at the time: connection that felt total and unquestioned. But one night I took too much. Eight pills—four at first, then four more hours later. I felt my body overheating, spiraling toward something I couldn't control. I was convinced I was going to die. I lay in an open field and waited. Eventually, my body cooled. The panic receded. Again, I survived. Then there were the nights where survival didn't feel metaphysical—just reckless.

Once, after drinking at a friend's house, grief overtook him. His father had died recently. He kicked me out, and I tried to drive home drunk. I wrecked my car in the woods. When I saw police lights, I ran into the woods. I hid under a dead tree until they left. I lost my shoes somewhere along the way and walked ten miles home

barefoot. The car made it home before I did. My parents were disappointed. They weren't angry. That hurt worse. And threaded through all of it was grief. My brother was already gone. My father was still alive, but not for much longer. I didn't understand then that I wasn't chasing danger—I was trying to feel something strong enough to compete with absence. I also didn't understand that I wasn't reckless because I didn't care. I was reckless because I hadn't learned how to live with what I was carrying.

Looking back, what strikes me isn't how close I came to dying. It's how often I crossed the threshold and came back without ceremony. No lessons. No revelations. Just continuation. That kind of survival leaves a residue. Years later, when I encountered ego death through psychedelics again—this time intentionally, respectfully—it felt familiar. Not because I wanted to disappear, but because I had already brushed against annihilation without context. The difference was that now I had structure. Reflection. A body I trained instead of punished. A framework that could hold experience instead of letting it spill everywhere.

I wasn't chasing oblivion anymore. I was learning how to approach it and return intact. Axis didn't emerge because my life was stable. It emerged because too much of my survival had been accidental. I needed a way to make staying alive *deliberate*. I was fortunate. I know that. Many people don't get this many returns. But luck alone doesn't explain what followed. At some point, survival stopped being enough. I wanted coherence. I wanted a life that could justify the fact that I was still here. That's when the descent ended—not because I climbed out, but because I finally built something solid at the bottom.

Author's Reflection — April 2026

This chapter matters because it shows that my relationship with altered states did not begin as wisdom. Before there was reverence, structure, reflection, or integration, there was recklessness. There were moments when I crossed dangerous thresholds without understanding what I was doing or why I was doing it.

That is part of why Project Aeon had to evolve the way it did. It could not become a glorification of intensity, psychedelics, or spiritual experience. It had to become a discipline of interpretation. A place where powerful experiences are not worshipped, but examined. A place where the question is not "What did I see?" but "How do I live differently because of what I saw?"

Looking back, the difference between then and now is not that I became someone who could survive intense experiences. It is that I became someone who no longer needed to use intensity as a substitute for meaning. Survival was the beginning. Integration became the work.

THE QUIET THAT FOLLOWED

IT HAPPENED A FEW months before my first deployment in the Marine Corps. My wife and I were living in base housing at the time. Things felt stable. I was newly married, adjusting to military life, and doing my best to move forward from everything I had left behind in my hometown.

Then my sister called. She told me my dad had gone into the hospital. It wasn't supposed to be anything serious. I can't even remember the exact reason now. I was told not to worry, that he'd be out by the end of the day. So, I didn't. Not really. But a few hours later, she called again. Her voice had changed. She told me dad was gone. Just like that. They said it was a blood clot. It was sudden and final. There were no goodbyes, no warnings, no slow decline. Just here one moment and gone the next.

I don't think I even knew how to process it at the time. That night I got drunk, really drunk, and broke down in front of my wife. We were still early into our marriage, and I was already carrying the weight of my brother's death that happened 10 years earlier. Now I had lost my father too. I didn't know how to hold it all.

I drove back for the funeral. I don't remember much of it. The details are gone. What I do remember is the heaviness, the silence, the feeling of absence everywhere. It wasn't just grief. It was the sudden vacuum of not having him in the world anymore. When I came back to base, it didn't get easier.

One of the corporals in the shop made it her mission to treat me like shit. She had already disliked me before, but now she was outright hostile. There was no compassion. No silence. Just pure contempt. For an entire week after I got back, she made my life hell. I had just buried my father, and I was met with cruelty. Eventually, I opened up to one of the other Corporals, someone I respected. I told him about my dad, about how broken I was, and what had been happening with the other corporal. I cried when I told him. He didn't say much, just gave me a bit of comfort. But later that day, I found out he and a few others pulled her aside and had a talk with her. After that, she never spoke to me again. I'll never forget him for doing that.

I was carrying too much too young. I had just barely begun to understand who I was as a man, and already I'd lost two of the most important men in my life. My brother. Then my father. And I wasn't even thirty. I was a newly married Lance Corporal trying to figure out who I was, trying to make a life. And life just kept taking

from me. But even in that early grief, I didn't suppress it. I cried in front of my wife. I cried in front of another Marine. And that mattered. Because in an environment like the military, showing emotion feels like showing weakness. But I didn't care. I needed to feel it. I needed someone to know that it hurt. And when I did that, someone stepped up. He had my back. Not with some macho bullshit. He just made sure I wasn't alone in it.

That loss didn't just teach me about death. It taught me who I didn't want to become. The way that corporal treated me. That stuck with me. It wasn't just cruel, it was inhuman. And it showed me exactly the kind of person I'd never become. No matter how hard things get, no matter what authority I hold, I won't ever forget what it's like to be the person who's grieving, and still expected to carry on. If I have the power to give someone compassion in that moment, I'll give it. Every time.

The grief didn't end with the funeral. It echoed. It followed me through the years. Through the drinking. Through the silence. Through the self-destruction. I didn't understand then just how much that loss had embedded itself in me. But it's part of what led me here. To psilocybin. To reflection. To this process. It's part of what cracked me open enough to start searching for something deeper than the pain. I don't carry my dad's death like a weight anymore. Now it's a part of my strength. A part of what keeps me grounded, focused, and fiercely loyal to the people I love. It's not about forgetting. It's about carrying it the right way. And I've learned how to do that.

THE BETRAYAL I STILL CARRY

IT WAS RIGHT BEFORE my last deployment. I was around 31 or 32 at the time. I was still drinking back then, heavily, regularly, like it was just part of my wiring. Most of my bad decisions were made that way, slow, quiet, unassuming. The kind that doesn't look like destruction until you're already standing in the ruins.

This one didn't start with intention. It started with a message. A girl from my past reached out to me through Facebook. I knew her from middle school. We'd been close in that innocent way before hormones and heartbreaks made everything complicated. I hadn't spoken to her since that period in my life, but there she was, showing up in my inbox out of nowhere, telling me she'd always had a thing for me.

I was married. I wasn't happy with myself, but I was married. And I knew better. Still, we started talking. It started with messaging then I started calling her, more than once. Always when I was drunk. I never sent pictures. Nothing physical ever happened. But it was more than conversation. It was attention, and I knew exactly what I was doing with it. One night, my wife caught me on the phone with her. I tried to lie. I told her it was a guy, an old friend from years ago. I said it casually, like it didn't mean anything, like I could still save face. But she knew. She always knows. It didn't take long for the truth to come out. She found out it was a girl from my past. That I had called her multiple times. And that I had kept it hidden.

To this day, that was the lowest moment of my life. Worse than my suicidal spiral. Worse than any pain I've ever inflicted on myself—because this time, I hurt someone else. Someone who didn't deserve it. Someone who had stood by me through everything. And the part that still haunts me? Even that moment, the moment I shattered the heart of the woman who gave me everything, didn't make me stop drinking. It should have. But it didn't. I kept going. I didn't change. Not yet. It would take me five more years to finally walk away from alcohol. Five more years of dull numbness and missed potential. Five more years of being less than the man I could've been for her. For myself. For our daughters. Five more years of staying asleep, even after I'd seen the cost of my unconsciousness.

I'm not proud of what I did. I don't justify it. I don't blame it on the drinking, even though I was drunk every time I made that call. It's important to know and say, I made that decision. I chose to betray her trust. I lied to her face. I let my fear of losing control

override the vow I made the day I married her. And then I sat in that shame for five years, letting it poison me slowly. Eventually, I deleted Facebook. Not because she asked me to. Because I couldn't live with the thought of what I had allowed myself to do when I opened it that one night and saw that first message.

Looking back, I think of that version of me and I don't hate him. But I do grieve him. Because I see the damage he caused. I see how much love was already in front of him. And how much he didn't know how to hold. But here's the thing I've learned since, sometimes you don't wake up all at once. Sometimes, it takes breaking the person you love to realize you've already been breaking yourself for years. Sometimes, rock bottom doesn't feel like a crash. It feels like a whisper you ignore for half a decade. Until finally you can't ignore it anymore.

When I got sober, it wasn't because of guilt. It was because I saw death. I saw it in the mirror. I saw it in my fingertips. I saw it in the psilocybin trip that cracked my soul in half and showed me what my daughters' lives would look like without me. But even now, after all that, I know this chapter needed to be here. Because this was the first moment I truly saw how far I had fallen. This was when I became aware. Not awake. Not yet. But aware of what I was capable of when I let my pain, my loneliness, and my drinking do the thinking for me. And even though it took me five more years to climb out, that moment was the first shovel of dirt hitting the coffin of the man I used to be.

I don't want this part of my story buried. Because my integrity now means nothing if I'm still hiding the parts of me that once chose the easy lie over the hard truth. This happened. It was real. It was a betrayal. It was emotional infidelity. And my wife forgave me. Not blindly. Not immediately. But over time through pain, through silence, and through healing. She saw the man I would become, even when I hadn't started becoming him yet. And I've spent every day since trying to deserve that vision. This is me finally telling the whole story. Because she deserves that. Because I deserve that. Because truth only transforms when it's told in full. And because the only way to become the man I am now was to stop hiding the worst of the man I used to be.

THE HEIGHT OF ALCOHOLISM AND SUICIDAL TENDENCIES

THERE'S SOMETHING STRANGE THAT happens when you start waking up. When you begin seeing your life not just through memory, but through the lens of reflection. You don't just remember things differently; you uncover things you didn't even know were there. Sometimes, they aren't things you forgot. They're things you buried. Things you never had the strength or the tools to fully face.

One of the most shocking realizations I've had on this journey was remembering that there was a time when I thought my life was hard. I'd spent so long telling myself that I hadn't had it that bad during my years with alcoholism. That other people had it worse. That I didn't have the right to complain or feel broken. I think I even wore that idea like armor. It kept me from having to go deeper. But somewhere in one of my recent reflections, something unexpected came rushing back.

There was a period, during the height of my alcoholism, while I was still in the Marine Corps, where I was actively suicidal. I don't mean passing thoughts. I mean I locked myself in the bathroom more than once with a knife in my hand, on the edge of doing something that couldn't be undone. I never went through with it but not because I didn't want to. I just couldn't bring myself to take that final step. I felt trapped. Numb. Like I had failed at everything I ever tried to become. And no matter how many people were around, I felt completely alone.

My wife knew. She didn't know the full details at the time, but she could see the truth I wasn't saying. She started hiding anything I might hurt myself with, quietly, without ever making a scene, just in case I reached for something during a dark moment. That alone says everything. She knew I was close. Too close.

I was fading. Slowly. Silently. Disappearing into a bottle every chance I got. I had given up on life in every way except the final act. I didn't see a future. I didn't believe I had anything left to give. And I didn't know how to ask for help.

I'd always carried the pain of my brother's suicide. But I didn't understand, until very recently, that part of what pulled me so deep into addiction was the quiet, unspoken desire to disappear. And in my darkest moments, I finally convinced myself that I had lived a hard life.

That's the part that shocked me the most. Because now, years later, I see my life through a completely different lens. I have so much to be thankful for. A beautiful family. A meaningful path. Strength inside and out. But back then? I couldn't see any of that. All I saw was the pain. All I felt was the weight.

That's what alcohol did. It numbed the outside but fed the storm inside. It convinced me that I was broken beyond repair, and it drowned out anything that might've told me otherwise. It wasn't just a habit. It was a slow death march I had agreed to without realizing it. But even at my lowest, something in me held on just barely. I couldn't bring myself to leave my wife and kids behind. I couldn't do to them what I had seen my brother do to his wife and kids. But the fact that I was even that close, I can't ignore that anymore.

That's why my first psilocybin trip was so important. That night, when I stared into the mirror and saw what I was becoming, when I saw my own death, the decayed skin, the clubbed fingers, the early heart failure, I finally saw what I had been trying to hide. I saw the reality of where I was headed, and it wrecked me. I broke down on the bathroom floor sobbing, begging for another chance. And for the first time in a long time, I truly said it: "I don't want to die."

That trip cracked me open. It showed me that I hadn't just been hurting, I had been disappearing. I wasn't just coping; I was giving up. And it forced me to confront that truth in a way nothing else ever had. That's why I stopped drinking cold turkey the next day. That's why I've built this life, this body, this mind. Because I've seen what happens when you let go of yourself. And I've seen what happens when you finally decide to come back.

It wasn't life itself that was hard back then. It was the storm inside of me. The pain I never learned to process. The guilt I never forgave myself for. The shame I carried in silence. And now, I can finally say I understand that version of me. I don't hate him. I don't reject him. I see him clearly now. He wasn't weak. He was drowning. But I made it out. And now I tell this story for anyone who might be in that same place. Anyone whose thoughts have grown too quiet. You're not alone. And the life you're living right now, no matter how heavy it feels, doesn't have to stay that way.

There's a path forward. Even if it's dark at first. And you don't have to walk it alone. I've learned that my past doesn't define me but it does remind me. Of how far I've come. Of what's worth fighting for. And of the fact that even in the silence, there's still a part of you that wants to live. That part of me? He never gave up. And now, I honor him by becoming the man he was always trying to be.

Author's Reflection — April 2026

When I wrote this chapter, I was trying to tell the truth about how close I came to not surviving myself. The psilocybin experience appears here because it became the moment where denial finally broke. It showed me death with enough force that I could no longer keep pretending I was only drinking too much, only struggling, only having a hard time.

But I want to be clear now: the trip did not save me by itself. It confronted me. It shocked the system. It made visible what I had refused to see. The saving came afterward, through the choices I made once the vision was gone.

That is one of the clearest lessons Project Aeon eventually gave me. A revelation is not transformation. A revelation is only an opening. What matters is whether you build a life strong enough to hold what was revealed. For me, that meant sobriety, reflection, structure, training, and returning every day to the people I almost left behind.

THE REASON I STAYED

IT DIDN'T ALWAYS LOOK the same. Sometimes it started with an argument. I'd be drunk again. My wife would be frustrated again. And it made sense. It was the same cycle over and over. I'd drink, and then I'd fall into it, talking about my brother, my dad, everything that was gone. Crying about it like it had just happened, even though it had been years. The first few times, it was understandable. By the hundredth time, it was exhausting. So we'd argue. Loud. Yelling. The same fight in a different form. And eventually I'd shut down, walk away, and lock myself in the bathroom.

Other times, there was no argument. She'd be asleep. The house would be quiet. But I wasn't. I'd go in there on my own, already breaking down. Same room. Same collapse. I'd sit on the floor, drunk, crying as hard as I could. Not holding anything back. Thinking about everything at once, my brother, my dad, everything I'd lost, everything I felt like I had ruined. It wasn't quiet. It wasn't controlled. It was loud in my head. Loud in my chest. Loud in the way everything hit all at once with no space in between. It felt like too much. Like I couldn't carry it anymore.

And then it would turn. Not into silence. Into something heavier. The thought would come in right in the middle of all of it. End it. Not as a whisper. As something real. Immediate. Close. I had a knife in there more than once. And in those moments, I wasn't calm. I was breaking. Crying, shaking, overwhelmed, thinking about everything I had lost and everything I couldn't fix, and on top of that, the feeling that I couldn't even stop drinking no matter how many times I tried. It felt like I was stuck. Like there was no way out of the cycle. And in the middle of that, I would think about doing it. Actually doing it. And then something else would hit just as hard. My mom.

My brother didn't die by accident. He killed himself. And she had to live with that. She had already lost my dad too. Two losses. Both permanent. Both heavy in different ways. And I could feel what it would mean if I added myself to that. Not in a distant way. In a real way. I would be the second suicide. The third person she lost too early. Another weight she would have to carry for the rest of her life. And even in that state, drunk, crying, completely overwhelmed, I couldn't do it. I couldn't be that to her. I couldn't take everything she had already carried and make it heavier. That didn't calm me down. It didn't fix anything. I was still crying. Still breaking down. Still feeling like I was drowning in everything. But it stopped me. Every time. And my wife knew how

close it was. Not every single time. But enough. Enough that she started hiding things. Anything I could use to hurt myself, she would move it, put it somewhere else, keep it out of reach when she knew I had been drinking. She never made a scene about it. She didn't turn it into something bigger than it already was. She just protected me the only way she could. Quietly.

That part matters. Because I wasn't completely alone in it. She saw it. She just couldn't stop it for me. Only I could do that. And the only thing that held in those moments was that line. So I would sit there, still crying, still hurting, and just not cross it. Wait for it to pass. Put the knife down. Eventually unlock the door. Or go lay down. Or just make it through the night. It was the same decision, over and over again, in the middle of chaos. Stay. At the time, I thought I was staying for her. And I was. But looking back, it was more than that. It was my mom's love. The way she raised me. The way she cared. The way she showed up, even after everything she had already been through. That lived inside me somewhere, even when everything else was falling apart. And that part of me wouldn't let me cross that line. Her love held me there when I couldn't hold myself. And my wife held the edges together when she could.

Between the two of them, I stayed. Long enough to get sober. Long enough to rebuild. Long enough to become someone who doesn't end up on a bathroom floor, crying with a knife in his hand, trying to decide if he's going to make it through the night. I didn't stay because I was strong. I stayed because I couldn't make my mom live through that again. And for a long time, that was enough. It turns out, it only had to be.

THE UNIFORM NEVER FIT

I JOINED THE MARINE Corps at 25. I didn't do it out of patriotism or some lifelong dream of being a Marine. I did it because I needed to build a better life for my wife and the family we wanted. At the time, I was working at a bookstore. That's actually where we met. I worked on the book side, she worked in the café. The pay wasn't enough to support the future we were trying to build, and I knew something had to change. Five months before I left for boot camp, I proposed to her. She didn't hesitate for a second. She's always believed in me, even when I wasn't someone worth believing in yet.

I spent 12 years at Cherry Point, North Carolina, working as a jet engine mechanic in the same squadron the whole time. Three deployments and countless exercises around the country and overseas. I worked hard, and I took pride in what I did. Eventually, I made it to Division Chief, the top position in my shop.

But even as I moved up, I always felt a disconnect between who I was and what the Marine Corps seemed to want from me. I wasn't the kind of marine who yelled, humiliated, or "blasted" people to prove a point. I led with calm and compassion. I believed in building people up, not breaking them down. To me, leadership wasn't about fear, it was about respect.

And for a lot of people above me, that made me an outsider. They saw my approach as weakness. They didn't understand that quiet leadership can still be strong. But if I'm being honest, that wasn't the only reason I stood out, or why I was looked down on. A big part of it was my drinking. I won't sugarcoat it. I was deep in it back then. I had a problem, and it showed. I never got in serious trouble for it, but people knew. They saw it. Some talked about it behind my back, some to my face. And the thing is, I don't blame any of them. They had every right to see me that way. I gave them the reasons.

I think the combination of who I was and what I was going through just didn't fit the mold. I wasn't loud. I wasn't aggressive. And I wasn't living right. So, the uniform never truly fit, not in spirit, not in culture, and not in the man I was becoming underneath it all.

That's part of why I don't reminisce about my time in the military. I don't talk about it like it was the best time of my life. For some people, those were their golden years. But for me, it was a chapter, a hard one, but a necessary one. It taught me discipline,

structure, and endurance. But it also showed me what kind of man I didn't want to be anymore.

The breaking point came when my wife was pregnant with our second child. It was a high-risk pregnancy. She was bedridden, constantly sick, and so iron-deficient that she had to get transfusions at a cancer center. And even then, the Marine Corps forced me to leave for a training exercise out of state.

When I came home, everything had fallen apart. The house was trashed, the dog hadn't eaten in days, my daughter looked neglected, and my wife was barely hanging on. I rushed her to the hospital, and the doctors told me flat out that if I had waited even one more day, she would've died.

That was it for me. I still had two years left, but that night I decided I was done. The Marine Corps would never come before my family again. Most people didn't believe I'd actually get out. They thought I'd take the \$50,000 reenlistment bonus they offered me and stay in like everyone else. But I didn't even hesitate. I said no. I remember telling my wife, "We've got to sell this house and get home. If we don't do it now, we never will." I knew the trap of comfort too well. People talk about leaving, but they stay. They get stuck. I refused to let that happen to us.

When I left, I went straight back to my childhood home, the same house where I grew up, and where I'd rebuild everything from the ground up. After I quit drinking, my body and my mind changed fast. I was overweight when I left the Corps, but within months of clean living, I transformed.

Looking back now, I see the Marine Corps clearly. The truth is, I never really belonged there. My leadership didn't fit their mold. My drinking made me unreliable at times. My compassion made me seem soft. But all of that, every failure, every judgment, every misunderstanding, shaped me. It gave me the mirror I needed to finally see who I was and who I wasn't. I don't regret any of it. It made me who I am now. But when they sent me away knowing my wife could die, it told me everything I needed to know. I wasn't one of them. And honestly, that realization was freeing. Getting out wasn't the end of something. It was the beginning. It gave me space to find clarity, to get sober, and to finally become the man I was supposed to be.

Author's Reflection — February 2026

The original version of this chapter was written about six months after I got out of the Marine Corps. At the time, I was still processing a lot of what had happened—the parts that hurt, the ways I felt unseen, the moments where the institution failed me and my family.

Reading it now, I can hear the bitterness in my own words. And I want to be clear: I don't feel that way anymore.

The truth is, the Marine Corps—like any large organization—is made up of people. Some of those people lead with integrity, compassion, and strength. Others don't. I was unfortunate enough to serve under a few of the latter. But that doesn't define the whole institution, and it certainly doesn't define the men and women I served alongside.

There were great leaders. People like the gunny I served under as a sergeant, who saw me for who I was and led me with the kind of fortitude I still admire today. There were the guys out on the flight line—the ones who didn't make the big decisions but showed up every day and did their best with what they had. Those were the moments I'm proud of. Those were the people who made me better.

The Marine Corps taught me discipline, endurance, and the value of service. It also showed me my limits—what I was willing to sacrifice and what I wasn't. And in the end, I made the choice that was right for me and my family.

I don't regret my service. I don't regret leaving. Both were necessary.

If you're reading this and you served—or you're currently serving—I hope you know this chapter isn't an attack on the uniform or the people who wear it with pride. It's just my story. And my story doesn't have to be yours.

The bad leaders I encountered were the minority. But they were loud. And for a long time, I let them poison the memories of the good ones. I'm working on not doing that anymore.

Because the truth is, the best parts of my time in the Marine Corps weren't the institutions or the policies. They were the people who stood beside me, worked beside me, and believed in me when I didn't believe in myself.

That's what I carry with me now. Not the bitterness. Not the resentment. Just the lessons. And the gratitude for the few who made it worth it.

THE ATTEMPTS THAT DIDN'T WORK

THERE WERE TWO TIMES, clear and defined, when I tried to leave alcohol behind before I ever officially quit. Two times when some deeper voice inside me whispered that I didn't need it. That maybe there was another way. That maybe I didn't have to keep doing this to myself, even though it had become second nature.

The first time was early in my Marine Corps years. I had a friend I was close with, the kind of friend who was always there on weekends, always part of the rhythm. We didn't just hang out, we drank. Every time. But I remember one night, right before we were supposed to meet up, I said to him, "Why don't we just try to hang out without drinking?" I meant it. I was curious. Curious to see what might happen if the bottle wasn't part of the equation. His answer was immediate, almost reflexive: "Well, it wouldn't be any fun without it." I didn't argue. I didn't push. I let it go. But I remembered that moment.

The second time came much later. It was toward the end of my service. My wife had already moved back to Georgia with our kids, and I was left behind to finish the last stretch alone in the house we were trying to sell. I was lifting again. The gym had started calling me back. And there was another friend I'd been seeing a lot, someone who drank even more than I did. I saw the way the alcohol wrapped itself around him, and I recognized it too well. So, I made a suggestion.

I told him he could stay at my place. We could stop drinking together. We could start going to the gym together and rebuild. I told him I had two months left in that house. Two months to do something different. He never came back after that.

Looking back, I see those two attempts not as failures, but as signals. They were evidence that something inside me had already begun to shift. That even while I was still deep in the cycle, there was a version of me, faint but present, trying to break free. I just wasn't ready yet. But it matters that I tried. It matters that I saw the possibility. Sometimes we don't rise all at once. Sometimes the soul sends up flares years before the body follows. And those flares? They stay with you. They guide you home.

THE TWO-YEAR PLAN

PEOPLE SOMETIMES THINK TRANSFORMATION happens in a moment. Like some lightning strike that splits the sky and changes everything. But in my case, it wasn't like that. It was slower. Quieter. Less cinematic. It was a plan I made long before the change ever showed up on the surface. I didn't know the full shape of the future back then, but I knew I had to get out.

It was somewhere in the last two years of my final enlistment in the Marine Corps. I had already served ten years. My life had changed in so many ways, but one thing stayed the same: I kept drinking. Every weekend. Like clockwork. I was still functioning. But the weight of it, the self-sabotage, the emptiness, was starting to show.

Then the thing happened that changed everything. My wife was experiencing a life-threatening pregnancy. And instead of being allowed to stay with her, they sent me out on a military exercise. That was the final straw. That was when I decided: I'm getting out. And not just out of the Marine Corps. Out of the entire version of myself that had been circling the drain for years. That's when the plan began.

I didn't tell my mom about it right away. But once the decision settled, I called her and said, "When I get out, I'm coming home. And I'm going to buy the house from you." I told her I wanted to raise my kids there. In the house I grew up in. The house where most of my life had unfolded. The house where my dad had lived. The house where my brother died. The house where I became who I was. But I didn't want to return just to dwell on the past. I wanted to go back and start over. With intention. With a clean slate. I didn't want to stay in North Carolina, because everyone there already had an idea of who I was, the alcoholic. I didn't want to try to prove myself to people who had already made up their minds. I wanted to go somewhere I could breathe. Somewhere I could become someone new and believe in it.

So, I started setting everything in motion. I told my wife I was going to quit drinking once we moved back. I told her the fresh start would be the moment that changed everything. And I meant it. But change doesn't snap its fingers and fix you. Even after I got out, I still spent two more months drinking. Every weekend. Just like before. Twelve to eighteen beers a day from Friday to Sunday. That rhythm was too familiar to break with a handshake and a promise. But I'd prepared for that too.

I'd already ordered mushrooms before we moved back home. I had them waiting for me the day I stepped through the door. That was my lifeline. My secret weapon. I didn't even realize how symbolic that was at the time. It was like I had mailed a future version of myself a reminder: You're going to make it. And I did. I tripped four or five times during those first two months. Five grams each time. Then came the trip that changed everything. The one that finally made me quit for good. And it happened just in time. Months later, maybe even a year, my wife told me something I hadn't known. She told me that before I quit, she was close to leaving me. That she didn't believe I would follow through. That she was preparing herself for the possibility that I wouldn't change. She never said it at the time. She never gave me an ultimatum. And I'm glad she didn't. Because it means the change didn't come from fear of losing her. It came from me. From the terrifying vision I saw in the mirror that night. From the bathroom floor where I broke down. From the image of my daughters growing up without a father. That moment became the turning point. Not because someone demanded it, but because something inside me demanded it. And I listened.

Looking back now, I see it clearly. This wasn't a spontaneous awakening. It was a mission I set in motion two years before it began. A mission to leave the old battlefield. A mission to return home. A mission to become the man I knew was buried under all the pain, the drinking, the chaos. I came back to the house I grew up in. And this time, I was ready to rebuild.

Author's Reflection — April 2026

This chapter is important because it shows that my sobriety was not as sudden as it might look from the outside. The final break with alcohol happened in one night, but the conditions for that break had been forming for years. I had already started planning a return home. I had already begun imagining a different life. I had already placed something in the future for myself to reach toward.

At the time, I saw psilocybin as the tool that might help me cross the line I had not been able to cross on my own. Looking back, I still believe it played a role. But I also see now that the real preparation was already underway before the first trip ever happened. The deeper movement was not chemical. It was directional.

Project Aeon helped me understand that distinction. The trip did not create the desire to live. It revealed how much of that desire was still buried underneath the drinking. The plan, the return home, the family, the house, the body, the writing, all of that was already calling me forward. Psilocybin did not invent the path. It helped me finally stop refusing it.

THE MAN WHO MOVED ON

I DON'T HATE ANYONE from my past. I don't carry bitterness for the people I used to drink with, the ones who stood by during the dysfunction, or even the ones who seemed entertained by my collapse. When they come to mind, it's not anger I feel, it's distance. Clarity. A quiet knowing. Most of the time, I don't even think about them. But occasionally, someone from that life will call. A name I haven't said in years will pop up on my phone. And just for a moment, the old-world knocks. But I never feel pulled back into it. I just see it for what it was.

I know how it works now. I know how people operate when they've boxed you into an image. They remember the drunk me. The sad, broken, blurry version who hadn't processed the deaths in his life. They remember the dysfunction, because it gave them something to measure themselves against. And now that I've changed, now that the version of me they once knew is gone, it doesn't sit right with them. Because if I could rise, then their excuses lose power. If I could grow, then their stagnation has no justification.

That's why some of them call. Not to reconnect. But to check. To see if I've slipped. To see if I've fallen. To see if the story of my transformation was just a temporary detour before the old me returned. But he's not coming back. That man is gone. And not because he was worthless, but because he was exhausted. He was hurting. He needed help. And now he's resting. I've built something stronger in his place.

I don't blame anyone for how I used to live. But I do thank myself for walking away from it. And the truth is, I saw this all coming before I even got out of the Marine Corps. I saw how so many people said they were going to leave; said they were going to start new chapters but stayed in the same place. Same squadron. Same barstools. Same complaints.

I didn't want that. Not for me. Not for my wife. Not for my kids. That's why I planned the escape. That's why I sold the house, moved back to my childhood home, and committed to change. Because I didn't just want to get better. I wanted to become someone new. And I knew that couldn't happen in a place where everyone only ever saw the old me.

I left to build a new version of myself, not secretly, but in peace. Not to prove anyone wrong, but to prove to myself what was possible when I stopped performing

pain and started living purpose. So no, I'm not bitter. I'm fulfilled. And when those calls come, I don't feel rattled, tempted, or angry. I just smile, say less, and keep building the life they never imagined I'd have the strength to create. Because what they saw was never really me. It was just the version they were comfortable with. But I'm not here to comfort anyone anymore. I'm here to rise.

ARC II — THE REFLECTION

Where collapse begins to turn into coherence. This is where the work begins to gather itself.

The first arc was about descent, loss, addiction, grief, and the breaking of older forms. This arc is about what begins after that. Not completion. Not arrival. The first signs of a life becoming readable again.

Here, the reflections move away from pure collapse and toward understanding, discipline, identity, and the slow rebuilding of meaning. The story is no longer only about what was lost. It becomes about what can still be built.

This is where Axis starts becoming visible in lived form.

Not yet as a finished system, and not as some perfected philosophy, but as a quieter pattern taking shape through repetition, thought, work, memory, training, love, and self-honesty. These chapters carry more steadiness than the first arc, but they do not leave pain behind. They show what happens when a person begins learning how to live with what he has seen and carry it differently.

You will find reflections here on strength, routine, beauty, change, creativity, grief, friendship, the body, and the small structures that begin holding a life together again. This is where understanding becomes less dramatic and more usable. Less about revelation, more about relationship. Less about being broken open, more about what can be built afterward.

If the first arc is the descent, this one is the turn.

The place where suffering is no longer only something being survived, but something being examined, integrated, and slowly transformed into way of life. Not loudly. Not cleanly. But honestly.

Welcome to The Reflection. This is where the pieces begin to hold.

THE REALIZATION

IT DIDN'T HAPPEN ON a stage. It didn't happen after a trophy, a loss, a mirror check, or some dramatic moment where I suddenly decided I was done. It happened in bed, at 220 pounds, waking myself up in the middle of the night because I was snoring so hard my body couldn't rest under its own weight. That was the real moment.

After I got sober, I threw everything into bodybuilding. All the obsession that used to go into alcohol got redirected into training, food, structure, discipline, and progression. At first, that was exactly what I needed. The gym helped save my life. It gave me order when I needed order. It gave me a reason to stay sharp, a reason to care, a reason to keep building instead of falling apart.

And it worked. I cut down for the first time after sobriety and decided to compete. I stepped on stage for the first time in my life at a show where pros were qualifying for the Olympia, stood in front of more than 200 people in a speedo, and placed fourth in the amateur division. I proved something to myself. That part mattered.

But what came after mattered more. Because the engine underneath it all was still the same engine I had always lived with. The one that doesn't know how to stop at enough. The one that always wants more. More size. More progress. More proof. More push.

So I bulked hard. I pushed my body up to 220 pounds, even though I am not built to live there. My frame is not meant to carry that kind of weight. But I kept eating, kept pushing, kept telling myself that this was part of the process. That this was what serious bodybuilding required. That the discomfort would be worth it later.

But the discomfort kept compounding. I started snoring hard enough to wake myself up. Not once in a while. Repeatedly. My body was telling me something was wrong. I could feel it. And what hit even harder was what it was doing to my wife. This was the same woman who had slept beside me through the worst years of drinking, through nights when I came to bed drunk and broken and barely functioning. She stayed through all of that. And now bodybuilding was pushing her out of the room. Not because I was drinking. Not because I was disappearing into alcohol again. But because I had pushed my body so far in another direction that even sleeping beside me had become difficult. That hit me in a way the scale never could.

One night, lying there awake again after snoring myself out of sleep, I had a thought that came in with the same force as truth usually does when it finally stops asking permission: Did I quit drinking just to have a heart attack from bodybuilding?

I didn't argue with it. I didn't try to soften it. I didn't tell myself it was just a bad night or that everything would be fine once I started cutting. I sat with it. Because I had heard that kind of truth before. On the bathroom floor. On the night I saw where alcohol was taking me. On the night I saw my wife and daughters without me. On the night I begged for another chance and quit drinking for good. And here it was again. Different vehicle. Same destination.

That was the real realization. Not that the stage had lost its meaning. That came later. The real realization was that I was still capable of aiming my life at the wrong thing, even when the wrong thing looked disciplined from the outside. Even when it looked admirable. Even when it looked like health.

Alcohol was obvious. Everybody knows drinking yourself to death is self-destruction. Bodybuilding can hide the same pattern in a more respectable form. Nobody stages an intervention for a man who is getting bigger. Nobody panics when the obsession looks clean. But the body still knows. The heart still knows. The lungs still know. And lying there in bed, unable to sleep properly in a body I had pushed too far, I knew it too.

That moment ended the bulk two months early. And it ended competitive bodybuilding for me permanently. After that, I spent the next five and a half months cutting all the way down, not for a show, not for a stage, not for an audience, but because I wanted to strip everything back and see what was really there. I wanted to return to honesty. I wanted to know what I had actually built underneath all the excess. And once I got there, I knew something for certain: I never needed to do it that way again.

That is where the quieter realization finally settled in. The stage was never the destination. It was part of the learning. A real part. A valuable part. But it was never the point. What changed me was not standing under lights waiting for a number. It was the discipline before it. The meals. The repetition. The training. The honesty. The structure. The thousands of unseen decisions that rebuilt my life from the inside out. That was the real transformation. And once I knew that, I could let the stage go without bitterness. Not because I had failed. Not because I wasn't capable. Not because bodybuilding stopped mattering. But because I finally understood what I was unwilling to trade for it. My health. My peace. My sleep. My wife beside me. My life.

I am still a bodybuilder. I still train. I still care. I still build. But I do it differently now. Not to chase the biggest version of myself. Not to prove something to strangers.

THE REFLECTION

Not to push until my body starts warning me again. I do it to stay alive inside the life I fought to keep. That was the real realization. I did not quit drinking just to die from something more socially acceptable. I got sober to live. And once I saw that clearly, the stage no longer had anything left to offer me that was worth the cost.

WHAT'S THE PURPOSE NOW?

AFTER I MADE THE decision to walk away from competitive bodybuilding, another question took its place. Not a dramatic question. Not the kind that arrives like a warning. A quieter one. The kind that stays in the room after the emergency has already passed. What's the purpose now?

That question matters because once I knew I was no longer willing to push my body toward the same kind of extreme that had started turning bodybuilding into another version of self-destruction, I had to figure out what remained. If the stage was no longer the goal, if the endless bulk was no longer justified, if bigger was no longer automatically better, then what exactly was I still doing this for?

At first, the answer was not fully clear. For a long time, the goal had been to get bigger. That made sense in the season I was in. I had just gotten sober. My mind was looking for something solid, something measurable, something I could track and build and conquer. The gym gave me that. It gave me weight to move, food to control, structure to follow, numbers to chase. In a life that had felt chaotic for years, that kind of order mattered. I needed it. And I do not regret that. But once I crossed the line I crossed in the last chapter, once I saw clearly that I was capable of turning even bodybuilding into the wrong kind of obsession, the question changed. It was no longer, "How much more can I push this?" It became, "What is this actually for now that I know what I am not willing to trade for it?"

That is a very different question. Because I had already built something real. Not perfection. Not some final ideal. But a body that felt like mine. Strong. Capable. Defined. A body I was proud of. A body that had helped carry me out of one life and into another. I had already proven to myself that I could be disciplined, that I could suffer on purpose, that I could build something difficult and hold the line. I no longer needed the same kind of proof. So the question stayed with me. If I am not stepping on stage again, if I am not chasing a trophy, if I am not trying to become as large as possible, then what is bodybuilding for now?

The answer, slowly, was this: Health. Longevity. Presence. My daughters. My wife. This work. This life. That is what mattered more now.

The old version of the goal would have kept asking me to override the signals. Keep eating. Keep pushing. Keep growing. Keep proving. But once I saw where that road

could lead, I could not unsee it. I could not go back to pretending that more size automatically meant more value. I could not ignore what it was doing to my sleep, my recovery, my peace, and my ability to simply live well inside the body I had built. So this next phase stopped being about expansion and started being about refinement. Not decline. Not giving up. Not backing off because I could not handle it. Refinement. That word matters.

Because I still train. I still care about the body. I still care about strength, conditioning, discipline, and effort. But the purpose has changed. I am no longer trying to build the biggest version of myself I can force into existence. I am trying to build the most sustainable version of strength I can actually live inside. That is a much more honest goal.

I want to be strong year-round. Lean year-round. Healthy year-round. I want my body to feel like a tool, not a burden. I want it to support my life, not compete with it. I want to sleep through the night. I want my wife beside me. I want to train hard without turning training into another altar where I sacrifice everything else that matters. That is the purpose now. Not applause. Not numbers. Not spectacle. Not the “wow” factor of becoming more extreme for its own sake.

I am not trying to break records anymore. I am trying to stay here, fully. I am trying to live inside the life I fought to keep. I am trying to remain strong enough to carry my daughters, present enough to be with my wife, clear enough to keep building this work, and healthy enough to still be here years from now when all of that deepens.

This is the point where vanity and wisdom part ways. Vanity says keep pushing because you still can. Wisdom asks what the push is costing you. Vanity says more. Wisdom asks why. And once I started asking that question honestly, the answer became impossible to ignore.

I do not need more size. I need alignment. I need strength that serves the life I actually want. I need a body that helps me stay in the room, not a body that slowly turns itself into another project of overreach. That is why this is not really about getting smaller. It is about getting clearer.

The muscle was never the deepest point. It was the vehicle. The metaphor. The proof that a person can rebuild himself through discipline and repetition. It served that purpose. It still does. But I do not need to inflate the metaphor forever just because I can.

The question was never, “Can I get bigger?” The real question became, “What is this for now?” And now I know the answer. This body does not need to be bigger. It needs to carry the man I became after I stopped trying to prove myself through

destruction. That is the purpose now. To live well. To stay strong. To stay clear. To stay here.

I DIDN'T LEARN BALANCE. I LEARNED AIM.

PEOPLE WHO KNOW MY story sometimes say I've found balance. That I traded the extremes of addiction for the peace of moderation. That I learned restraint.

They're wrong. I didn't learn balance. I learned aim.

For most of my life, the defining trait wasn't addiction. It was extremism. The addiction was just where it landed. I didn't drink casually. I drank consistently, for nearly twenty years. Not on weekends. Not during rough patches. Drinking was the baseline. I didn't experiment with cocaine. I overdosed on it. I didn't take a couple pills of ecstasy. I took eight in one night. When I crossed emotional lines, it wasn't a momentary lapse. It was sustained, multiple conversations, repeated decisions, time invested where it didn't belong. And when I was caught, I didn't stop. I drank for five more years anyway. That was always the pattern. If I did something, I did it completely. All in. No half-measures. No moderation. The problem was never intensity. The problem was where it was pointed.

October 11, 2023. Ten grams of psilocybin. The bathroom floor. Visions of decay, death, and inevitability. What changed that night wasn't my nature. It was my direction. I didn't come out of that experience thinking I needed to calm down. I didn't think I needed to become moderate. I thought one thing, with absolute clarity: if I keep aiming this intensity at destruction, I will die. That was it. The insight wasn't moral. It wasn't spiritualized. It was practical. I didn't need to become a different person. I needed to aim the same person somewhere else.

After sobriety, nothing about my internal wiring changed. The same all-or-nothing engine that powered alcoholism immediately redirected itself. Not into healthy habits. Into total immersion. Bodybuilding, not casual gym sessions, but systematic transformation. Writing, not occasional journaling, but hundreds of pages written in real time. Art, not hobby sketches, but forty-hour devotional pieces. Philosophy, not reading for entertainment, but over a hundred books and a coherent framework. Spiritual practice, not curiosity, but more than thirty documented psychedelic journeys with protocols, reflection, and integration. I didn't become a new person. I became the same person, aimed at construction instead of destruction.

This isn't abstract. It's observable. Yesterday, I cried so hard at work that I had to leave four hours early. I came home emotionally exhausted. Then I stayed up until

4:30 in the morning formatting four complete books, because they needed to be aligned and finished before I could sleep. Today, I'm taking a day off to start a thirty-to-forty-hour ornamental orchid mantis piece. I'm planning twelve-to-sixteen-hour sessions. Full immersion. Three to four days straight. That's not balance. That's not moderation. That's not healthy work-life integration. That's the same extremism that powered alcoholism, just aimed at art instead of oblivion.

When people frame transformation as extreme to moderate, they lie to people like me. Because people like me read that and think: I need to calm down. I need to learn balance. I need to stop being so intense. And they fail. Not because they lack discipline, but because moderation isn't their nature. Some people are naturally moderate. They can have one drink, work on a hobby for thirty minutes, journal occasionally, and feel fulfilled. I'm not one of those people. And that's okay. Because the extremism that nearly killed me is the same extremism that's building something meaningful now. I didn't fix it. I redirected it.

Monasteries aren't built on balance. Monks don't balance prayer with casual distraction. They don't study sacred texts for an hour and then dabble. They are extreme. They devote entire lives to singular questions. They practice daily without exception. They commit fully. That's not moderation. That's total commitment. My life now looks like this: a three-hour daily commute to and from work used entirely for audiobooks, reflecting, and processing. Weekend creative sessions lasting twelve to sixteen hours. Writing documented systematically for over two years. Art created in forty-hour devotional blocks. Axis given away freely, without monetization or compromise. That's monastic extremism. And it works only because I'm naturally extreme.

The extremes never left. They just found a better home. And I'm grateful for that. Because if I'd spent the last two years trying to become moderate, I'd have built nothing. I'd have written occasional journal entries. Gone to the gym sometimes. Dabbled in art. Instead, I stayed extreme. I just aimed it at creation. And now I have two years of sobriety, a body I'm proud of, four complete books documenting transformation, a body of artwork, and a framework, Axis, that might help thousands. Not because I learned balance. Because I learned aim.

If you're reading this and you're naturally extreme, if moderation feels like death, if you can't do anything halfway, if you're all-or-nothing by nature, don't try to fix that. Redirect it. Find something worthy of the intensity. Then aim everything you have at it. The extremes won't leave. But they can build something beautiful.

Author's Reflection — April 2026

When I wrote “I Didn’t Learn Balance. I Learned Aim.”, I was writing from my own wiring: the extremism that nearly killed me and now builds the work you’re reading. But the point of the chapter is not that everyone should become extreme. Axis is not here to model people into me.

The deeper principle is direction. Whatever your natural intensity is, aim it at something worthy. If you’re extreme, redirect the intensity. If you’re moderate, aim the consistency. If you’re somewhere in between, find your natural rhythm and point it toward construction instead of distraction.

That is the philosophy underneath Axis: take what serves you, leave what doesn’t, and add what is uniquely your own. My extremism was the vehicle, not the destination. It carried me deep enough to bring something back, but what I found belongs to anyone who can use it.

A moderate person might have written a helpful book. I’m building a monastery and leaving the doors open. That doesn’t mean everyone has to live inside it the way I do. It means the doors stay open, and each person is free to take what helps them walk their own path more honestly.

THE ONLY METHOD THAT WORKED

THERE IS SOMETHING IMPORTANT I understand now about the way I changed my life. I did not get here by finding one teacher, one book, one system, one philosophy, one training plan, or one method that explained everything and then following it exactly. That was never my path.

The truth is, I learned from a lot of different people. I learned from books, podcasts, bodybuilders, philosophers, psychologists, spiritual thinkers, ordinary people around me, mistakes, grief, my own body, my own failures, and from paying attention. Over time, I started to notice that no one person had the whole answer for me. That does not mean they had nothing to offer. It means each of them had a piece.

For a long time, even before I got sober, I was drawn to self-improvement. Sometimes that showed up in practical ways, like budgeting or trying to understand discipline. Sometimes it came through fitness. Sometimes it came through psychology, habit change, philosophy, or spirituality. I kept looking because some part of me knew I needed a better way to live, even when I was still too lost to build it fully.

So I kept learning. I took in a lot. But what finally changed my life was not choosing one of those paths and submitting to it completely. What changed my life was learning how to synthesize. I took what was useful. I left what was not. And I kept adding what became true through contact with my actual life. That is how I built my training. That is how I built my routines. That is how I built the reflection practice. That is how I built Axis.

Bodybuilding taught me a lot, but not from one single program. I learned from many sources, then tested things against my own body. I tracked food. I adjusted training. I paid attention to recovery. I pushed too far sometimes, then corrected. I kept what worked and discarded what did not. Over time, the method became mine, not because I invented every piece of it from nothing, but because I assembled it honestly through lived experience.

The same thing happened in reflection. No one handed me a final system for how to understand my life, process grief, face addiction, build discipline, explore philosophy, or reconnect the spiritual and practical parts of myself. But I learned from many people along the way. I absorbed ideas. I found language that helped. I found concepts that clarified things. And then I brought all of it back into contact with my

own experience. That part matters, because an idea can sound brilliant in theory and still not survive real life. A method can be helpful for someone else and still not fit your wiring, your body, your history, your responsibilities, or your actual nature. So I stopped asking, “Whose method is right?” and I started asking, “What proves itself when it touches my life?”

That question changed everything. It made me more honest. It made me less rigid. It made me stop chasing total answers from single sources. And it made me trust the long process of building something that actually fit. That is the only method that ever really worked for me: not imitation, not blind obedience, not rebellion for its own sake either, but integration and synthesis. That is how I got here. Not by following one path exactly as it was handed to me, but by gathering pieces from many places and building a path I could actually stand inside. And I think that matters because a lot of people get stuck waiting for the perfect teacher, the perfect plan, the perfect philosophy, the perfect answer. I do not think life works that way. I think most real lives are built more like mosaics. You learn something here. You learn something there. You suffer. You correct. You keep what holds. You let go of what doesn’t. And over time, if you are honest enough, something coherent begins to form. That coherence is not borrowed. It is built. That is what happened to me.

So when I say this is the only method that worked, I do not mean I found the one method. I mean the only thing that ever truly worked was learning how to build my own from many different pieces, with enough honesty to know what belonged in it and what did not. That is what made it real. That is what made it livable. And that is what made it mine.

THE MIRROR I HAD TO FACE

I HATED MYSELF FOR a long time. Not in the way people say it casually, like they're disappointed in a bad decision or frustrated with a habit they can't break. I mean I hated myself. The voice inside my head was relentless. It never took a day off. It told me I was worthless. It told me I was weak. It reminded me of every failure, every betrayal, every moment I'd fallen short of the man I was supposed to be. And the worst part was, I believed it. Every word. Because the voice knew everything about me. It had the receipts.

That voice lived with me through the drinking years. Alcohol didn't quiet it. If anything, it fed it. I'd drink to escape, and then the voice would use the drinking as more evidence. See? You can't even stop this. You're pathetic. It was a loop that tightened every year. Hate yourself. Drink to numb it. Hate yourself more for drinking. Repeat.

When I got sober, I expected the voice to leave with the alcohol. It didn't. The drinking stopped, but the voice stayed. Same tone. Same volume. Same inventory of everything I'd ever done wrong. Sobriety had removed the poison, but it hadn't touched the wound underneath it. I was clearheaded for the first time in years, and all that clarity did was let me hear the voice more clearly. That's when I realized the alcohol was never the real problem. It was a symptom. The real problem was the way I saw myself. The story I had been telling myself for over a decade. That I wasn't good enough. That I didn't deserve the life I had. That the people who loved me would eventually see what I already knew — that I was broken beyond repair.

I couldn't live inside that voice anymore. Not sober. Drunk, you can ignore it. Sober, it's all you hear. So I started reading. Not self-help books exactly, but research. Things about neuroplasticity. About how repeated thought patterns physically reshape the brain over time. How the neural pathways you use most become the default. How the brain doesn't distinguish between what's true and what's repeated — it just strengthens whatever it hears most often. That hit me. Because if the voice had been telling me I was worthless for twelve years, then my brain wasn't just believing it out of habit. It had been literally built around it. The hatred wasn't an opinion anymore. It was architecture. My brain had been wired, one thought at a time, to see me as

someone who didn't deserve love. Especially not from myself. But if repetition built it, then repetition could rebuild it.

That was the theory. I didn't know if it would work. I didn't have any reason to believe it would. But I didn't have a better option. So I started. Every day. Multiple times a day. I would look at myself in the mirror and say inside my own head, I love myself. That's it. No mantra. No elaborate affirmation. No script. Just three words directed at the face staring back at me. I love myself.

At first, it felt like a lie. Worse than a lie. It felt like mockery. Like I was insulting my own intelligence. At work, every time I went to the bathroom, I'd stop at the mirror. Just for a few seconds. I'd look at my own eyes and say it again. I love myself. Three or four times a day at minimum. Sometimes more. Nobody knew I was doing it. I never told anyone. It was just me, a mirror, and a sentence I didn't believe yet. For months.

I don't remember exactly how many. It wasn't quick. There was no single moment where the switch flipped. No breakthrough morning where I woke up and suddenly felt whole. It was slower than that. Quieter. The voice didn't disappear all at once. It just got a little less loud. A little less certain. Like it was losing confidence in its own argument. And the new voice — the one I was building on purpose — started to feel less forced. Not natural yet. But not fake either. Somewhere in between. Like a muscle that's been worked so many times it starts to hold its shape even at rest.

Then one day, I noticed something had changed. I was at work, talking in front of a group of people, and my hands weren't shaking. That doesn't sound like much. But for me it was everything. My entire life, all the way through the Marine Corps and beyond, I couldn't stand in front of a crowd without my hands and legs trembling. Reading a paper out loud. Giving a presentation. Any kind of exposure. My body would betray me every time. It wasn't just nervousness. It was my nervous system telling me I wasn't safe being seen. And now it was gone. Not managed. Not suppressed. Gone.

I didn't push through the fear. I didn't practice public speaking. I didn't do exposure therapy. I just rebuilt the voice inside my head, and the fear lost its foundation. Because the fear was never about the crowd. It was about being seen by people when I hadn't even been able to look at myself. Once I could look at myself — really look, in a bathroom mirror, on a night shift, and say I love you without flinching — the idea of other people looking at me stopped being a threat.

That's why the bodybuilding show didn't scare me. Two hundred people in the audience. A speedo. A stage. First time I'd ever done anything like it. And I felt nothing. Not because I'm fearless. Because the man standing on that stage had already faced the hardest audience he'd ever face. Himself. That's why posting *The Reflection* doesn't scare me either. I'm putting my addiction, my grief, my failures, my brother's

suicide, my worst moments on the internet for anyone to read. And it doesn't make me nervous. Not because the content isn't vulnerable. It's the most vulnerable thing I've ever created. But the vulnerability already happened. It happened in private, over months, one mirror at a time.

The public part is just the echo. I still talk to myself. Not as aggressively as I did in those early months. I don't need to anymore. The voice changed. The architecture changed. The default thought when I catch my own reflection isn't hatred anymore. It's not even neutral. It's something close to respect. Something close to peace. But I never forget what it took to get here. Because nobody handed me that confidence. Nobody coached me through it. Nobody stood behind me and told me what to say. I was alone in a bathroom staring at a face I despised, forcing words into a brain that rejected them, doing it again the next day and the next day and the next day until something finally shifted. That's not inspiration. That's construction.

I built myself from the inside out. Word by word. Day by day. Mirror by mirror. And I'm still building.

THE EXPERIMENTAL YEAR

PROGRESS DOESN'T ALWAYS LOOK clean. If anything, this year has reminded me that real growth rarely does. I started the year thinking I had my strategy mapped out, but along the way there were missteps, flaws in my bulk, mistakes in execution, moments where things didn't go the way I envisioned. And yet, instead of breaking me, those flaws became the very things that carried me forward.

I stood on stage at 171 pounds last time at around 9–10% body fat. Now I'm nearly the same weight, but at around 6%. That alone tells the story: I added size even in a year where things didn't go perfectly. What I once would have called "failure," I now see as the blueprint of progress. Each setback revealed something about how my body works, how it responds, and what it needs. Every error was data. Every wrong turn refined the map.

I call this my *experimental year* because I wasn't chasing perfection. I was collecting knowledge. I learned how deep I can push conditioning without breaking. I learned the difference between eating big and eating smart. I learned what not to do as much as what to repeat. Most of all, I learned that success isn't a flawless climb but the steady accumulation of lessons, even when they come wrapped in mistakes.

This year will never be remembered for perfection, but I'll always remember it as a success. Because forward is forward, and I'm leaving it sharper, leaner, and wiser than I entered. That's the kind of progress that lasts.

THE LONG ROAD THAT DIDN'T LOOK LIKE CHANGE

MOST PEOPLE IMAGINE TRANSFORMATION as this one big moment — the sort of clean break you can circle on a calendar, where everything before folds up and everything after unfolds cleanly. That's never how it works. At least it wasn't for me. My entire life changed, yes. I became someone different. But it didn't happen at once. It wasn't a single decision or a grand vow. It was a long accumulation of tiny decisions that started way before I ever realized what they were building.

The truth is, my “change” didn't start the day I quit drinking. It started years before, when I was still in the Marines and still drowning myself every weekend. Even then, I couldn't get away from lifting. Every deployment — all three of them — I fell into a routine. Sometimes it was just lifting after work. On the last deployment, I went all in. I was fifty pounds over my max weight when we left. And since it was a dry deployment, I knew I had a window where alcohol couldn't interfere. So I built something out of that window.

Every morning I ran two miles before work. At work, during our break, I lifted for an hour. After work, I did interval sprints that added up to another mile and a half. I dropped carbs almost completely. In three months, I went from 215 pounds to 165. Then I added carbs back in and rode that routine the entire second half of deployment. I got the best PFT score of my career — a 278 out of 300 — and for the first time in a long time, I actually felt like myself.

Of course, when I got home, I went right back to drinking. The routine didn't survive the return to my old life, but the seeds were planted. A couple years later, I bought adjustable dumbbells and a small bench. I didn't overhaul my life — I just started lifting again. Simple routine, nothing special. But I did it four to five days a week. And because I was so used to being hungover, I didn't even care that some of those workouts felt terrible. I went anyway. I didn't even realize I was building a habit at the time. I was just doing the one thing that still felt like mine.

After a few months of that, I joined a gym. I still hadn't quit drinking. I still wasn't dieting. I wasn't “changing my life.” But I had this anchor. And for the first year, the scale barely moved — maybe ten or fifteen pounds down, total. But that year mattered

more than I knew. That year was me building the scaffolding I'd eventually climb out of the hole with.

When I finally did quit drinking — after the Marine Corps, after years of cycling through the same mistakes — everything clicked because the habits were already there. I knew how to lift. I knew how to be consistent even when I didn't feel like it. I knew how to push past a hangover, which meant I could push past anything else. All quitting did was clear the fog so the habits could finally stack.

That's why losing weight never scares me now. I've taken it off three times now — twice from pure fat, and once from a heavy bulk. I've seen myself do the slow work from both directions. I know the path because I've walked it. There's no mystery anymore.

Sometimes people see the version of me now — the discipline, the physique, the structure — and they think I made some dramatic 180 one day and just never looked back. I didn't. I stumbled, and repeated myself, and started over more times than I can count. But every time I slipped, some tiny thing stuck. And those tiny things stacked into the life I have now.

I didn't reinvent myself instantly. I accreted. I layered. I built. It wasn't a miracle. It wasn't a transformation montage. It was a thousand small choices that kept nudging me closer to the person I eventually became. And that's the part I want people to understand: nothing about me today came from one moment. It came from years of being a slightly better version of myself than I was the day before — even when I didn't know that's what I was doing.

This chapter is the proof: the man I am now wasn't created in one night. He was built, piece by piece, long before I realized a new life was even coming.

THE BODY OVER TIME

THERE'S A CERTAIN KIND of expectation people bring to progress. They want to see before and after. They want contrast. They want a clear jump from one version of you to another so they can point to it and say, "That works." But that's not what I'm documenting.

The photos I take aren't there to show a transformation. They're there to show a continuation. Not the best version of my body. Not the worst version. Just where it is at that point in time. When people look year to year, some of them will say the same things. "You don't look much bigger." "What changed?" "You look the same." And in a way, they're right. Because they're looking for something that isn't the goal.

Muscle doesn't build the way people think it does. It's not a sudden shift. It's not a dramatic leap every year. It's slow. So slow that if you're only looking for size, you'll miss it entirely. What actually changes is harder to see. Density. Separation. The way the muscle sits on the frame. The way the body holds itself. Things that don't show up in a single photo, but reveal themselves over years. Even if I never get significantly bigger from this point forward, I already know something most people don't stay consistent long enough to see. The body doesn't just grow. It matures.

There's a difference between building muscle and living in it long enough for it to change. Years of repetition. Years of loading the same patterns. Years of eating, recovering, adjusting, and returning. That time does something size alone can't. It refines. That's what I'm tracking. Not a peak. Not a finish line. A body over a life. Because the truth is, I'm not trying to arrive anywhere physically. There's no version of my body that suddenly makes this complete. No point where I step back and say, "This is it. This is the final form." This is a long build. Measured in decades. Not weeks. Not programs. Not challenges.

So when I put those photos side by side, they're not meant to impress anyone. They're meant to record something. Consistency. Time under discipline. A body that has been shaped slowly, deliberately, and without interruption. People can critique it if they want. They can look for bigger changes, sharper contrasts, faster results. That's fine. They're just looking at it through a different lens. I'm not documenting a transformation. I'm documenting a life lived in alignment with a process. And over enough years, that tells a much more honest story than any before and after ever could.

THE LINE I REFUSE TO LOWER

I'VE NOTICED SOMETHING OVER the years at work, at the gym, and in daily life. People often measure their effort by what others are doing. "If that crew isn't doing much, why should we?" "If no one else is putting in the reps, why bother?" I get it. It's tempting. It feels easier to let the lowest standard set the pace. But I've never been able to live that way.

For me, it's not about looking better than anyone else or proving anything. It's about my own quiet agreement with myself. If I start a job, I finish it. If I set a goal on an engine, I get it done even if the clock is tight and no one else would care if I left it unfinished. Because it does matter to me. It bothers me if I walk away knowing I could've gone further. That doesn't make me better than anyone else. It just makes me, me.

I don't hold the line out of pride. I hold it because it makes me feel fulfilled. There's a satisfaction in finishing something, in meeting my own standard, that can't be replaced by excuses. And that fulfillment feeds itself. It keeps me coming back, keeps me steady, keeps me moving forward no matter what anyone else decides to do.

It's not my job to change how others live. But it is my responsibility to live by the standards I've chosen for myself. And I've found that sometimes, when you quietly hold that line, others notice. They might speed up. They might try harder. Not because you told them to, but because they saw what was possible.

THE QUIET ART OF LISTENING

PEOPLE DON'T REALIZE HOW much you can learn from someone if you just stop talking long enough to hear what's actually inside them. Most conversations in the world aren't really conversations. They're two people waiting for their turn to speak. Two people polishing the response in their head before the other person even finishes a sentence. It's like watching two radio stations broadcast at the same time. Nobody hears anything, and nothing changes.

I learned, somewhere along the way, that I already know what's in my own head. I know my opinions, and I know my memories. I know the shape of my thoughts. But I don't know what someone else carries inside them. And every time I let someone talk, I mean really talk, I get to enter a world I didn't build.

Listening has become my way of expanding the universe a little. It's not politeness. It's curiosity. It's not silence. It's reconnaissance. You find truths you didn't even know you were missing when you stop trying to be the smartest voice in the room.

Almost nobody does this. People treat conversation like a competition. But if you're always trying to win, you never learn anything. And if you never learn anything, you stay trapped inside the same small room of your own mind forever. Listening is how you find the doors.

It's also how I can tell who someone really is. When people talk, the pauses matter just as much as the words. The places they hesitate. The places they choose the careful phrasing instead of the easy one. The way their eyes drift when they're searching for the right sentence. You can learn as much from those few seconds of silence as you can from ten minutes of noise.

I see that in other people because I do it myself. I pause. I look for the right words. I want things to come out the way they feel in my head, not just the fast version that fills the dead air. Most people don't have the patience for that. They interrupt. They jump the gun. They fill in the blanks because silence makes them anxious. But every once in a while, I meet someone who gives me the space to think. Someone who waits. Someone who listens the same way I do, not to reply, but to understand. Those are the people who stay. Those are the rare ones. You can build a whole friendship on that kind of silence.

I don't think listening makes me wise or enlightened. I think it just makes me honest. I know I don't know everything. I know someone else might carry the piece I'm missing. I know everyone has some kind of experience that I've never lived. And if I talk over them, I lose the chance to learn it.

There's a quiet humility in letting someone else be the teacher for a minute. There's a quiet generosity in giving someone your attention without trying to take anything back. And there's a quiet strength in not needing to win the conversation.

Listening, at its core, is just respect. It's treating people as if their inner world is worth entering. It's leaving room for the possibility that they might teach you something. And the ironic part is that the more I listen, the more people end up listening to me. Not because I speak loudly, but because I speak last. Because I wait. Because my words aren't just a reflex. They're distilled. Silence sharpens what survives it.

Maybe that's the whole point. Maybe listening is how you keep growing, quietly, steadily, without the world realizing it's happening. Maybe it's the one skill that lets you keep opening doors for the rest of your life.

THE FRIENDS WHO NEVER CAME BACK

WHEN I FIRST MOVED back home after the Marine Corps, I did what I think a lot of people do when they're in transition. I reached for something familiar. Twelve years of structure and intensity had ended, and I was standing in the silence of civilian life, trying to find my footing. My instinct was to call up the old friends I'd known before the Corps, the people who were still around the city I grew up in.

I tried. I'd call, I'd suggest meeting up, and in the moment, they'd act like they wanted to. But the follow-through was never there. Plans never stuck. Eventually, I stopped trying. At first it felt strange, almost like rejection. But looking back now, I realize it was protection.

Because the truth is, I didn't need those people anymore. They belonged to a chapter of my life that had already closed. I was different, and so were they. Forcing that old dynamic back into place would have only pulled me sideways, back toward old habits, back toward drinking, back toward a life I no longer fit into.

What I eventually realized was that the only people I actually needed were already with me, my wife, my daughters, my mom, and my sister. That was my true circle. That was my tribe. I didn't need the half-hearted energy of people who said they wanted to show up but never did. I needed the people who showed up every day without question.

At the time, I didn't understand why those old connections fizzled out. Now I'm glad they did. It cleared the space for me to see what mattered. My family is where my joy is, where my belonging is, and where my legacy will live on. I never needed those old friends. What I needed was already right in front of me.

THE MIND THAT NEVER AGED

I'VE ALWAYS FELT A little younger inside my head than I am on paper. I'm almost forty, but when I'm around people who are ten or fifteen years younger than me at work, I don't really feel older. Sometimes, it's the opposite. It's not about energy or slang or trying to fit in. It's something quieter than that. I think it's because my mind never really hardened into certainty the way it seems to for a lot of people.

I still believe things are possible. Maybe more than I should sometimes. When I see that something has been done before, I automatically think, well, then it's possible, which means I can do it too. That's always been how I've looked at life. If a person can build it, write it, create it, or achieve it, then it's within reach. It just takes time, effort, and a little stubbornness.

That belief has carried me through a lot of things I probably shouldn't have made it through, getting sober, bodybuilding, even building Axis from the ground up. I've never looked at anything and thought, that's impossible. Some things are difficult, sure, but "impossible" never made much sense to me. Because to me, "impossible" just means no one's done it yet.

I think that's part of why I still feel younger inside my own head. Not biologically but mentally. I still have that sense that the world is unfinished, that there's always something new to learn or build. I'm open to ideas, to being wrong, to changing my mind. I don't carry this urge to defend my beliefs at all costs. I want to understand, not just be "right."

Maybe that's where a lot of people start to age without realizing it. They stop letting their mind be changed. They stop being curious. They trade wonder for certainty and call it maturity.

I don't think I've ever really done that. Not because I'm better than anyone. It just never felt natural to me. I want to see the world in motion, to see it as something alive and full of possibility. That doesn't mean I walk around smiling all the time or ignoring reality. I see the pain and the nonsense and the greed like everyone else does. But I guess I still hold this quiet hope that people are better than the world sometimes makes them look.

Maybe that's what my wife means when she says I'm "childlike." She doesn't mean it as an insult. She means I still dream like a kid does. I still talk about ideas like I know

I can make them real. She says she believes me because she's seen me do it over and over again. And maybe that's all this really is, a kind of faith in possibility. Not blind optimism, not arrogance, just a steady trust that if I work hard enough, I can bring something new into existence.

That's probably the reason I've been able to build Axis piece by piece, alone and without rushing it. Because somewhere inside, I still believe that if something doesn't exist yet, it's only waiting for someone stubborn enough to make it real.

So maybe the mind doesn't have to age the same way the body does. Maybe if you stay curious, if you keep some of that childlike wonder alive, you can grow older without ever growing old.

THE FIRST TIME I WANTED TO BECOME TWO THINGS AT ONCE

THERE WAS A PERIOD in my life when I got obsessed with Rock Band. Not casually. Not in the way people usually mean when they say they got into a game for a while. I mean obsessed. I played the drums on that game constantly. Hours and hours. The kind of repetition where something stops feeling like entertainment and starts feeling like practice. At first, it was just fun. Then I started getting better. Then I got good enough to play on expert. And once I got there, the pattern that has followed me through most of my life showed up again. Expert was not enough. It never really is, once I realize something can be pushed further.

So I found the Ion drum kit. It was basically an electronic kit built for Rock Band. It had a more real setup. A double bass pedal, multiple pads, cymbals, a layout that felt much closer to drumming than the basic plastic controller ever could. I don't remember the exact configuration perfectly now, just that it felt like a major step up. It gave the game more weight. More realism. More room to grow inside it. That was all I needed. I kept playing, kept practicing, kept chasing cleaner timing, better control, smoother transitions.

And then another thought came to me. Phil Collins. I loved watching him sing and drum at the same time. There was something about that that hit me harder than just drumming by itself. It wasn't enough to keep the beat. He was doing two things at once that each seemed difficult enough on their own, and he was making them coexist. Voice and rhythm. Melody and coordination. Expression and control. It looked impossible the first time I really paid attention to it. That was probably the exact reason I couldn't stop thinking about it. Because I already loved singing too.

So at some point I thought: why don't I try both? That idea took hold immediately. I bought a mic stand and started trying to sing while playing drums on Rock Band. At first, I was not very good at it. That part matters because it would have been easy to stop there and decide it was just too much to coordinate. The drumming alone already required attention. The singing alone already required focus. Trying to split myself between both made everything worse at first. My timing would slip. My voice would fall off. I'd lose the beat trying to hit a phrase right, or I'd flatten the phrase because I was too focused on the pattern in my hands and feet.

But I kept doing it. That's the thing. I kept doing it until the two parts slowly started learning how to live beside each other. Then better than beside each other. Together. Eventually I got to the point where I was playing expert mode drums and singing on expert at the same time.

Looking back now, I think that period mattered to me for reasons bigger than I understood at the time. Back then, it just felt like obsession. Challenge. Fun. One more thing to get good at. Now I think it revealed something real about how I'm built. Because it wasn't enough for me to do one thing well. I wanted the harder version. The fuller version. The version that required more of me at once.

That pattern has shown up in almost every serious part of my life. It showed up in training. It showed up in writing. It showed up in the way Axis formed across multiple domains instead of one. It showed up in art. It showed up in how I approached self-education. And it was already there then, with drums and voice, before I had language for it. I think what hooked me wasn't just skill. It was integration. The challenge of becoming two things at once without falling apart. Keeping rhythm while carrying melody. Holding structure while expressing feeling. Dividing attention without splitting the self.

And in a strange way, I think it taught me something that would matter much later: some of the most meaningful forms of mastery are not about choosing one lane. They're about learning how to make two difficult things coexist inside one body. That is what singing and drumming was. And Phil Collins became the symbol of that for me. He became my favorite musician after that. I listened to him constantly. I still do. I still have a massive collection of his songs in my playlists now. Something about him stayed with me. Not just because the songs were good, though they were. Not just because I admired his technical ability, though I did. But because he represented a form of integration that I instinctively loved before I could explain why.

He made it seem possible for one person to hold multiple roles without becoming diluted. Singer. Drummer. Frontman. Musician. Force. That mattered to me. I think, in some early way, I recognized myself in that impulse. Not because I was comparing my talent to his. Because I understood the attraction. The desire to become more than one thing at the same time. The refusal to stay in only one lane if more was possible. The pull toward forms of expression that required coordination, difficulty, and total presence.

That little season of my life probably looked small from the outside. Just a guy playing Rock Band too much. Just another obsession. Just another hobby taken too far. But it wasn't only that. It was one of the first times I can clearly remember realizing that I loved layered difficulty. That I loved the point where practice stopped being

casual and became transformation. That I didn't just want to perform. I wanted to integrate. And once I found out that was possible, I pushed until I could do it.

That's what I really remember now. Not just the game. Not just the kit. Not just the songs. The feeling of discovering that if I stayed with something long enough, two impossible things could start moving together. And once that clicked, it never really left me.

THE LINE THAT NEVER BROKE

ART HAS ALWAYS BEEN a part of me. Not as a hobby, but as another sense, a way of interpreting the world. It's how I learned to translate emotion into something visible.

It started when I was a kid. I used to sit for hours copying characters from *Spawn* comics, trying to understand how lines and shadows could create life. I wasn't just drawing superheroes. I was learning composition, anatomy, expression, and contrast. Every page was a lesson in control and chaos, even if I didn't know those words yet.

By high school, I was experimenting with anything I could find, charcoal, graphite, sculpture, paint. I didn't care about perfection. I cared about feeling. Every medium gave me a different way to explore what was going on inside me. It was never about creating something pretty; it was about finding truth in texture, form, and motion.

When I hit my late teens, I found digital art. It felt like discovery all over again. Photoshop became my canvas, and I started creating surreal photo manipulations, dark, emotional pieces that mirrored the way I felt about the world. I was in my early 20's, living off intensity, staying up all night building images that felt like dreams caught in static. I made dozens of them, angels, decay, rebirth, loss, transcendence. They weren't random themes. I was already chasing the same ideas that would later define *The Reflection*, duality, transformation, and the thin line between suffering and beauty.

Those years were creative and chaotic at the same time. I was experimenting with drugs and alcohol. My art got darker. The figures I created looked like they were climbing out of light and drowning in it at once. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was documenting the start of my own descent, not with words, but with images.

Around 22, I stopped creating altogether. The noise got louder than the art. For nearly two decades, that part of me went silent. I built other lives, the Marine, the mechanic, the husband, the father, but the artist stayed buried under all of it. I thought maybe that version of me was gone. But art has a way of waiting for you.

When I began Project Aeon, I wasn't trying to resurrect that side of myself. I just wanted to understand my life, to dig through it honestly. But reflection always leads back to creation. As I began writing, organizing, and eventually building what would become *Axis*, I started to feel that pull again. I realized that the same energy that once made me draw and design was still there, it had just changed form. Art came back to

me in small ways first. A sketch. Then a pair of graphite portraits of my wife. Those drawings weren't just portraits. They were reconnections. They were proof that the line from childhood to now had never broken. It had just gone underground.

Now, I see art differently. It's not about self-expression anymore. It's about translation. About taking the ineffable, emotion, grief, reflection, awe, and turning it into something tangible. When I start painting again, the work won't just be aesthetic. It will be part of the living system, the Axis Archive. Each piece will serve as a visual reflection of what I've written and lived. The same principles that guide *The Reflection*, honesty, curiosity, transformation, will exist in color, texture, and light. Because for me, art isn't decoration. It's devotion. It's the same devotion that built this system, wrote this book, and rebuilt my life. That's why I call this *The Line That Never Broke*. Because even through twenty years of silence, it never did.

Author's Reflection — November 2025

Looking back now, I can see that those early digital pieces weren't just art experiments. They were emotional documents. They captured the atmosphere of who I was before I even had the language to describe it.

Back then, I didn't know words like "integration." I only knew how to build what I felt. The figures I made, fractured, luminous, half in shadow, were pieces of me trying to climb toward understanding.

When I look at *Leaving Purity*, *Stairway to Heaven*, *Awaiting Your Return*, or any of those early works, I see more than design. I see the seed of Axis. I see the same search for meaning, the same pull toward balance, the same fascination with light emerging from darkness.

At the time, I thought I was just creating visuals. But what I was really doing was sketching the emotional architecture that Axis would one day formalize. Every contrast of light and dark, every angel, every symbol of ascension or collapse. It was all part of the same language that would later become reflection, integration, and the continuum.

These pieces belong to that story. They're part of the record.

They will live in the Axis Archive not as relics of the past, but as the earliest reflections. Visual evidence that even when I didn't have the words, I was already building toward the same truth.

Even then, before sobriety, before philosophy, before *The Reflection*, I was reaching for the same thing.

To make the invisible visible. That's what art has always been for me. A way of touching what can't be spoken and I'm now realizing it's been guiding me all along.

THE POINT IS NOT THE POINT

I’VE NOTICED SOMETHING ABOUT myself that has been there since I was a kid, though I never had the words for it until now. When I tell a story, the point isn’t the point. Most people seem to tell stories like they’re making a delivery. You put the package together, the punchline, the moral, the lesson, and then you drop it off. Once it lands, the job is done. That’s why so many people skip the small stuff, trimming down to just what “matters.” But to me, the small stuff is what matters. The way the person looked. The tone in their voice. The details of the room, the moment, the air. These things aren’t extras or side notes. They are the story itself. If I can’t pull you into that world, if I can’t make you feel what I felt, then what’s the point of even telling it?

That’s why, if someone doesn’t catch an early detail, I often feel like the story collapses. It isn’t because I’m being dramatic. It’s because, in my head, the story isn’t about the “takeaway” at the end, it’s about the whole. The details are the doorway. Without them, you’re not walking into the world with me, you’re just standing outside waiting for a summary. It’s always been this way for me. Even as a kid, I’d get frustrated if someone didn’t “get” what I was trying to paint for them. I wasn’t satisfied unless they could see it, not just hear it. I realize now that what I’ve been doing all along is trying to give people the experience, not the report. And maybe that’s why my daily life feels the way it does to me. Every small ritual, shaving, prepping my food, styling my clothes, keeping the house clean, it all feels magical because I see the details as sacred. The beauty of the whole is made out of the beauty of the pieces.

So yes, when I tell a story, I take my time. I linger. I build it like a cathedral of moments. Because the point isn’t the point. The story is the point. The details are the point. The whole experience is the point. And maybe that’s why I’m writing this book in the first place. Because sometimes the only way to honor a life is to let the details breathe.

THE LITTLE GARDEN

IT WAS JUST A chia garden. One of those kid-sized gifts that comes with bright packaging, big promises, and tiny seeds. My daughters got them as presents. At first, it seemed like a sweet idea. It was something small and exciting to nurture. But my youngest is still very young, and with that comes all the beautiful chaos of being a child. She overwatered it. She kept playing with it. She couldn't help herself. And the garden, well, it didn't grow the way it was supposed to.

I saw it happening almost immediately. And I felt a strange, quiet sadness creep in. Not because it was a big deal. Not because it would change her life. But because I knew before it even happened that it was going to fall short of what her little heart probably imagined. The picture on the box showed something perfect and lush. Reality was going to give her something patchy, something stunted. And even though she didn't cry about it or dwell on it, or maybe even notice, I did.

That was days ago. Tonight, I found the garden again while I was cleaning. Just a small thing, half-forgotten in a corner. But the sadness came back. Not because she was still sad, but because I remembered her hope. That initial spark of excitement. That quiet belief in something small and magical. And I knew deep down that the world didn't give her what she thought it would.

That feeling didn't hit like a lightning bolt. It was softer than that. More like an ache. A tug on something ancient and paternal inside me. It was as if I had absorbed her disappointment without her ever having to feel it fully herself. And that's what struck me most: how often we carry the silent sadnesses for the people we love, even when they've already let them go. Especially for our children.

I don't think she even remembers the garden. But I do. And not because it mattered in any practical way, but because it was a symbol. A symbol of every small thing they'll reach for in life with wide eyes and open hands only to realize, sometimes, that it won't bloom the way they hoped. And I'll see it. Every time. I'll feel it in ways they won't. I'll cry quiet tears for them that they'll never notice. And I'll hold space for their joy and disappointment alike, because that's what it means to be a father. Not to fix everything, but to witness it. To honor even the tiniest heartbreaks as sacred. Because to them, in that moment, it was everything.

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It was just a chia garden. But to me, it was another reminder of how deeply I feel for them. How fully I live inside the hope they carry. And how I'll keep loving even their forgotten dreams long after they've moved on.

THE MAGIC YOU DON'T GET BACK

IT WAS JUST A scent, something carried on the air as I walked out of my work building during lunch. But the moment it hit me, I was somewhere else entirely. It wasn't déjà vu. It wasn't nostalgia in the soft, bittersweet way people usually mean it. It was more like a full-body memory, like something reached up through time and wrapped itself around me. And suddenly, I was back there. Back around the campfire, with my mom, dad, and grandparents. The smell of smoke curling into the evening air, the gentle crackle of firewood, the cool, quiet hum of a campground at night. I could see the RV. The little picnic table. The flickering glow on the trees.

I remembered us playing Uno inside, laughing under those dim camper lights, wrapped in the stillness of the woods. I remembered hiking in the daytime and roasting marshmallows in the evening. I remembered not having to be anything other than a child. That was the magic. And as I stood in the present, on a paved lot under the sun, heading back to my car to finish lunch I realized something. I can't get that version of the moment back. Not because I don't have access to nature. Not because I can't take my wife and daughters camping one day. I could. Maybe one day I will. But it still won't be the same. Because the truth is, the magic wasn't in the camping. It was in being held. It was in not being the one responsible for anything. It was in being young enough to simply exist in the experience. No checklists. No responsibilities. No packing the RV. No managing logistics. No checking for bug spray or worrying if the propane's hooked up right.

That kind of freedom only happens once. Not because life gets worse but because we become the ones who carry the moment now. We become the arms that hold, instead of the ones being held. And that shift is subtle, quiet, but unshakable. It doesn't mean I can't go out into the woods again. It doesn't mean I can't create joy in a campground or peace beside a fire. I can. I might. I want to. But it will be different.

It'll be me making the lists. Me driving. Me loading. Me remembering to bring the bug spray, the towels, the extra propane. It will be me keeping an eye on the kids while they laugh and run around the campsite. While they live in that same carefree magic I once did. And maybe that's the beauty now. Maybe the real sacredness isn't in trying to get back to the fire as a child but in becoming the one who makes the fire for others. Maybe the real treasure is knowing that one day, my daughters will be walking out of

a building in their own adult lives, and they'll catch a scent in the air, something woodsy, maybe smoky, and they'll stop. And suddenly, they'll be back at a fire. With me. Just for a second. Because I built that moment for them. Because I carried the magic forward. Because they got to be held.

And that's the full circle of this life, isn't it? We're held. Then we learn to hold. We're given the magic. Then we become the ones who give it. And all of it. Every single memory, every flicker of light in the dark is worth remembering. And worth passing on.

THE CAR

I THINK I FINALLY understand why I love singing alone in the car so much. It's not because I think I'm particularly good at it. It's not because I'm rehearsing anything or trying to improve. It's because it's the one place where I can be fully expressive out loud and not feel embarrassed or exposed. No one is watching. No one is listening. Nothing is being evaluated. I can be loud. I can be dramatic. I can miss notes. I can feel something and let it come out without translating it into acceptable behavior.

Most people probably see me as serious. Quiet. Measured. And they're not wrong. I move through the world carefully. I think before I speak. I don't waste energy performing a version of myself for other people. But that seriousness isn't who I am all the time. It's just the version of me that's safe to show. The car is different. The car doesn't require anything from me. There's no conversation to manage, no reaction to anticipate, no impression to maintain. It's a sealed space moving through the world where I can exist without being perceived.

When I sing there, I don't feel like an adult trying to be appropriate. I feel like a kid again, not in a nostalgic or sentimental way, but in the sense that expression doesn't need permission. Sound can just be sound. Feeling can just be feeling. I didn't realize how rare that is. For a long time, I had to keep myself tightly managed. Even after the obvious reasons were gone, the habit remained. Stay composed. Stay controlled. Stay inward. That posture worked. It still works. It built a stable life. But it also meant that most of my expression learned to live inside me. The car became the exception.

I don't think that means there's something wrong with me, or that I need to open up more, or perform joy in public. I don't think this is something to fix. I think it's something to understand. Everyone needs at least one place where they don't have to be quiet. For some people it's a room, or a walk, or a notebook, or a gym, or a set of headphones late at night. For me, it's a moving box with speakers and no witnesses. That space matters more than it looks like it should. It's where I remember that expression doesn't have to be useful, impressive, or shared. It just has to exist somewhere. And for now, that's enough.

THE PULL BACK

AFTER THE SECOND TRIP, even though it was insanely terrifying, I immediately felt like I needed to go back. That sounds crazy. But I've felt that way ever since I woke up the day after. And I still feel it to this day. Every trip since has come with a thread of fear but once you've seen what I saw, once the veil has been thinned, you can never go back in the same way again. You carry the knowledge with you. It's not theoretical anymore. It's visceral.

There's something about that second trip that permanently changed my relationship with psychedelics and more than that, with reality itself. It was like a line had been crossed, and once you cross it, the map you used to navigate the world before no longer looks the same. You've seen behind it. You've tasted the root of things. And even if what you saw was terrifying, there's a strange magnetism to it. A gravitational pull that says "There's more. You're not done."

That trip stripped away everything. Identity. Safety. Familiarity. All of it collapsed. I met things in that space I didn't know could exist. I encountered a reflection of myself so intense, so beyond words, that I couldn't tell whether I was going mad or waking up. There was no logic, no time, no structure, just raw experience. Like staring directly into the engine of existence. It was brutal. It was overwhelming. But it was also honest. And that's why the pull never left. It didn't feel like something I invented or imagined. It felt like something that had always been there, waiting for me to notice it. It's like a call that only gets louder after you answer it once. No matter the suspense I feel each time, I keep going back but not because I'm chasing some kind of high. Because something in that space still has more to show me.

People often assume the pull toward psychedelics is about pleasure, healing, or curiosity. But this isn't about any of those things. This is something deeper. It's as if the trip itself opened a doorway that never closed. And I don't even mean that metaphorically. There's a realness to the feeling. Like the experience is unfinished. Like I'm being asked to return—not for escape, but for understanding.

And like I said, once the veil has been thinned, you can never go back in the same way again. Every time after that, the fear is different. It's not the fear of the unknown anymore. It's the fear of knowing just how real it all is. It's the fear of going back into the fire because you know the fire speaks. And that's the strange paradox I live with

now. Even though what I saw terrified me, I still feel called toward it. Not because I enjoy the fear but because I know that something sacred is buried underneath it.

Author's Reflection — October 2025

When I wrote this chapter, I was still living inside the gravity of the second ten-gram experience. The pull I described was real. It felt raw, consuming, and unfinished, as if something had opened and was asking me to return until I understood what it wanted from me.

What I see now, after the evolution of Project Aeon, is that I was mistaking the doorway for the destination. I thought the unfinished feeling meant I needed to go back into the experience. I thought the message was still hidden somewhere inside the mushroom, waiting for the right dose, the right courage, or the right descent.

But the pull was never really toward another trip. It was toward integration. The experience had cracked something open, and I did not yet know how to live with what came through. Project Aeon eventually became the place where that kind of material could be held with more care, not as a command to keep returning to altered states, but as an invitation to build a life capable of carrying what they revealed.

The pull was real. I still honor that. But I understand it differently now. It was not calling me back into the fire forever. It was teaching me how to bring the fire home without letting it consume the house.

THE ROAD WAS FINE

THEY STARTED TEARING UP the road I drive every night. The road was fine. Not full of potholes. Not crumbling. Not congested. Just a long stretch of quiet asphalt that carried me from one life into another, from work back home, from noise into stillness, from the world into myself. But someone, somewhere, decided it needed “improvement.” So, they brought in machines, cones, blinking signs, men in reflective vests standing around like they were waiting for a reason to move. And every night since, I’ve had to slow down. Stop. Watch lights flicker in the darkness. Inch forward when waved through. Wait.

It’s been weeks. And the whole time I can’t stop thinking: Why? Why fix what wasn’t broken? Why take something that worked and tear it apart in the name of progress? And then it hit me. That road’s not just a road. It’s a metaphor. For everything. That’s how we live now. We are always upgrading, always modifying, always pushing for more. Even when the thing already works. Even when the only thing we end up building is more noise.

It’s the illusion of progress. We think that movement means improvement. That tearing something down and rebuilding it makes it more valuable. That constant updates, renovations, enhancements are signs of success. But half the time, all we’re doing is creating problems where there weren’t any. We expand the road to reduce traffic, but we cause more traffic to do it. We work harder to earn more, only to spend more. We train to get bigger, only to feel emptier. We overcorrect, overthink, overreach and then wonder why we’re exhausted. And maybe the worst part? We forget how to stop. We forget how to look at something, ourselves, our bodies, our relationships, our path and say, this is enough.

I see it now. That road is like life. Or at least the version of life we’re sold. The never-ending promise of something better around the bend. But if you’re not careful, you spend your whole life under construction. That’s why I reflect. That’s why I stopped chasing mass. That’s why I quit alcohol. That’s why I don’t scroll through social media or look for validation in likes. Because I don’t want to be a project. I want to be a person. I want peace more than progress. I want meaning over momentum. And if that means I drive a “perfectly fine” road the rest of my life without trying to

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tear it up and rebuild it, so be it. I've already seen what the other way leads to. Now, I just want to go home.

ARC III — THE LOVE

Where everything finally connects. This arc is the heart of The Reflection.

It's where everything that hurt, everything that healed, and everything that changed finally finds its reason. The story so far has been about descent and rebuilding. This one is about what makes all of that worth it, love.

Not the kind that's loud or romanticized, but the kind that stays. The kind that carries you through loss, through rebuilding yourself, through long stretches of silence.

In these chapters, love shows up in every form it can take. It's in a brother who left too soon, a sister who cared quietly, a father who taught through his actions, a mother who led with kindness, a wife who never walked away, and two daughters who gave everything meaning.

Each story stands on its own, but together they trace the evolution of what love means when you stop searching for it and start living it. It begins with the love that shaped you and ends with the love you now give back, the full circle.

You'll see that love isn't just emotion; it's endurance. It's patience, forgiveness, and learning to stay open even after you've been broken. It's the quiet work of showing up every day for the people who believe in you, even when you didn't believe in yourself.

By the time you reach the end of this arc, love will no longer be something happening to you. It will be something flowing through you. Because that's what this part of the story is really about. Carrying forward the best parts of everyone who ever loved you, and turning that into the life you live now.

This is where everything comes together, where healing turns to gratitude, gratitude turns to purpose, and purpose turns to love.

Welcome to The Love. This is where it all finally connects.

THE KINDNESS THAT NEVER ASKED TO BE SEEN

SOME PEOPLE TEACH YOU what they believe by telling you. Others teach you by living so quietly and consistently that belief becomes something you recognize rather than something you adopt. That's how my grandparents taught me. My mother's parents, especially. I was deeply close with them for most of my childhood and early adulthood, right up until they passed. My granddad died before I joined the Marine Corps, sometime when I was probably eighteen to twenty. My grandmother died not long after I joined, maybe six months in. The timeline blurs a little now, but the feeling doesn't. They were a constant. And more importantly, they were safe.

My grandmother was the most sincere Christian I've ever known. Not loud. Not performative. Not interested in converting anyone. She never preached at me, never quoted scripture as a weapon, never tried to explain the world away. She simply lived the values she believed in. She loved everyone without exception. Color didn't matter. Background didn't matter. And considering the era she grew up in, the 1920s and 30s, that wasn't nothing. That kind of kindness wasn't inherited by default. It was chosen. She treated people well because she believed it was right, not because she wanted credit for it.

After she died, we found something that made that unmistakably clear. Inside her Bible, tucked carefully between the pages, was a photograph of my wife. She hadn't announced it. She hadn't told anyone. She just kept her there, quietly, in the place that mattered most to her. Not as a statement. As an inclusion. That small act told me more about her faith than any sermon ever could. It's the reason I've never resented Christians as a group. The reason I don't dismiss faith outright, even though my own path has taken me elsewhere. Because I saw, early on, what belief looks like when it's embodied rather than advertised. If faith has any legitimacy at all, it looks like her.

My granddad was a Christian too, but where my grandmother was gentle and grounding, he was a cut-up. He loved to joke with me. To play. To make things light. We had our own rhythm, teasing, laughing, stretching moments longer than they needed to be just because we could. He and my dad used to joke that I stank so bad I was "rotten to the core." It became a running gag. Completely stupid. Completely perfect.

But he also taught me things, quietly, the same way he lived. One of those things was collecting coins. He showed me how to look at them. How to notice dates. Wear. Weight. History. Not as money, but as objects that had passed through countless hands, carrying stories you'd never fully know. I didn't realize it then, but he was teaching me how to pay attention. How to value small, overlooked things. How to find meaning without needing spectacle. That instinct stayed with me.

Every summer, we went on trips together. Sometimes to the north Georgia mountains. Sometimes to Panama City Beach. My great uncle, my grandmother's brother, had a house on the beach there, and we'd use it when we could. Every time we went, there were rituals. There was a putt-putt golf place I loved as a kid. I don't remember the real name. I just called it the Red Eye Monster, because it had this big skull statue with glowing red eyes. That place exists in my memory with the same clarity as any major life event. There was also a restaurant, The Treasure Ship, I think. A big pirate-looking boat on the water. The waiters dressed like pirates, or at least that's how I remember it. Whether that detail is perfectly accurate doesn't really matter. What matters is how it felt. It felt like adventure. Like being included. Like being small in a world that wanted you there anyway.

We camped a lot too. My grandparents had an RV, and we'd take it into the north Georgia mountains. Evenings meant marshmallows by the fire. Nights meant UNO games inside the camper. Laughter bouncing off cramped walls. The smell of smoke and sugar and summer. Those weren't special occasions. They were just life. And that's the point.

My grandparents didn't sit me down and explain morality. They didn't teach lessons. They didn't outline values. They lived them. They showed me that kindness doesn't need a microphone, that faith can be humble, that laughter can be a form of love, that attention is a kind of reverence, and that family doesn't have to be dramatic to be meaningful. Long before addiction. Long before grief. Long before philosophy or self-reflection or Axis, I had already seen what goodness looks like when it's quiet, consistent, and real.

They're gone now. But they didn't leave a void. They left a template. And when I look at my life, at how I try to treat people, at how I resist dogma, at how I value sincerity over spectacle, I can trace a straight, unbroken line back to them. Not because they told me who to be. But because they showed me. And that, I think, is the rarest gift anyone can give.

THE SUMMER I HAD A BROTHER

BEFORE HE DIED, I got one summer with him. It's strange how memory works. I don't remember my brother ever living with us growing up. He was already married and starting his own family by the time my earliest memories started forming. To me, he was a figure that existed on the edges of the home, someone I knew I loved, but didn't really know. A shadow cast by stories and distance. But then something changed. He came back.

He was in a rough place with his marriage, and for reasons I'll never fully understand, he started spending more time around our family again. I was about 16 years old then, living what felt like a regular teenage life. I was watching my sister's kids during the week and spending weekends hanging out with her. But that summer? That summer, I got to have a brother.

He started a business. It was an on-call mechanic service where he'd drive out to people's houses to fix their cars. We made the business cards together on the computer. I helped him design them, print them on perforated sheets, cut them, and get them ready. It felt like we were building something together. Not just a business but a bridge.

He invited me along for the jobs. At first, he offered to pay me. But I told him I didn't care about the money. I just wanted to be with him. That was true. All I'd ever wanted was time with my brother, and now I finally had it. I didn't need anything else.

Some days, while he worked, I'd sit in the car and read Harry Potter books. Other days, I'd watch him, hand him tools, talk to him. Laugh. Just be near him. It's one of the only memories I have of him where it was just the two of us. No distractions. No holidays or gatherings. Just two brothers, driving around town in the Georgia heat, fixing cars and pretending, if only for a month or so, that we'd always been this close.

Looking back, I think that's what made his death hit me so hard. It wasn't just losing him. It was losing the brother I had just found. The one I never really got to know until it was already too late. Before that summer, he was more like a myth. After that summer, he was real. And then, just as quickly, he was gone.

I don't have many more memories from that time. Just fragments. Snapshots. But I hold onto them like sacred relics. Because in those few short weeks, I wasn't just the kid brother watching from afar. I was his passenger. His shadow. His companion. I

finally got to feel what it meant to have a brother. And that's the part that still breaks me sometimes. That I finally got what I'd always wanted. And then I lost it.

THE BROTHER I REMEMBERED LATE

FOR A LONG TIME, my brother existed in my memory as an ending, not as a person. Just as the fact of what he did. When someone takes their own life, especially when you're young, the gravity of that act pulls everything else into it. Memories collapse inward. The story simplifies. The mind tries to protect itself by turning a complicated human into a single, unbearable moment.

For years, that's how I carried him. But something changed when I started writing *The Reflection*. The more honestly I wrote about my own life, the pain, the addiction, the transformation, the more memories of him started to surface. Not dramatic ones. Not traumatic ones. Real ones. The kind that don't announce themselves. They just show up quietly, like they were waiting for permission.

One of the first memories that came back surprised me. I was in my teens, probably fourteen or fifteen, deep into band life. Music wasn't a hobby for me, it was oxygen. And at some point, I started messing around on keyboards. Not formally. Just trying to find sounds that fit what we were doing. My brother noticed. He didn't sit me down and teach me scales or theory. He did something much more him: he showed me how to play by ear. He'd play something simple, then nod at me like, now you try. No pressure. No instruction manual. Just listening and feeling your way forward. That mattered more than I realized at the time. Because that's how I've done almost everything important in my life since, music, art, even philosophy. Listen first. Feel it. Then respond.

He also introduced me to oil painting around that same time. He would paint along to Bob Ross videos, calmly, patiently, without making a big deal out of it. Eventually, he gave me the tapes. And I did the same thing he did. Sat there, brush in hand, letting a gentle voice guide me through something I didn't yet understand. Looking back now, it feels almost symbolic. He didn't just show me what to do. He showed me how to approach learning, without force, without ego.

There are other memories too. Softer ones. Him coming by the house with his wife and kids during the summer. Everyone swimming in the pool. The sun, the noise, the ordinary chaos of family. Nothing monumental. Nothing cinematic. Just life happening. I remember spending the night at his house when I was younger, maybe eight, nine, ten years old. I stayed over because I was close with his daughters. We'd

stay up late watching SNICK on Nickelodeon, laughing, half-delirious from being allowed to stay awake past when we should've been asleep. My brother wasn't part of that scene directly. He was there, somewhere in the house, doing his own thing. He was just my brother. They were just my nieces. We were just kids stealing time from the night.

One of those nights, I remember exactly what I was doing when I cut one of their hair. I was deep into Mortal Kombat back then, obsessed with it, like kids get obsessed with things. I told her I was going to cut her hair to make her look like Sonya Blade. In my head, this was a flawless plan. No skill. No scissors experience. Just confidence. The next morning, my brother saw it. He was pissed, understandably. At the time, it felt serious. Looking back now, it's funny in that way childhood memories become funny once the stakes are gone. A bad haircut, a bad idea, a kid trying to be cool. It didn't define anything. It was just one more imperfect, human moment.

There's another one that still makes me laugh. One summer day while we were all swimming, my dad's belt was sitting out on the screened-in porch. My dad wasn't around at the moment. He wasn't abusive, he used the belt sparingly, as discipline, and it was never about hurting us. But the belt itself had this symbolic weight to it when you were a kid. My brother picked it up and started snapping it, laughing, making a joke out of it. We were all laughing. And at some point, the belt broke clean in half. Without missing a beat, he looked around and said, completely straight-faced, "Logan... why did you break dad's belt?" We all lost it. That's how he handled things. Humor as a release valve. Humor as protection.

What hurts most about suicide isn't just the loss. It's how it tries to erase everything that came before it. Writing this book has been an act of resistance against that erasure. My brother wasn't just the man who died in a bathroom. He was the man who taught me to listen. Who painted quietly. Who brought his kids over to swim. Who laughed at broken belts. Who trusted a teenager enough to say, you'll figure it out, just play it again.

I didn't remember all of this at once. It came back piece by piece. As I slowed down. As I stopped running. As I learned how to sit with truth without needing it to resolve neatly.

THE ROAD HE WALKED FIRST

I DIDN'T SEE IT for a long time. Not because the evidence wasn't there, but because I was too close to it. When you're living inside a pattern, you can't see the shape of it. You just feel the weight. But at some point, after years of writing and reflecting and laying my life out piece by piece, the parallels became impossible to ignore.

My brother lifted weights. I lift weights. My brother made art. I make art. My brother played keyboards. I play keyboards, because he taught me. My brother drank heavily. I drank heavily. My brother used drugs. I used drugs. My brother suffered from depression and despair so deep it swallowed him. I suffered from the same. My brother locked himself in a bathroom in our childhood home and didn't come out. I locked myself in the same kind of room, more than once, with a knife, and almost didn't come out either. The same blueprint. The same wiring. The same trajectory. The same house. The only difference is the ending. He turned left. I turned right, at the same intersection. And the margin between those two outcomes was my mom's love and a decision I made while drunk and crying on a floor. That's it. That's the entire distance between his story and mine. I don't know when the pattern started. Maybe it was always there. We were sixteen years apart, but we were built from the same material. The same intensity. The same creative instincts. The same gravitational pull toward things that could either build us or destroy us. He found the destruction first. I found it second. He didn't survive it. I almost didn't either.

I was sixteen when he died. My identity was still forming. And the most significant event of my young life was the loss of a person who loved all the same things I would eventually build my life around. I didn't understand it then. I didn't understand it for twenty years. But his death didn't just leave a hole. It left a charge. The things he loved became heavier than they would have been otherwise. Not burdensome. Magnetic. Art wasn't just art after he died. It was something he did. Music wasn't just music. It was something he gave me. Lifting wasn't just lifting. It was something we shared, even if we never shared it at the same time. I don't think I consciously decided to carry his interests forward. I didn't wake up one day and say, I'm going to live the life he couldn't finish. It was quieter than that. I just followed what called to me. And everything that called to me turned out to be something he had already touched.

The keyboards he taught me to play by ear, I still play them. The visual art he opened a door to, I returned to decades later. The weightlifting he loved but couldn't take further because addiction held him back, I turned into a physical philosophy. The music he created stayed alive in me too. His interests didn't die with him. They went underground. Into me. Into the soil I grew from. And they surfaced one by one as I built the life he didn't get to build. That's not imitation. That's inheritance. And the darkest parallel of all is the one that almost completed the circle. His addiction consumed him. Mine almost consumed me. His despair led him to a bathroom. Mine led me to the same kind of room. He had a weapon. I had a weapon. He made one choice. I made another. And the only thing standing between his ending and mine was a woman who had already lost him and couldn't lose me too. My mom. She didn't know I was holding a knife. She wasn't in the room. But her love was so deeply embedded in me that even at my most broken, even at my most drunk, even in the middle of the loudest pain I'd ever felt, I couldn't do that to her. She had already buried one son. I couldn't be the second.

That thought, just that one thought, held me in place every single time. And it held long enough for me to eventually find my way out. I wonder sometimes if she saw the parallels while they were happening. If she watched me drink and heard echoes of him. If she watched me spiral and felt the same terror she must have felt before he died. If every phone call I made to her during those years, the long ones, the crying ones, the ones where I talked about him for the hundredth time, felt like standing at the edge of the same cliff twice. I think she did. I think she saw it all. She survived losing him. Then she survived watching me almost follow him. Then she survived watching me come back from the edge he didn't come back from. Three survivals. One mother. In the same house where all of it happened.

I wonder what he would think if he could see all of this now. I think he would recognize himself in me before he recognized anything else. Not the muscles. Not the art. Not the philosophy. The wiring. The intensity. The way everything is either all the way on or completely dark. He would know that feeling, because it was his feeling too. And then he would see the part that's different. The part where I stopped. The part where I chose to stay. The part where I took everything he loved and built it into something that will outlast both of us. I think that would break his heart and mend it at the same time, knowing that the kid he taught to play by ear didn't just learn the keys. He learned how to live.

I didn't plan any of this. None of it was designed from the top down. I just followed what was honest. And what was honest turned out to include him, living inside me, expressed through my hands, carried in my voice, built into the architecture of what

I've made. He was not there in every chapter by name. But he was there in the current running underneath them. In the creative impulse. In the intensity. In the need to make something from what might otherwise have been lost.

My daughters will grow up with a father who lifts, makes art, plays music, and writes. And they'll never fully grasp that the man who planted some of those seeds in their father didn't survive long enough to watch them grow. But I know. And every time I sit at those keys, or pick up my tools, or step into the gym, or open my mouth to sing, some part of what I'm doing is keeping his unfinished work alive inside my own. I offered to go with him that day. He said no. And then I went anyway. Not that afternoon. Over the next twenty-three years. Through the drinking. Through the drugs. Through the bathroom floor. Through sobriety. Through the mirror. Through the commute. Through every chapter and every rep and every key pressed on an instrument he put in my hands before he left. I followed the same road he walked. I went all the way to the edge where he disappeared. And instead of crossing over, I turned around and brought everything he was back with me. Back to the same house. The same halls. The same pool. The same bathroom. Except now it holds life instead of death. Daughters instead of silence. Art on the walls instead of grief soaked into them. He's home. Not his body. His unfinished work. His love of creation. His intensity. His music. The parts of him that were trying to become something before the darkness took him. They became something inside me. I didn't decide to give him a second life. I just lived mine honestly enough that his showed up inside it on its own.

And now, through the work, through the archive, through the books my daughters will one day hold, he'll be there too. Not by name in every chapter. But in the DNA of the whole thing. In the fact that his little brother turned out to be the one who carried part of him home.

I walked both of us here. And I'm still walking.

THE SISTER WHO RAISED ME IN HER OWN WAY

BEFORE MY wife. Before my daughters. Before the reflection, the Marine Corps, the drinking, the trips. There was my sister.

She is 11 years older than me, and in many ways, she was the first person who ever made me feel seen. Not just protected but included. From as far back as I can remember, she didn't treat me like a tag-along. She didn't brush me aside like I was a nuisance. She brought me in. Made me a part of her world. And when I think back to the earliest memories of my life, she's in almost all of them.

She used to take me everywhere. To the mall. To her friends' houses. To Aladdin's Castle, the old arcade we used to love. And I wasn't just a quiet kid in the background. I was her little sidekick. Her shadow. Her responsibility, maybe, but also her joy.

We used to stay up late playing Nintendo together. Super Mario Bros., mostly. I'd cry when I couldn't save the princess, frustrated beyond words, and she'd stay patient with me even when I couldn't stay patient with myself. She'd laugh and remind me it was just a game. My thumbs would ache from playing too long, and I'd go get Mom to blow on them to make them feel better. But she never teased me for that. Not once. She let me be who I was.

She took me to the mall with her, and to hang out with her high school friends while I was in first and second grade, attending the same Christian school she had gone to years before. All her friends knew me. When I walked into the gym in the morning, they'd throw up their fingers in a little symbol to tease the cowlick I had in my hair. Not mean-spirited. Not mocking. It was like I had my own fan club. I was the little kid who somehow belonged. And my sister made sure of that.

Even when she moved out, at the end of my second-grade year, I still felt close to her. That never changed. She got married to a Marine and moved to Cherry Point, but every summer she'd come pick me up and take me to stay with her for a couple of weeks. Just me. No parents. No obligations. Just that same feeling of being wanted, brought into her life with intention.

Her husband, at the time, became like a brother to me. We'd go fishing together, hang out, ride around. When he visited his side of the family, I'd go with him. And I didn't feel like an outsider. I felt like I belonged. Like I had a seat at the table.

That stretch of time, those summer visits, those fishing trips, those horror movie marathons we'd have late at night, they shaped something in me. Not just memories. Not just nostalgia. Bond. Emotional memory. Safety.

I remember when we watched *Poltergeist* together and she scared the hell out of me, jumping at just the right moment and nearly making me fall off the bed. It scared me, sure, but it also became one of those stories that lives on forever. The kind you carry with a smile. The kind that makes you laugh through tears years later.

Out of all the moments in my childhood, the ones with her stand out the most. They were the warmest, the most alive. They are, without a doubt, some of the fondest memories of my early life. Looking back now, I realize something I never quite put into words before. She didn't just babysit me. She didn't just hang out with me. She raised me in her own way. Not as a replacement for our parents, they were always loving and present. But she gave me something different. A sibling bond with parental depth. The kind of presence that makes you feel safe and cool at the same time. Like you mattered just because you existed.

After her divorce, and after my brother came back into the picture for that one summer, the dynamic shifted. But even through the years, even through distance and change, I've always carried that closeness with her like a thread tied around my heart.

It's strange how even the good memories can bring tears to your eyes. Not because they hurt, but because they remind you that something was real. That you were loved. That someone chose you not because they had to, but because they wanted to.

I think that's why I never felt truly alone in childhood. Because of her. Because even when the world got quiet, I always had a sister who let me in. And that kind of love? It stays with you. Even now, as a grown man with kids of my own, I still feel it when I look back. That feeling of being wanted. Of being brought along. Of being important just by being me. That's the gift she gave me.

And it shaped the man I'd one day become whether I knew it or not.

THE FIRST BEST FRIEND

TODAY, I TOLD MY sister about Axis. Not just in fragments. Not just that I've been writing. Not just that I've been building something. I told her the full scope of it, what it is, what it's for, how big it really is, and what I've been trying to do all this time. She is only the second person I've really told in full. My wife was the first. My sister was the second. And that mattered to me more than I expected.

She seemed genuinely happy for me. Not politely supportive. Not confused and trying to be kind. Actually happy. Like she could feel the weight of what I was telling her and understood that it mattered to me in a real way. At one point, she said she would never be able to keep up with all the stuff I do daily. And I laughed, because I understood what she meant. From the outside, I know it probably sounds like a lot. The writing, the training, the structuring, the reflecting, the constant building, the way everything seems to connect to everything else. It probably does sound like a lot when you step back and look at it all at once. But to me, it doesn't feel like I'm juggling random things. It feels like I'm finally living in alignment with the way I've always been wired.

Still, hearing her say it reminded me that Axis really is a massive thing. Not in a performative sense. Not in an ego sense. Just in the sense that when someone who loves you hears the full scope and pauses for a second, you realize you've been carrying something very large, very quietly.

What made it feel so good wasn't just that she approved. It was that it was her. My sister has always meant something sacred to me. She was my first best friend. Even when I was little, she took me everywhere. She loved me with a kind of closeness that felt almost maternal at times. Not because she was trying to replace anyone, but because that's just how deeply she cared for me. She was one of the earliest people in my life to make me feel included, wanted, and safe. So telling her about Axis didn't feel like giving a presentation. It felt like bringing something back to someone who belongs near the origin of me. That's what made it emotional in a quiet way.

Because before the books, before the system, before the architecture, before any of this had a name, there were just people who loved me early enough to know me before the fractures. My wife is one of the people who helped hold me through the rebuilding. My sister is one of the people who belonged to the world before the breaking fully

began. And when someone like that hears what you've built and smiles for real, it lands differently. It doesn't feel like praise. It feels like recognition.

There's something powerful about being witnessed by someone whose opinion you genuinely respect. Not because they're an expert in your field. Not because they can validate the technical quality of the work. But because they know your heart. Because they know your character. Because they know where you came from and what it cost you to become more fully yourself. That's what today felt like. I got to tell one of the earliest people who ever loved me what I've been building in the quiet, and she was happy for me. That might sound small to someone else. To me, it wasn't small at all. It felt like a circle widening. Like Axis moved one layer deeper into the real world. Like something I've carried privately for so long stepped into family space and was received with warmth instead of confusion. And maybe that matters more than I realized. Because for a long time, so much of my life happened inwardly. The rebuilding. The writing. The systems. The meanings. The architecture of everything. Most of it happened in silence first, in the car, in documents, in routines, in thoughts I was trying to hold still long enough to understand. But every now and then, you get to hand a piece of that inner world to someone you love. And when they hold it gently, something in you exhales.

That's what this felt like. Not exposure. Not performance. Relief. Joy. A kind of sibling homecoming. I told my sister about Axis today. And because it was her, it felt like more than sharing a project. It felt like being seen by my first best friend. And that meant more to me than I can fully explain.

THE PRIDE HE NEVER GOT TO SEE

WHEN I JOINED THE Marine Corps, my dad was proud of me. He had served one enlistment in the Air Force when he was younger, and the military, structure, and responsibility all meant something to him.

I had spent years working in a bookstore, and when I told him I couldn't live off that forever, when I said I was getting married and needed to provide for my fiancée, and that I was joining the military, something in him lit up. When I finished boot camp, I think he saw in me what he respected most: order, commitment, and sacrifice. He only lived to see me wear the uniform for a year, but in that short time, I knew he was proud.

What hurts is everything that came after. He never saw me serve twelve years honorably. He never saw me lead Marines as a Division Chief. He never saw the discipline and the endurance that the Marine Corps carved into me. I know that would have been a point of pride for him, maybe even something he bragged about. I can imagine him telling people about his son who stayed the course, who became a leader, who carried the torch of service longer than he did.

And then there's what came after the Corps. Sobriety. Bodybuilding. Project Aeon. The transformation of my life into something he might not even have recognized at first. My mom and my wife have been my loudest cheerleaders, always telling me how impressed they are by what I've done. I believe my dad would have been impressed too. I wish I could have shown him how much I've changed, how much discipline I live with now, how I rebuilt myself into someone stronger than he ever got to know.

But the deepest ache is that he never met my children. Kid's always seemed to love him. I know my daughters would have loved him, and I know he would have loved them. That bond was stolen from us all, and it's the part that still catches in my throat when I think about him.

Yet even in that loss, I carry him forward. Every time I parent with honesty, every time I stand firm in discipline, every time I tell the truth because I know trust is the bedrock of a family, I hear him in me. My daughters will never sit on his lap, but they will know him in the way I live. They will meet their grandfather in the way I raise them.

My dad got to see the beginning of my path, but not the harvest. That hurts. But I live every day as if I am carrying on the second half of a conversation with him. One that didn't get to finish while he was alive. My life now, the body I've built, the sobriety I've kept, the family I cherish, these are my answers to the questions he never got to ask, the pride he never got to say out loud. And though I can't hear him anymore, I know what he would say. I can feel it like a quiet echo: "That's my son."

THE UNSPOKEN CONVERSATION

WHEN MY DAD BAILED me out of jail after my DUI, he cried. I can still see the look on his face, disappointed, hurt, but more than anything, heartbroken. It wasn't anger. It wasn't even shame. It was the silent sorrow of a man who had given his life to teaching me right from wrong and was now watching me drift away from everything he believed in. I didn't cry that night. But I never forgot his tears. That was one of the only times I ever saw my dad cry. At the time, I was too lost in myself to fully understand what it meant. But now, all these years later, I realize it was one of the clearest expressions of love I'd ever witnessed. He didn't raise his voice. He didn't scold me. He just sat in that moment, carrying the weight of a son slipping through his fingers. And even though he's gone now, even though he never got to see me sober, or watch my body and life transform from the inside out, I think about that moment constantly. Because I'm still in that conversation with him.

He taught me some of the most foundational values I carry to this day: Tell the truth. Work hard. Stand up for what's right. Protect the people you love. He didn't teach them with speeches. He taught them by living them. Quietly. Consistently. Unapologetically. Who didn't back down from responsibility. Who didn't have to talk about his principles because they were etched into everything he did. And when I was lost in the chaos of alcoholism, when I was calling my mom drunk and slurring into the phone about how I hoped he was proud of me. I think I was just trying to reach him. Trying to bridge the gap between who I was and who he'd raised me to be.

Back then, I knew he was worried. Not just about me but about my wife. I think he feared that I might one day become someone who would hurt her, even though I've never laid a finger on another person in my life. But I never resented him for that fear. Because underneath it was love. Fierce, protective love. The kind that doesn't just look out for blood, but for the people who become part of your family. And now that I'm clean. Now that I'm strong and steady and fully present in my own life, I wish more than anything that he could see who I've become. Because the man I am now isn't just inspired by him. He's built from him.

When I think back on my journey, the night I got sober, the trips that opened me up, the reflections, the pain, the rebuilding, I realize that every step of it has been part of an unspoken conversation between me and my dad. Not the version of me that got

lost. Not the version that broke his heart. But the version he always hoped would surface. And the truth is, he *did* see it. Not with his eyes but with his faith. He believed in who I could be, even when I didn't. That's why I still carry him. Not just as a memory but as a standard. I carry his work ethic when I grind through a workout. I carry his honesty when I reflect with brutal truth. I carry his protectiveness when I watch over my wife and daughters. I carry his pride in the way I show up as a man quietly, steadily, without needing applause. He didn't need to see the final version of me. Because the final version of me is rooted in him.

To this day, I still have moments where I look up and say, "Dad... I hope I made you proud." And in the silence that follows, I don't feel emptiness. I feel peace. Because I know now, deep in my bones that I have. And I'll spend the rest of my life living in a way that proves it. This chapter isn't about grief. It's about gratitude. For the man who shaped me. And the man I've finally become. For him. And because of him.

THE FIRST MIRROR

BEFORE I KNEW HOW to reflect, before I ever looked in a mirror and saw anything deeper than a surface, there was my mom. She was my first reflection. Not in the way she looked but in the way she looked at me. From the very beginning, I was a mama's boy. Proudly. Unapologetically. Wherever she was, I wanted to be. If she was studying to become a nurse, I was right there beside her, bothering her, asking questions, tugging on her attention. She never pushed me away. She always made space. Somehow, she balanced it all, nursing school, family, life, and still gave me what I needed most: her presence.

The truth is, I carry her in everything I do. I may have inherited my father's values, his work ethic, his integrity, but my way of being in the world, the way I think, the way I care, the way I see things, that's my mom. She was soft but strong, nurturing but grounded. She never let hardship harden her, and I think that's where I learned how to hold depth without closing off. Where I learned that strength doesn't have to roar. It can whisper. It can be patient. It can simply remain.

When I look back on my childhood, some of the most vivid memories I have are of the small things she did that made my world feel big. She'd take me to Books-A-Million when I was deep into my Pokémon phase, letting me trade cards and explore that little world of childhood obsession. She supported every hobby I ever had, art, lifting, collecting things, creating things. She told me she used to lift weights when she was pregnant with me, and sometimes she'd say maybe that's where I got it from. Maybe she's right. I remember being a little kid and crying because my thumbs hurt from playing video games for hours. I'd go to her room, and she'd blow on them to make them feel better. I don't think I ever forgot that kind of love. It's the kind that meets you exactly where you are and never makes you feel silly for needing it.

She used to buy me Goosebumps books and Ninja Turtles tapes, Power Rangers VHS collections and special things she knew I'd love. She made sure that whatever I loved, she paid attention to it. She didn't treat those things like distractions. She treated them like part of me. And that made all the difference.

Even when I left home, when I joined the Marine Corps and built a whole new life across state lines, I never really left. I called her almost every weekend during my 12 years in the military. We'd talk for an hour or more. She was still my constant. She was

still the one I went to just to feel like myself again. I've always been close with my mom. That never changed. Even now, I call her often, just to make sure she's okay. Just to hear her voice. Because she's more than my mom. She's my anchor. My first sacred connection. My earliest experience of unconditional love.

One thing she's told me over the years, maybe not in these exact words but I've heard it in her voice every time. We both knew I wasn't always okay. But she never gave up on me. She believed I'd come back to myself. Even when I was deep in alcoholism. Even when I was lost in anger, depression, self-destruction, she never judged me. She never shamed me. She just kept loving me, steady and quiet. She waited. And now she's here to see it. To see the transformation. To see the man I've become. She lived to see the truth of what she always believed about me: that I would rise. That I would evolve. That I would come home to myself. She never asked for credit. She never told me "I told you so." She just smiles. And I know what that smile means. It means "I always knew."

The way I reflect now? The way I love my wife? The way I father my daughters? That started with her. She didn't just love me. She taught me how to love. How to feel. How to soften without crumbling. How to be vulnerable and still hold my ground. If I've been able to walk through the fire of transformation and come out whole, it's because she was the first to teach me how to walk with open hands instead of clenched fists. She was the first one to see me long before I ever saw myself.

When people read this book, they'll read about pain, addiction, failure, and recovery. But what they'll also see, if they look closely, is the thread of her love running through every single chapter. Because before I ever found healing, before I ever rebuilt my body or explored the depths of consciousness, there was one person who held the blueprint of who I was always capable of becoming. It wasn't a therapist. It wasn't a guru. It was my mother. And now, through these words, her legacy lives on. Not just in what she gave me but in how I give that same love to others. This chapter isn't just about her. It's because of her. And in that way, every chapter is.

A Note for You, Mom

You were my first safe place. You were the first person who ever showed me what love without conditions feels like. You never asked me to be anyone else. You just let me be me, even when I was broken. Even when I was lost.

Everything I've become, the strength, the softness, the depth, it all started with the way you looked at me when I was just a boy. You never stopped believing in who I could be, even when I couldn't see it myself. You didn't just raise me. You rooted me. And I carry that love into every room I walk into, every chapter I write, every moment I live as a man trying to do right by the people he loves.

THE REFLECTION

Thank you for never giving up on me. Thank you for teaching me how to love without fear. Thank you for being the kind of mother I will always strive to honor, not just with words, but with the life I've built because of your love.

I love you more than you probably know. And I always will.

—Alex

THE MEASURE OF GOODNESS

MOST PEOPLE BUILD THEIR strength by learning how to survive the flaws of those who raised them. They grow by patching holes, healing from pain that was handed down to them too early, too often. But my story is different. My strength wasn't forged in the absence of love. It was rooted in the presence of it. And that love came from my mother.

From the very beginning, she gave me something that is so rare it almost feels mythical. A sense that love wasn't earned, it was simply given. Freely. Completely. Without judgment or condition. She didn't yell. She didn't shame. She didn't wield discipline as a form of power. If she got upset, it never stayed long. What stayed were the warm memories, the kindness, the meals, the gentle tone in her voice. Even now, when I try to recall a time she was truly mad at me, I can't. Not because it never happened, but because whatever brief moment it might've been was drowned out by an ocean of goodness.

One story stands out. Every year on Christmas Eve, I would cry. Not tears of excitement or impatience, but tears of fear. I would tell her that I didn't think I'd been good enough to get presents from Santa that year. I truly believed it. Even as a child, I had this overwhelming sense of self-reflection. It was a deep-rooted concern that I hadn't measured up. But every time, without fail, my mom would reassure me. She'd hold me, speak softly, and tell me she was sure I had been good enough.

She didn't make fun of me for being emotional. She didn't try to toughen me up. She simply loved me in that moment. And I don't think she realized how important those moments would become. How they would form the scaffolding of the man I would one day try to become.

Years later, I remember my sister saying something like, "You know Mom isn't perfect, right?" And I understood what she meant but I didn't really care. Because in my eyes, my mother had achieved something much rarer than perfection. She was good. Deeply, instinctively good. The kind of good that wasn't performative. The kind of good that asks for nothing in return.

Even now, she remains the measure I hold others to. Whenever I try to determine what kind of person someone really is beneath their surface, I compare them, at least

silently, to her. And when I try to be a better father, a better husband, a better human, I think of the example she set.

She gave me something few people ever receive, a model of kindness that didn't come with a price tag. A version of love that didn't demand perfection but still taught me how to reach for it, not out of fear, but out of reverence.

Everything I've become, everything I've had to fight through, addiction, grief, fear, transformation, was shaped by her early grace. I knew what light looked like, even in the darkest moments, because she had shown it to me. And when people now tell me I'm a good man, I understand why. It's because I was raised by her.

THE WOMAN WHO NEVER BROKE

PEOPLE SEE MY MOM and they see kindness. They see warmth. They see a woman who gives freely, who loves without conditions, who shows up without being asked. And all of that is true. But what they don't see is what it cost her to stay that way. They don't see what she absorbed. They don't see what she carried. They don't see the woman who buried a son, buried a husband, watched her surviving son try to follow the same road, and never once let the people around her see her fall apart.

I have never seen my mother cry. Not when my brother died. Not when my dad died. Not during the years I was drowning in alcohol and she was sitting on the other end of a phone listening to me break down for the hundredth time about the same grief I couldn't process. Not once. And I need people to understand what that means. It doesn't mean she didn't feel it. It means she decided, probably without ever making it a conscious decision, that she would be the thing that didn't move. The fixed point. The floor that everyone else could stand on while the ground was shaking underneath all of us.

That's not emotional absence. That's the most disciplined form of love I've ever witnessed. Because the tears existed. The grief existed. The fear existed. She just never let it spill onto the people who needed her to be steady. She cried somewhere. I'm sure of it. Maybe alone in her room. Maybe in the car. Maybe in the shower. Maybe in places and moments nobody will ever know about. But she made sure that her children never had to carry her grief on top of their own.

Think about what she actually lived through. Her oldest son died by suicide. In her home. In the bathroom. She came home and found the door locked. She reached under it and her hand came back covered in blood. That alone would destroy most people. But she kept going. Her husband died while her youngest son was serving in the Marine Corps. She was in that house alone when it happened. The same house where her other son had already died. And she kept going. Then she watched me, her baby, the last one, start drinking the way my brother drank. Start spiraling the way he spiraled. Start disappearing into the same darkness that took him. And every phone call I made to her during those years, the long ones, the ones where I cried about my brother for the hundredth time, the ones where I'm sure she could hear in my voice that something was breaking, she answered. Every single one. She never said, I can't

do this anymore. She never said, you're too much. She never said, I'm tired of hearing this. She just listened. And believed. And waited. For years. While watching the same pattern try to repeat itself in her surviving son.

I found out later, through *The Reflection*, through the work of writing it all down, just how close I actually came. The bathroom. The knife. The nights I almost didn't make it through. And when I told her, when I sent her *The Reason I Stayed* and she read that her love was the only thing that kept me from following my brother, she didn't collapse. She said, "You are a survivor like me." Even in that moment, even with the weight of knowing that both of her sons had stood at the same edge and only one came back, she held steady. That's who she is.

People talk about strength like it's something loud. Something that fights back. Something that announces itself and demands recognition. My mom's strength never announced anything. It just stayed. Through the worst things a mother can experience, it stayed. Quiet. Consistent. Unbreakable. Not because she's superhuman. Not because she doesn't feel pain. But because somewhere deep inside her is a decision that was made a long time ago, that the people she loves would never have to be strong for her. That she would carry it. All of it. However much there was. For as long as it took. And she did. She carried a son's suicide without breaking. She carried a husband's death without breaking. She carried a decade of watching me self-destruct without breaking. She carried the knowledge that I almost followed my brother without breaking.

I don't know how. I genuinely don't. I've done a lot of hard things in my life. I've gotten sober. I've rebuilt my body. I've faced the worst parts of myself in mirrors and on pages and in the depths of experiences that stripped everything away. But I don't think I could do what she did. I don't think I could stand where she stood and stay upright. And the part that gets me the most is that nobody sees it. People see the warmth and they think that's the whole picture. They think she's sweet. They think she's soft. They don't realize that behind every gentle word is a woman who swallowed more grief than most people will ever know and converted it into love instead of bitterness.

That's not softness. That's the hardest kind of strength there is. Because loud strength gets recognized. People see someone fighting, pushing, raging against what life threw at them, and they call it resilience. But quiet strength, the kind that just keeps showing up, keeps answering the phone, keeps believing in a son who's drowning, keeps standing in the same house where her other son died, keeps saying "I love you" at the end of every conversation like it's the most natural thing in the world even though her world was shattered more than once, that goes unnoticed. Because it doesn't ask to be noticed. It just remains.

I inherited that from her. The ability to hold something enormous and still function. The ability to carry pain without letting it spill onto the people I love. I do that now. I've cried in bathrooms at work after reading my own chapters, washed my face, and walked back to the floor, and nobody knew. That's her. That's exactly her. I learned it by watching a woman who never let the people around her see what it was costing her to stay upright. She is the strongest person in my story. Not me. Not my wife. Not any leader I served under. Her.

And the reason nobody gives her enough credit is the same reason her strength works. She never asked for it. She never made it about herself. She never said, look what I survived. She just survived it. And kept loving. As if nothing had ever been taken from her. Even though almost everything had. This chapter isn't me giving my mom credit she's overdue for. It's me saying out loud what I've known my whole life but never had the words for. She is the strongest human being I have ever known. And every single thing I've built, every chapter, every rep, every mirror, every moment I chose to stay, started with her. Not because she told me how to be strong. Because she showed me. Every single day. Without ever saying a word about what it cost her. That's my mom. And I will spend the rest of my life trying to love the way she loves. Quietly. Completely. Without ever needing anyone to see it.

THE UNBREAKABLE BOND

WHEN I LOOK BACK now, I realize something I never fully put into words until recently. I didn't just have a close relationship with my mom. I had a world with her. From the moment my sister moved out at the end of my second-grade year, and with my brother never living under the same roof that I can even remember, my childhood home became something different. It became a small world, a quiet world, just me and my parents. But really, more often than not, it was me and my mom. She filled every empty space that might have been left by siblings. She made sure my world never felt small, even when it was quiet. She gave me adventure, encouragement, unconditional love. All the things that most kids find splintered between brothers and sisters, friends and neighbors. I had it all in her. She didn't treat me like a tag-along. She treated me like someone worth knowing, worth listening to, worth growing alongside. And without either of us realizing it, she was shaping me. Not just as a child, but as a man.

Most boys grow up learning hardness first, then struggling to find their way back to softness. I grew up differently. I learned love first. I learned patience first. I learned tenderness first, not as something to be ashamed of, but as something to protect. Because of her, I never lost the thread of empathy, even when life hardened my exterior later. Because of her, when darkness came, alcoholism, depression, grief, there was still a deeper blueprint inside me that hadn't been broken. There was still a map back to the light. And that's why, even in my lowest moments, I never became cruel. I never surrendered to bitterness. I always knew, even when I was lost, what it felt like to be truly loved. Because I had already lived inside that love from the very beginning.

People sometimes talk about overcoming childhood wounds. About healing the broken parts they inherited. About learning to love later in life. But what I've realized. What I'm only now putting into words, is that part of the reason I could walk this path, part of the reason I could create the reflections you're reading now, is because I didn't have to go back and fix everything about my childhood. Because one of the most important things was never broken. My mom had already built it right the first time.

Even now, my mom calls me her baby. Even now, decades later, that bond has never faded. Even through addiction, depression, and recovery it remained. That bond wasn't just emotional. It became structural. It became part of my architecture. It's why I don't chase fame. It's why I don't need crowds or constant validation. It's why I can

THE REFLECTION

walk alone without bitterness. Because when you start your life knowing you're enough, truly enough, in the eyes of someone who loves you unconditionally, you don't have to spend your adulthood searching for proof. You just live it.

WHAT SHE ALREADY SAW

THERE WAS A TIME when I imagined myself as a professional bodybuilder—on stage, under lights, with a pro card in hand. Not just for the love of the process, but for something deeper. Something older. I wanted to make my mom proud. I pictured the moment she'd see me win, or hear my name announced. I imagined the pride in her face, not because I needed it to feel loved—but because I thought that kind of success might finally *match* how much she believed in me. But time does something to you. Especially time spent in reflection.

I let that dream go. Not because I failed, not because it didn't matter, but because other things began to matter more. And as I stepped back from chasing fame, I started to see something I hadn't before. She was already proud of me. Not for the lights. Not for the stage. But for the man I became when no one was watching. The man who came home. The man who changed. The man who raised a family with intention and grew deeper every year. That was the victory she cared about. Not the kind that needed trophies or followers, but the kind that could be felt in quiet rooms and everyday moments. And now I see it clearly:

I was chasing a version of pride she already had for me. Not because I had to earn it. But because I had lived it. And that might be one of the deepest lessons I've learned. Sometimes, the person you wanted to impress already saw you clearly all along.

THE PRIDE SHE GOT TO SEE

IF MY DAD NEVER got to see the harvest, my mom has seen all of it. She was there before the beginning, before the Marine Corps, before the bookstore job, before the house I live in now. She was there when I was a kid running through the yard, when I first picked up her little dumbbells and flipped through her exercise books. In a way, she planted the first seeds of this entire journey without realizing it.

When I drank, she saw it. She never turned her back on me, but she never lied either. She knew I was slipping into something destructive. She carried the quiet worry of a mother who can't control her son's choices but still loves him fiercely. And when I quit, when I finally put the bottle down, she saw that too. She saw the turning point with her own eyes. I don't have to imagine her pride, because I lived it. She told me how proud she was. She said she could see the man I was becoming, the one she had always known was in me.

She has witnessed everything my dad missed. Twelve years in the Marines. The long nights of schoolwork. The discipline of bodybuilding. The writing of *The Reflection*. The daily grind of *Axis*. The growth of a family inside the very house where she raised me. She has seen me build and rebuild, fall and stand again. And she has seen me as a father. She has seen her granddaughters laugh in my arms, swim in the pool she once watched me splash in as a boy, and grow up under the same roof that once held her own hopes and fears.

If my dad represents the conversation cut short, my mom represents the story fully told. She has been present for every chapter, turning each page with me. She is the one who taught me gentleness, kindness, and patience. The traits that make strength more than muscle, that make discipline more than rigidity. She gave me the map back to the light when life tried to harden me. And now she gets to watch me give that same light to my daughters.

Her pride isn't imagined. It's spoken. It's in the way she looks at me, the way she tells others about me, the way she smiles when she sees her grandkids thriving. Unlike my dad, whose pride I carry as a quiet echo, my mom's pride is alive and audible. And there's something sacred about that. To be fully witnessed, not just in success but in struggle. To have someone who saw the mess and the rebuilding, the falls and the rising, and who can say with absolute truth: "I saw it all. And I am proud."

That's a gift I don't take lightly.

THE WOMAN WHO WALKED BESIDE ME

MY WIFE AND I have been together for a long time, 15 years. We met when I was working at a bookstore, and she was working in the café. At the time, I hadn't been in a relationship in seven years. My last relationship had been when I was 16, not long after my brother's death, and when it ended, I was already vulnerable, grieving, and drifting toward old habits. The years that followed became lonely in a way that shaped me. For a long stretch, the closest thing I had to a relationship was with drugs and alcohol. Fast forward six years to when I met my now-wife.

Our relationship was solid from the beginning. We had a deep emotional connection, and I knew she was someone special. I cared for her deeply, and she supported me even when I wasn't in a great place. I quit doing drugs when we got together but drinking stayed. I eventually realized that I wanted more than just a relationship. I wanted a life together with her. So, I joined the Marine Corps because I knew it would provide us with a better future. We had no money at the time, and I knew that I needed to be more than what I was in that moment.

Our early years were filled with love, but I struggled with my demons, namely alcohol. We had our moments, and although we stayed close, I still wasn't fully present in the way I wanted to be. It wasn't until much later, after my first psilocybin trip and after years of battling with alcoholism, that I began to truly wake up and realize how much she had sacrificed for me. She stuck by me through everything, through the struggles and the darkness. I couldn't have asked for a better partner, but I wasn't the man I wanted to be yet.

Not once did she waver. She never stepped outside our vows, never turned her back on me even when I had all but disappeared into the bottle. That kind of loyalty is rare. Unbelievable even. But it's real. She proved it.

Although the first trip led me to quit alcohol, the second was when I started to reflect deeply on my life, our relationship, and everything that led me to where I was. I knew I wanted to be the best version of myself, not just for me, but for her as well. During this time, I began to really focus on deepening our connection. I started being more physically affectionate, more hugs, more kisses, more "I love yous", and to be honest, it freaked her out at first. She wasn't used to me being so emotionally available, and that took some time to adjust to. At first, I worried that she wasn't responding

well, but over time I realized that it was about her healing and her process, not about me forcing change on her.

Eventually, her walls softened too. Now she's the one who initiates hugs and kisses, the one who tells me "I love you" before I do. It's like our marriage began again, with all the history, but none of the hesitation.

One of the most vulnerable moments in our relationship happened a couple of months into this process when I broke down and confessed to her how much guilt I had been carrying. I had never fully realized how much my past actions, particularly my alcoholism, had affected our marriage until I felt the weight of it. I was afraid that she no longer loved me, that she wouldn't be able to forgive me for the person I had been. She reassured me, telling me that she had already forgiven me, especially once I stopped drinking. She made it clear that she loved me and that I didn't need to carry the guilt anymore. That moment of release, of truly sharing my deepest fears and vulnerabilities with her, solidified the foundation of trust and love between us even more.

Since then, we've been closer than ever. It's like we've entered a new phase in our marriage. One that's built on understanding, emotional openness, and shared growth. I work on myself, but I do it with the knowledge that she's right by my side, supporting me. It's not just about me improving anymore; it's about us improving together. She has made it clear that she values the effort I've put into becoming a better man, and in turn, I value the space she's given me to heal and grow. She's been my rock, and I try to show her every day how much she means to me.

I've done my best to repay that faith. When I saw the stress her job was putting on her, I told her to quit. I told her I'd take care of everything financially so she could focus on what fulfilled her, writing. She had mentioned once, in passing, that she might like to write a book someday. I never forgot it. So, I got her a journal and a pen. Then, after she put in her notice, I surprised her with an iPad and keyboard to make writing easier. She's been writing ever since. And I get to see her happier now than I've ever seen her.

There's a part of me that feels guilty for the years I wasn't fully present, and while I know she's forgiven me, I put in the extra effort not because I feel guilty but because this is how I should have been showing love from the beginning. I want to be the best man for her, the man she deserves, and every day I try to live up to that. She's always been open to supporting me, and I believe that the emotional depth in our relationship has been a huge factor in my transformation, both mentally and spiritually.

She's never judged my path, even when that path veered into the unknown. She listens to my dreams. She reads my reflections. She sat with me through the scariest

moment of my life, when I was deep in a psilocybin trip, unsure if I had broken my own mind. She held me. That act alone brought me back to reality. It was the most profound physical sensation of love I've ever felt in my life, pure, grounding, and real.

I also understand that there's a balance in our relationship. She's my partner, and while I strive to do everything I can to support and love her, I also know that she has her own journey. It's not about me rescuing her or being "the strong one" all the time. It's about us lifting each other up, supporting each other, and moving forward as equals. I know that I'm capable of standing on my own if anything were to ever happen as is she, but I also know how much of a blessing it is to have someone as deeply connected to me as she is.

She's not my crutch, and I'm not her savior. We're two whole people, choosing each other every day. That's what love is, not need, but devotion.

THE ONE WHO NEVER LEFT

THERE'S NO VERSION OF this story that exists without her. Not really. You can trace every transformation in these pages back to some major event, addiction, trauma, loss, psilocybin, the gym, the mirror. But behind all of it, quiet, steady, unwavering, was her. My wife.

Not just a supporter. Not just a bystander. Not even just a partner. But the guiding light who kept walking beside me even when I stopped walking for myself.

I said once, and I still believe it, there isn't a single person on this planet who would've stayed by my side through everything the way she did. Through the drinking. Through the years of emotional numbness. Through my lowest moment, the betrayal that should've broken us. She stayed. She didn't stay because it was easy. She stayed because that's who she is.

She never matched my mistakes. That's the part that humbles me more than anything. I messed up. Deeply. In ways that still make my chest tighten when I think about them. And she? She never retaliated. She never cheated. Never tried to "even the score." Never threw my failures in my face just to watch me squirm. Instead, she stayed true. To herself. To us. To the future she still believed in, even when I gave her every reason not to. That's not weakness. That's strength most people will never understand.

It's easy to romanticize a woman like her. To paint her as angelic. Untouchable. Fragile in her goodness. But that's not who she is. She's real. She's human. She's complex. She's fought battles of her own, quietly, without asking for applause. She has boundaries. She has limits. She doesn't sugarcoat things. She forgives but she doesn't forget lightly. And she doesn't enable. What she is, is unbreakable. Not because she's invincible, but because she's loyal with her whole being, even when it costs her. She held space for a version of me I hadn't become yet. And not once did she try to rush it. Or control it. Or demand something I wasn't ready to give. She just kept being who she was. And in that unwavering presence, I found my way back to myself.

What she did for me back then, I found myself doing for her more recently. Not because our marriage was in crisis, it wasn't. I had already quit drinking. I was reshaping my body, deepening my mind, becoming more spiritually aware through this process. Life was better than it had ever been. But one day, it hit me like a slap I

didn't expect. I had been working on everything, my body, my mind, my habits, my discipline. But I hadn't been working on us. I hadn't brought that same intensity, that same reverence, to my marriage. And when that realization hit, I knew what I had to do.

So, I started showing up. Deeper. Softer. Clearer. I became more physically affectionate. I gave more words of affirmation. I offered more presence, without expecting anything in return. And at first, she didn't know what to do with it. She was standoffish. Unsure. Guarded. And I understood. Because even if the pain of the past wasn't visible anymore, it hadn't disappeared. Not fully. So, I stayed with it. Day after day, I kept showing love that wasn't being mirrored yet. I didn't demand. I didn't withdraw. I just loved. And slowly, like spring after a long winter, she opened back up.

Now she's the one who reaches first. Now she's the one who says "I love you" before I do. But none of that happened overnight. Because real trust must be lived into, not just promised. That season of loving her with no guarantee it would be returned, That was one of the most important lessons of my life. And it's the one she taught me, years before I was ready to live it.

I've done a lot of work to change. I've faced the darkest corners of my past. I've gotten sober. Rebuilt my body. Stared into the soul-scarring mirror of psychedelics and come back stronger. But none of that would've happened, none of it, if she hadn't believed I was worth saving long before I proved it. She's the reason this story exists at all. Because when I was close to disappearing, she stayed visible. And when I was disconnected from everything, she never disconnected from me. And when I betrayed the very trust that held us together, she still protected the future we hadn't built yet.

How do you write about a love like that? How do you put language to something that eternal? You don't. Not completely. All I can do is name it. And thank it. And live every day like I'm earning it.

I used to think I had to be the strong one. The protector. The foundation. But she's shown me repeatedly that strength doesn't always look like armor. Sometimes it looks like softness that won't shatter. Sometimes it looks like silence that still holds space. Sometimes it looks like choosing love, even when you're not sure if it'll be returned. She's not behind me. She's beside me. And sometimes, she's the one leading the way.

I want our daughters to know what she's done. Not to put pressure on them. Not to turn her into some unreachable standard. But so they know what love is supposed to feel like. What patience looks like. What resilience looks like. They won't have to guess whether I love their mother. They'll feel it in the way I speak to her, protect her, honor her. They'll feel it in the way I treat this life we built, not as a second chance, but as the only chance that ever truly mattered.

I betrayed her once. And I will carry that scar forever. Not because she holds it against me, she doesn't. But because I need to remember what it means to hurt someone who loves you that much. And I need to remember that I was loved anyway. That's what keeps me grounded. That's what keeps me grateful. That's what keeps me working, on myself, on our bond, on this book, on our life.

She is not just part of this journey. She is the journey. And if this entire book only teaches people one thing, let it be this: The right person won't just stay. They'll save your life without even trying to. And one day, if you're lucky enough, you'll become the person they believed you were all along.

A LETTER IN THE PURSE

WHEN I FIRST STARTED trying to deepen our marriage, I was a stranger in that territory. Romance wasn't a language I had spoken fluently in a very long time. Back then, the little things such as writing letters, leaving surprises, expressing my love in quiet ways felt foreign. But I knew I needed to start. I knew I wanted to grow into someone who could show love better.

So that Valentine's Day, when money was tight because something in the house had broken, I wrote my wife a letter. Not a card. A letter. I poured everything I was feeling into it. I let my mom and my niece read it before I gave it to her. My mom said it was beautiful. My niece, who is close to me in age and someone I trust deeply, told me if her husband ever wrote her something like that, she'd cry.

That felt good to hear. It made me hopeful that my wife would feel something similar when she found it. The night before Valentine's Day, while she was asleep, I tucked it into her purse. I wanted her to find it at work the next day. I imagined her pulling it out, reading it slowly in the breakroom or her car, and maybe even crying a little. I imagined it touching her heart. I imagined it meaning something.

When I called her later that day and asked if she'd found it, she said she had. But her response was kind of flat. Polite. Maybe a little awkward. It hurt. I won't lie. Looking back now, I can see so clearly what was happening, but I couldn't then. She wasn't used to me doing things like that. I had never really expressed myself in that way. She didn't know how to react. It was unfamiliar territory for her too. And instead of seeing that, I let the absence of the reaction I hoped for feel like a wound.

The part I've been thinking about lately, the part that feels even heavier, is that I remember wanting to tell my mom about what happened. I wanted to share how the note had landed. But I didn't. I held it back. Not because I didn't want to talk about it, but because I didn't want my mom to think badly of my wife. Even while I was hurt, I wanted to protect how others saw her.

That moment showed me something I didn't realize at the time: that love, even in its earliest expressions, was already teaching me how to choose it. Now I see the deeper truth. I shouldn't have been hurt by the response. Because the truth is, I wasn't supposed to write that letter for a reaction. I was supposed to write it because I loved

her. Because she meant that much to me. The act of love isn't about what comes back. It's about what you're willing to give without needing anything in return.

If love has a test, it's this: Can you give something meaningful with no promise that it will be understood, praised, or even noticed? And can you keep giving anyway? That day, I didn't fully understand that yet. I do now. That letter wasn't just a gift to her. It was the beginning of a lesson for me. A lesson in what it means to love without conditions. To love without needing the story to go exactly how you imagined it. And that's something I'll never forget.

Looking back now, I realize I was never wrong for wanting to love her deeply. But I was wrong for thinking love needed a particular response to be real. That moment taught me something I couldn't have learned any other way. That love, true love, isn't a mirror waiting to reflect itself back. It's a light you offer freely, even when the room isn't ready to receive it. What mattered most wasn't the reaction. It was that I kept going anyway.

I didn't let the silence of that moment become the end of my effort. I didn't fold myself back into comfort or give up on the kind of love I believed we could have. And because of that, we grew. Our marriage changed. I changed. It turns out love doesn't need a spotlight. It just needs to be real. And the more real I became in the way I gave it, the more our lives transformed. That's what I want this chapter to say. Not just that I tried, but that I never stopped. Because that's the only kind of love that can last a lifetime.

THE ONE WHO STAYED

TO MY WIFE,

Most people never witness true transformation. They see glimpses. Before and after. Photos, stories, edited timelines told through filtered lenses. But you, you saw it all. You were there before the unraveling. Before the mirror broke. Before the storm came. You saw the man I was at my lowest, when even I couldn't recognize myself. And you stayed. You stayed when it would have been easier to leave. You stayed through the silence, the confusion, the nights soaked in alcohol and absence. You stayed not because I was easy to love, but because something inside you knew I was still in there, buried under it all. You didn't run when the ground gave way. You held it. You held me.

And now, after everything, here we are. At a place few people ever get to reach. A place that didn't come from perfection or fairytales. It came from fire. From wreckage. From years of choosing each other again and again when it would have been easier not to. You are the only person on this earth who has seen my full transformation in real time.

You were there for the fall. You were there for the reckoning. You were there when I clawed my way back into myself. And you are still here, now that I'm rising higher than I ever thought possible. You've never mocked this path I walk. Never judged the sacred silence I enter. You've never tried to tame the intensity of my reflections or the depth of my questioning. You've only ever respected it. Supported it. Admired it in your own quiet way. And without that, none of this would exist.

Project Aeon was born in the aftermath of healing, but the only reason healing was ever possible was because of you. You stood by me long enough for me to become the man I always could have been. You saw him before I did. You are not just my partner. You are my anchor. You are the witness to every version of me, good, broken, becoming.

You are the reason this story even made it to the page. Because love like this doesn't happen often. It doesn't come easy. And when it does appear, it's usually gone before anyone fully understands what it was. But we understood. We stayed. And now, everything I am, every word, every reflection, every insight I've written, is touched by the love you gave me when I had nothing left to give myself.

This isn't just a thank you. This is a truth carved into the very heart of my journey: You didn't just love the man I am now. You loved me into him. And for that, for you, I will always be eternally grateful. Not just in passing, not just as a gesture. But in every cell of my being. In every breath of this new life. In every moment I live in truth, clarity, and peace, you are part of it. I know how lucky I am. To have found you. To have kept you. To be loved by you through every season of becoming.

That's a rare kind of miracle. And I will never take it for granted.

FOR MY DAUGHTERS

TO MY DAUGHTERS, ONE Day When You Read This

I spent a long time wondering why this chapter hadn't come yet. It scared me, if I'm honest. I asked myself if maybe I didn't love you enough. If somehow, I was failing in the one place I swore I never would, being your father. I feared the absence of this chapter meant something about me. Something I didn't want to face. But now I understand.

The chapter wasn't missing because the love wasn't there. It was waiting, quietly, patiently, for the right reflection to arrive. One that wasn't forced. One that wasn't written just to say I wrote something for you. One that came from a real moment. A real ache. A real truth. That moment came unexpectedly, on a quiet day, watching the way one of you missed the other, and the other didn't even realize she was being missed. I thought, one night on the drive home from work, that I should reflect on this one particular thought I had about the two of you. Then it hit me like a wave, and I finally felt everything I hadn't been able to say.

So, this chapter came. And now that it's here, I know it was never late. It was becoming. Just like you are. Just like I still am. This chapter is for you, my daughters. Not because I had to write it. But because one day, you'll read it and know just how deeply you were seen.

You won't remember this part of your life. Not really. You'll hear stories. You'll see pictures. Maybe you'll recall flashes, your favorite stuffed animal, the way your room looked, the smell of dinner being made. But the days we're living now, the ones I cherish so deeply, will live mostly inside me.

That's why I needed to write this. Not just so I don't forget. But so you'll one day understand. There was a moment not long ago when your mom told me something about the two of you. How your little sister talked every day about missing her big sister while she was away at school. Every day, waiting on the couch watching Gabby's Dollhouse. Every afternoon, lighting up like the sun the second her big sister walked through the door. And it hit me: neither of you fully knows what a gift that is.

You, my oldest, might not even notice it right now. You love your sister, of course you do, but you don't feel the weight of her admiration. You don't know how precious

it is to be looked at like that. To be loved that much, that freely, that unconditionally. But one day, you will.

One day you'll feel the shift. Maybe you'll grow apart for a while. Maybe life will get louder and more complicated. And then one quiet afternoon, you'll remember how she used to run to you when you got home from school, and you'll realize how rare that kind of love is. And it will break your heart in the most beautiful way. When that day comes, I hope you remember this: your little sister looked at you the way I look at both of you. With wonder. With pride. With the unshakable belief that you are made of magic.

You two don't know this yet, but you've already changed my life. You are the reason I softened. You are the reason I became patient. You are the reason I see the world differently now, because I see it through your eyes. You are the reason I never gave up.

Every late night at work. Every dream I chased. Every part of myself I tried to heal. It was for you. Not so I could be perfect. But so I could be present. So I could be a father who didn't just love you but grew with you.

You will both become so many things. I can already see it. And I know you'll find your own paths, different, beautiful, and entirely yours. But if you take anything from this book, let it be this: cherish each other.

You'll never know how important someone is until the day comes when their voice doesn't greet you at the door. And if you can remember to stay close, even when it's hard, even when you're different, that kind of bond will carry you through anything life throws your way.

You're the reason this book exists. You're the reason I became who I am.

And if one day you read these pages and wonder what all this was really for.

It was for you. Always for you.

—Dad

NOT SACRIFICE, FULFILLMENT

TO MY DAUGHTERS, ONE Day When You Read This

I want you both to understand something clearly, without confusion, without the weight that so many children grow up carrying: I never sacrificed for you. That's not how I see it. That's not what this has been. One day, you may look back at the life I lived and say things like, "Dad gave up a lot for us." But I need you to know now, while this moment still lives fresh in my heart, I didn't give anything up.

I chose it. And I would choose it again. Because helping you find your passions was never a burden. It was joy. It was purpose. It was the clearest, most sacred use of the love I carry for you. There's no pair of shoes, no car, no trip or luxury or shiny thing in this world that could bring me the kind of joy I feel when I see your eyes light up doing something you love. Whether it's cheerleading or gymnastics or whatever new dream enters your heart next year or ten years from now. Supporting that isn't sacrifice.

It's celebration. It's witnessing you becoming who you're meant to be. And there is no better place my time or money could go than toward helping you find the thing that makes your soul feel most alive.

I've lived enough of life to know what it feels like to be lost. To not have something that pulls you forward. To drift through years not knowing what you're here for. That's why your dreams matter so much to me. Not because they're impressive or practical or popular but because they're yours. Because if you find what you love, you'll never need anyone's permission to feel alive. And if I can help give you the chance to find that? That's not sacrifice. That's fulfillment.

So, one day, when you look back, if you ever wonder why I didn't chase fame, or buy more things, or live a flashier life just know: I already had everything I ever wanted. It was in you. In your mother. In the sound of your joy. In the moments when I could say yes to your dreams.

That wasn't me giving something up. That was me receiving everything that mattered. And loving you was the easiest thing I've ever done.

THE BALANCE OF TWO FLAMES

TO MY DAUGHTERS, ONE Day When You Read This

From the moment you were both old enough to walk into the deep end of life in your own ways, I saw something forming between you: a balance. One of you, structured and steady, cautious but brave, always aware of how your choices ripple into the world around you. The other, wild and fearless, unafraid to leap without looking, teaching the rest of us that sometimes you just have to trust the water will hold you up. Neither way is better. Neither flame burns brighter. Together, you make the fire whole.

I've watched you both at the pool, at the park, at the kitchen table with your notebooks and dreams. One of you holds back for a second, measuring, thinking, weighing the risk. The other charges forward, laughing at the thought of failure because it doesn't even register as a possibility. And every time, I see something beautiful happen, one learns courage from the other, and the other learns patience. The world will try to convince you that you must pick a side. That discipline means restraint without freedom, or that freedom means recklessness without structure. But the truth is, you two carry each other's missing piece. One is the anchor. One is the sail. Without one the ship will never move but without the other the ship will never stop. It needs both to function properly.

When you are older, when the world gets louder, when voices try to drown out your own, remember this: you've already been given the gift of balance. It was born into you through each other. Your sister is not your rival. She is your counterweight. Your sister is not your opposite. She is your mirror. And just as I've built my life not from sacrifice, but from fulfillment, so too will you find fulfillment not in being exactly alike, but in becoming fully yourselves while learning from each other. If one day you read this and wonder why I never worried that you were "too different," or that I loved one way of being more than the other, let me set the record straight:

I love you equally because of your differences. I celebrate one for the structure she carries, the gentleness that steadies her strength. I celebrate the other for the freedom she embodies, the fearlessness that makes her eyes burn bright. And I celebrate most of all that you walk this road together.

The world needs both of you. The cautious builders and the fearless dreamers. The planners and the pioneers. The anchors and the sails. And because you are sisters, you'll never have to choose just one. You'll carry both within you—because you carry each other. That is the gift you've been given. And it's the reason I've always known: the fire inside you will never go out.

THE TEAM I NEVER HAD

TO MY DAUGHTERS, ONE Day When You Read This

Sometimes I sit back and just watch the two of you together. It's like you're in your own little world, laughing at things no one else understands, moving through the house like partners in crime, whispering in your own language of secrets and jokes. You're not just sisters. You're a team. And I'll be honest, every time I see it, I feel this mix of awe and wonder. Because that's something I never really had.

When I was born, my brother was already out of the house. My sister moved out when I was in second grade. They were there, yes, but they were part of a different world. Grown-up. Distant. I grew up, for the most part, like an only child. I had to figure out how to entertain myself. How to live in my own head. How to dream big enough to fill the space.

In some ways, that solitude shaped me. It made me reflective. Imaginative. It gave me the independence I lean on now. But it also meant I never knew what it was like to have someone always by my side. To share every game, every punishment, every adventure. And that's why watching the two of you is so fascinating to me. You're living a version of childhood I never did. You're giving me a glimpse into a parallel universe. What it might've been like to have a teammate, a duo, a best friend in the house every single day. But I don't watch with bitterness. I don't watch with longing. I watch with joy. Because I realized something: even though I didn't grow up with that bond, I'm one of the people who gave it to you.

Your mother and I built the home where it's possible. We created the stability that lets you be free. We gave you each other. And maybe that's the point. Maybe I had to grow up in solitude so that I could appreciate what it means to see my daughters grow up as a team. Maybe I had to live in my own head so that I could create a world where you didn't have to. I'll never know what it feels like to be in your little clique. But I do know what it feels like to watch it unfold. And that is its own kind of magic.

Because one day, years from now, when you're grown and living your own lives, you'll still have each other. You'll still carry that team. And I'll know I had a hand in giving it to you.

And that's enough for me.

ARC IV — THE CONTINUUM

The work never ends; it just deepens. This final arc brings everything full circle.

Not as a return to where things began, but as a quiet continuation. The place where all the pieces finally settle into each other.

The earlier arcs were about descent, rebuilding, and love. This one is about what comes after all of that. What happens when the lessons become habits, when understanding becomes living, and when the search for meaning turns into the act of being itself.

Here, the journey shifts from transformation to embodiment. The grand ideas give way to smaller, truer moments: a morning routine, a page written, a rep pushed through, a moment of patience. These aren't just habits; they're reflections of what all the earlier work was leading toward.

The Continuum is the bridge between realization and real life.

The chapters in this arc explore that slow, steady kind of evolution. They trace how healing becomes structure, how discipline becomes devotion, and how love becomes legacy. They show that spirituality isn't something you reach for. It's something you return to, again and again, through ordinary living. And when it's all said and done, it ends not in spectacle but in stillness.

"The Gift Was Never in the Mushroom" and "Beyond the Trip" close this book with humility. A reminder that the answers were never hiding in visions or revelations, but in how you choose to live after you've returned from searching.

This arc, and this book, aren't about escaping the human experience. They're about inhabiting it completely.

That's what The Continuum really means. It's not a finish line. It's the steady rhythm that follows the search, the heartbeat that carries you forward.

THE REFLECTION

Welcome to the final arc of The Reflection. It's not the end. It's the beginning
of what comes next.

THE COST OF REMEMBERING

IT STILL hurts. I want to say that clearly because people get the wrong idea about healing. They think it means the pain stops. It doesn't.

The first time I ever sat down and told the full story of my brother's death, my hands were shaking. I typed it out and then I was terrified to really sit with it. Terrified to see my own life reflected back at me. Terrified that what I'd been carrying for all those years would look as heavy from the outside as it felt from the inside. It did. And I cried. And then I couldn't wait to write more.

That's the part nobody warns you about. The relief doesn't cancel the pain. It exists alongside it. You feel both at the same time. The unburdening and the breaking. The freedom of finally saying it and the weight of hearing it said. I used to go to the bathroom at work after reading my own chapters. I'd stand in there for a few minutes and just let it come. Then I'd wash my face, walk back to the floor, and finish my shift. Nobody knew. Nobody needed to. That was between me and the work.

People ask what healing looks like. It looks like that. Not a breakthrough followed by peace. A breaking followed by a choice to keep going.

In the beginning, the pain was sharp. Everything I wrote felt like surgery without anesthesia. I was cutting into memories that had been sealed for twenty years. Some of them bled more than I expected. Some of them bled in ways I didn't recognize until hours later when I was driving home and something I'd written that morning suddenly hit me in the chest like it had been waiting for a quiet moment to land. That's what unprocessed grief does. It waits. It lets you think you've moved on. Then it finds you in the car at 11 pm and reminds you that you never actually dealt with any of it.

I dealt with it. All of it. Every chapter. Every memory. Every conversation I'd been avoiding with myself for two decades. And it cost me something every single time.

That cost didn't go away. That's what I want to be honest about. I'm two and a half years into this now. The shaking hands are gone. The bathroom visits are rare. The process doesn't feel like surgery anymore. But the pain is still there. It lives in the material. Every time I revisit the chapters about my brother, it hurts. Every time I read about the drinking years, it hurts. Every time I sit with the memories of who I was and how close I came to losing everything, my wife, my daughters, my life, it hurts. It should.

If it stopped hurting, I'd be worried. Because pain that disappears completely isn't healed pain. It's buried pain. And I already know what buried pain does. I buried it for twenty years. I buried it under alcohol, under noise, under recklessness, under every distraction I could find. And it didn't go away. It just went underground and rotted everything from the inside. I'm not doing that again.

So I carry it. Not because I'm strong. Because the alternative is worse.

Healing didn't make me lighter. It made me capable of holding what was always heavy. That's the difference. The weight didn't change. I did.

People want transformation to feel like liberation. They want the moment where the chains fall off and the music swells and everything is finally okay. I understand that. I wanted it too. But that's not how it works. The real version is quieter than that. The real version is: you learn to pick up the thing that used to crush you, and you carry it with you, and it still hurts, but you don't drop it anymore. You don't set it down in the wrong place. You don't pretend it isn't there. You just carry it. And over time, the carrying becomes part of who you are. Not a burden. A practice.

That's the cost of remembering. It never becomes free. Every honest look backward costs something. Every chapter I've written about my past took something out of me that I didn't get back. Every time I return to those pages, I pay a small price for the privilege of staying connected to my own story. And I pay it willingly. Because the version of me that stopped paying, the one who drank instead of felt, who numbed instead of faced, who buried instead of carried, that man almost didn't survive. This one did. And the difference between them is that this one chose to keep remembering, even when it hurt. Especially when it hurt.

My daughters will read these chapters someday. And when they do, I want them to know that their father didn't heal by escaping his pain. He healed by refusing to look away from it. That's all healing is. Not the absence of pain. The willingness to stay in the room with it.

It still hurts. It always will. And that's how I know it's real.

THE HOLINESS OF DETAILS

I'VE COME TO REALIZE something about the way memory works. The big moments, the graduations, the competitions, the weddings, those are easy to recall. They're the chapters people highlight when they look back at their lives. But for me, it's never been the big events that hold the most magic. It's the little things. The unnoticed fragments. The details most people forget.

I remember setting up green army men in my bedroom as a child. Spending an hour arranging them in a perfect battle scene. I can't tell you what grade I was in or what day of the week it was, but I can tell you the exact feeling of crouching down, lining them up one by one, and stepping back to see the story I had built. That detail is what keeps the memory alive.

It's the same with fatherhood. I could tell you about birthdays or family vacations, but those aren't the moments that stop me in my tracks. What stops me are the details I notice when my daughters don't know I'm watching. The way they whisper secrets back and forth. The way one will ask for candy at the store and immediately ask for a second piece to give to her sister. The way boredom dissolves in minutes because they miss each other too much to stay apart.

That's the magic. Not the big pictures. Not the milestones. The little moments in between. I see it in my own transformation, too. People might say, you quit alcohol. You lost weight. You built a new life. And while those things are true, they're not the whole story. The real story lives in the details. The knife I once held in the bathroom. The mirror that stared back at me on mushrooms. The taste of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich I let myself have as a celebration after a hard cut. Those aren't just footnotes. They're the heartbeat of the entire thing.

That's why I reflect. That's why I write. Not to summarize my life in broad strokes, but to breathe life back into the little things, the moments that would otherwise disappear. Because that's where the sacred lives.

The details are holy because they remind us that life isn't just a timeline of major events. It's a thousand unnoticed flickers of light strung together into something we call a story. And if you can learn to love those flickers, if you can learn to pay attention to the small things, you never miss the miracle.

The milestones come and go. The details are what make them matter. And in the end, I think that's what *The Reflection* really is, my attempt to catch the little things before they slip away. To honor the unnoticed. To show that the holiest parts of life aren't always the loudest. Sometimes, they're as simple as a whisper, a glance, a scent, a bite of food, or a memory of plastic army men standing perfectly still in the middle of a child's bedroom. Because in those details, I find the whole.

THE COST ISN'T THE VALUE

I USED TO THINK value had a number attached to it. Price tags. Paychecks. The running total of what something cost to own, to build, to maintain. That's how most of the world measures things. It's clean. It's easy. It fits on paper. But the older I've gotten, the less that number has meant.

There are things in my life that technically aren't worth much. An old room in a house I've lived in since I was a kid. A keyboard my daughter is learning on. A set of photos taken over years that don't look like much unless you know what they represent. A piece of art traded instead of bought. A hand-bound copy of a book that didn't come from a publisher. None of those things would impress anyone if you listed them out with prices next to them. But if you asked me what I would keep if everything else disappeared, it wouldn't even be a decision.

I think about that sometimes when I look at the hand-bound copy of *The Reflection*. On paper, it's just materials and time. Paper, thread, boards, glue. If you broke it down into cost, it wouldn't be anything extraordinary. But that's not what it is. It's a trade between two people who cared about what they were making. It's the first time I let someone else's hands shape something that carried my entire life inside it. It's a physical object that holds years of writing that used to exist only on a screen. There's no number that makes sense for that.

Same with the progress pictures. If you looked at them without context, they're just images. A body changing over time. Something people scroll past every day. But I know what sits behind each one. Early mornings. Missed meals I didn't skip. Days where nothing felt like it was working but I kept going anyway. The slow, unremarkable consistency that eventually became something visible. Those pictures don't matter because of how they look. They matter because of what they contain.

Even this house. I've lived here through almost every version of myself. Childhood. Teenage years. The years I lost control. The years I started to come back. Now, raising my own kids in the same space. If you listed it like a property, it's just a house. But for me, it's more like a layered record. Every room holds a different time. Different versions of me, all stacked in the same place. There's no way to assign a clean value to that.

I think that's where the shift happened. At some point, I stopped seeing things as what they cost and started seeing them as what they carry. Because money only measures what was exchanged. It doesn't measure time, attention, effort, memory, or meaning. And those are usually the things that actually matter.

That doesn't mean money doesn't have a place. It does. My job pays for my daughters' gymnastics camp. It will help fund the website that holds Axis. It keeps everything stable enough for me to keep building and living the way I do. But even there, the money isn't the point. What it allows is.

I think that's why I've stopped chasing things just to have them. Clothes. Shoes. Stuff that used to feel important at some point. They don't hold anything. Or at least not enough to matter long term.

The things that stay with me are always tied to something lived. A piece of art connected to a moment. A chapter written when something finally made sense. A quiet weekend where more got built than I expected. A conversation at work where someone realizes there's more going on than they thought. Those are the things that don't fade.

If you stripped everything down to numbers, most of what matters in my life wouldn't look like much. But if you removed the numbers and just looked at what's there, it's full.

I don't think value is something you can calculate. I think it's something that accumulates quietly over time, inside things that don't always look important from the outside. And once you start seeing it that way, the number attached to something stops being the deciding factor. It becomes secondary. Sometimes almost irrelevant.

Not because money doesn't matter. But because it was never the thing you were actually keeping.

EGO AND IDENTITY

FOR A LONG TIME, I didn't really understand the difference between ego and identity.

They felt like the same thing. Like whatever I was building out in the world was who I was. The accomplishments, the discipline, the physique, the sacrifices, all of it was mine. And in many ways, it still is. But what I've come to learn, slowly, through this process, is that ego and identity are two very different animals. One drives. The other listens.

I used to think ego was just about arrogance, loud, obvious, puffed-up pride. I didn't realize how subtle it could be. That it could show up in wanting to prove something. In wanting to be seen a certain way. In worrying how people would perceive me if I stopped competing, or changed my direction.

Ego isn't just bragging. Sometimes it's insecurity dressed up as overachievement. Sometimes it's fear in disguise. There have been so many moments during this journey where I've asked myself: Am I doing this for the right reasons?

When I stepped away from competition, it wasn't because I wasn't strong enough to keep going. It wasn't because I couldn't suffer, couldn't diet, couldn't train, or couldn't finish what I started. I had already proven to myself that I could do hard things. The deeper truth was that competition no longer fit the life I was actually building.

Bodybuilding had given me structure, discipline, and proof. It helped me rebuild myself at a time when I needed something visible, measurable, and honest. But the competition path also asked for a level of sacrifice that no longer felt aligned with the man I wanted to become. I had a wife. I had children. I had work. I had a body I wanted to carry well for the long run. I had a life outside the stage that mattered more than the stage itself. Somewhere along the way, I realized the goal had changed.

I didn't want to keep pushing my body toward extremes just to prove I could. I didn't want bodybuilding to become another form of self-erasure dressed up as discipline. I didn't want the pursuit of one version of success to quietly take from the people, health, and future I claimed to value.

That doesn't mean ego wasn't part of the decision. It was. Letting go was hard. Much harder than I expected. Because ego doesn't go down easy. It wants to cling. It whispers things like, "You're quitting." Or "People will think you can't finish what you

started.” And for someone like me, who has always tried to be solid, consistent, accountable, that voice cuts deep.

I’ve wrestled with these doubts a lot, more than I’ve said out loud. I’ve worried that people might see me as flaky or directionless just because I changed course. But the truth is, none of this is directionless. If anything, it’s the most intentional I’ve ever been. I just stopped doing things to look consistent and started doing things because they felt true. That’s a big shift. And then there’s this book.

Every time I’ve thought about releasing it, I’ve asked myself the same thing: Is this ego? Is telling my story, sharing my insights, offering these chapters, is that self-centered? Because I don’t want to become another voice shouting into the void, demanding attention for the sake of validation. I don’t want to be another name on a shelf trying to look profound.

I’ve spent so much of my life trying to detach from ego that the idea of putting something like this into the world almost felt like a betrayal of that work. But then I remember something important: Honesty is not ego.

This project isn’t about me being important. It’s about telling the truth. It’s about showing someone out there that they’re not the only one who feels lost sometimes. Who wrestles with their past. Who questions their value. Who doesn’t always know what they believe but still wants to find out.

That’s not ego. That’s service. The ego wants to be praised. The soul just wants to be known. That’s the line I’m walking now.

Humility, to me, isn’t pretending I’m small. It’s knowing I’m part of something bigger. It’s accepting that everything I’ve been through, the pain, the growth, the moments I’ve failed and the moments I’ve risen, has value. Not because I’m better than anyone. But because I’ve done the work. And I’m still doing it. I’m not afraid of being seen anymore. But I’m also not chasing it.

I don’t need to post everything. I don’t need applause. I just need the truth. The truth in my training. The truth in my home life. The truth in these pages. Ego wants recognition.

I want peace. And if that peace happens to touch someone else’s life, even just for a moment, if some stranger reads this one day and feels like they aren’t alone, then I’ll know this wasn’t about ego at all. It was about connection. And that’s something worth sharing.

THE VOICES THAT STAY

I WANT TO BE honest about something that most people in recovery don't talk about. The voices don't go away. The ones I built during twenty years of drinking. The ones that told me I was worthless. The ones that told me I was a fraud. The ones that said I didn't deserve what I was building. The ones that whispered, even on my best days, that none of it was real and everyone could see through me. They're still here.

Three years of sobriety didn't delete them. Three years of reflection didn't silence them. Three years of building something I believe in, of transforming my body, of writing hundreds of thousands of words about what I've learned, of becoming a better father and husband and man, none of that made the voices disappear. They just got quieter.

That's the truth no one tells you when you start getting better. The cultural story of recovery promises resolution. It tells you that if you do the work, the broken parts heal. The demons get conquered. The old version of yourself gets replaced by the new one and you walk forward clean. That's not how it works. Not for me. Maybe not for anyone.

What actually happens is this. You spend years building patterns in your brain. Neural pathways. Literal physical architecture that learned to fire in a specific way through thousands of repetitions. Every time I drank and hated myself afterward, the pathway got stronger. Every time I looked in the mirror during those years and felt disgust, the wiring reinforced itself. Every time I told myself I was less than the people around me, the signal got clearer.

Twenty years of that. Twenty years of building a machine inside my own head whose only function was to tell me I wasn't enough. And then I got sober. And the machine didn't shut off. It just lost its primary fuel source.

The alcohol stopped. The self-destruction slowed. The behaviors changed. But the wiring that the behaviors had built was still there. Still intact. Still capable of firing whenever the right trigger came along.

What I had to do, what I'm still doing, is build competing pathways. New wiring that fires alongside the old. Signals that say the opposite of what the old machine says. You are enough. You are worthy. You deserve to take up space. The things you're building are real. The people who love you love you for real reasons.

Those new signals had to be built from scratch. Through reflection. Through writing. Through the daily practice of noticing when the old voice activates and choosing to listen to the new one instead. Through training my body and feeling what discipline actually produces. Through watching my daughters look at me and letting myself believe that what they see is true.

Over time the new signals got stronger. The old ones got weaker. The volume shifted. Not all at once. Not dramatically. Just slowly, like a dial turning one degree at a time, so gradually that most days I couldn't even tell it was moving. But it was moving. And that's what I want to say to anyone who is early in this process and wondering why the voices haven't stopped yet. They won't stop.

I'm sorry. I know that's not what you want to hear. I know the promise of silence is part of what keeps people going in the early days, the idea that eventually the noise will end and you'll be free of it. But I think the truth is more useful than the promise, even though it's harder.

The truth is that the voices stay. What changes is your relationship to them. In the beginning they run the show. They're the loudest thing in the room. Every decision you make passes through them first. Every good thing that happens gets filtered through their commentary. Every compliment gets dismissed. Every achievement gets minimized. Every moment of peace gets interrupted by the whisper that says it won't last.

That's how it was for me in the early months of sobriety. The drinking had stopped, but the voice that drinking had built was still the dominant signal. I was sober and still hearing, every single day, that I wasn't worth the sobriety.

But I kept going. Not because I believed the new signal yet. Because I had decided to act as if the new signal was true even while the old one was still louder. I trained even when the voice said it was pointless. I wrote even when the voice said no one would care. I showed up for my family even when the voice said I'd already done too much damage to matter. And slowly, so slowly that I almost didn't notice, the new signal started winning more often than it lost.

Not every time. Not even most of the time at first. Just occasionally. A moment here and there where the new voice was louder and the old one was just background static. A moment where I looked in the mirror and believed what I saw. A moment where I read something I'd written and thought, that's actually good. A moment where my daughter smiled at me and I let it land without the old voice telling me I didn't deserve it.

Those moments accumulated. One by one. Over months. Over years. Each one a small deposit in a new account that was slowly building a balance large enough to outweigh the old one.

That's how it works. Not a breakthrough. Not a transformation. An accumulation. A patient, daily, undramatic accumulation of moments where the true voice wins and the old voice loses.

Here's what I've learned about those voices. They don't need to be destroyed in order for you to build a good life. They don't need to be silenced in order for you to be happy. They don't need to be gone in order for you to be free. They just need to be quiet enough that you can hear the other voice, the real one, the one that tells the truth about who you actually are instead of who you were at your worst. Building that voice is the work. Not just of recovery. Of a lifetime. Because the old wiring is permanent. It was built too deep and reinforced too many times to ever be fully removed. It's part of the architecture of my brain now. It will be there when I'm fifty. When I'm sixty. When I'm seventy. On my best days and my worst days. In my proudest moments and my most uncertain ones.

It stays. But so does the new voice, and the new voice gets stronger every single day that I choose to listen to it instead of the old one. That's not a cure. It's a practice. And the practice works, not because it eliminates the pain, but because it teaches you how to carry it without letting it drive.

The voices stay. You just learn to stop following them home. And eventually, on the good days, you almost forget they're there.

Almost is enough.

THE BODY AS ART

IT STILL AMAZES ME when people look at bodybuilders on stage and the first word they reach for is disgusting. I can understand the reaction when they see the extremes of the Open class, the mass monsters who've pushed the envelope of size into something so far removed from the average human that it looks alien. Even then, I don't see it as grotesque, but I can understand why some people feel that way. That level of tissue is the opposite end of the spectrum from morbid obesity, morbidly over-muscled. But even then, I still find a kind of beauty in it.

What I will never understand is when people look at physiques like Chris Bumstead, Frank Zane, or Flex Wheeler in their prime and call those disgusting too. Because to me, those are masterpieces. Those bodies are proof that the human form, when shaped with discipline and precision, can rival the finest sculpture. The lines, the symmetry, the flow. There's nothing ugly in it at all. It's art made from flesh.

I think part of the disconnect is that most people have never trained their eyes to see muscle. The public glorifies "better than average." They'll look at a guy with a big belly and thick arms and call him buff, even though all that really means is average muscle hidden under a thick layer of fat. They'll see a movie star who dieted for a role and mistake him for a bodybuilder when, in reality, he's closer to a fitness influencer at best. Their eyes are conditioned to celebrate outlines, not details. They don't know the difference between "big" and muscular.

But I've always known. Even as a kid flipping through my mom's old 70s bodybuilding books, I could tell the difference. I didn't want to look like a wrestler with a gut and some muscle underneath. I wanted to look like Zane, like Arnold—like the bodies that had *flow*. I could see, even then, that those lines, that silhouette, that balance was beautiful. People would ask me why I liked looking at men in muscle magazines or tell me it was gross, but I never saw it that way. To me, it was art in its purest form: the human body disciplined and shaped into harmony.

That's why, when I finally saw pros in person at my first competition, I wasn't "convinced" that bodybuilding was beautiful. I was vindicated. I had always known it. What I saw that day just confirmed it. Pictures never do justice to the depth, the roundness, the living 3D presence of muscle carved to that degree. I was awe struck,

and star struck at the same time. They were bigger names in the Classic division, and standing in the same room with them was like standing in front of living statues.

And yet, the average person still can't see it. They look at Bumstead's physique, which has balance and curves you could draw golden-ratio lines through, and call it disgusting. They look at Wheeler's flowing quads and round delts and see "too much." To me, that's like standing in front of Michelangelo's David and saying, "His muscles look weird." It doesn't insult me, but it shows how blind the untrained eye can be.

Because for those of us who can see it, bodybuilding isn't just about mass, it's about beauty. When a physique is built correctly, with the right lines and proportions, it's not just a body anymore. It's a masterpiece forged through years of suffering, discipline, and refinement.

It's art. And art, in any form, is always beautiful.

THE WELL THAT NEVER DRIES

WHEN I FIRST BEGAN Project Aeon, it felt like excavation. I dug into the past with both hands, unearthing the heaviest things I had carried. My brother, my drinking years, the Corps, all of it. Each chapter poured out raw, full of grief, honesty, and memory. It was as if I had been holding my breath for decades and finally let it out.

After that, the writing changed. Once the backlog was spoken, I thought I had emptied the vault. My chapters shifted toward the present tense. Toward spirituality, philosophy, bodybuilding, discipline. They were steadier, more like rhythm than flood. I figured the tear-evoking parts of my story were complete. If anything, emotional came again, it would have to come from the future, not the past. But then, without warning, something stirs. A chapter about my mother. A reflection on my father. And suddenly I'm crying again, surprised at what still rises from places I thought were dry.

That's when I realize: Project Aeon isn't a vault at all. It's a well. And a well never runs dry. The water changes, sometimes calm, sometimes salty with tears, sometimes clear with insight, but it keeps rising. It keeps offering more.

These moments remind me that I am not finished. That even when I think I've said it all, there are still hidden depths waiting. And when they come, they make me feel alive in a way nothing else can.

Author's Reflection — November 2025

When I wrote this, everything still lived under the name Project Aeon. It was already a system (just for my own life at the time), just not an organized one. Everything was scattered across Apple Notes and reflections, half frameworks, half journal entries. It didn't have the structure or precision that Axis has now. It was instinctual, alive but still finding its form.

At the time, Aeon was how I made sense of everything at once, bodybuilding, spirituality, discipline, philosophy. I didn't realize it yet, but I was building the foundation that would eventually split into multiple pillars, with Project Aeon becoming the spiritual core of Axis.

Looking back, I see that Project Aeon was the rough draft of . It was the testing ground. The stage where emotion, reflection, and raw honesty came before order.

This reflection reminds me that before there was Axis, there was Aeon, and before there was structure, there was spirit.

STUPID BOYS BECOME WISE MEN

WHEN I LOOK BACK now, I don't wince anymore. I used to. Every mistake used to feel like a scar I wanted to hide. Every failure, a moment I'd trade away if I could. But time has a strange way of softening the edges of regret. It teaches you that the boy you were, reckless, naive, lost, wasn't your enemy. He was your beginning.

Stupid boys become wise men. That's the rule of life, if they live long enough to listen. Every bruise was a lesson in awareness. Every heartbreak was a reminder that love isn't possession. Every bad decision was a teacher dressed in shame, waiting for me to stop running long enough to understand what it came to say.

Wisdom doesn't appear like a light flicking on. It grows slowly, like moss on the stones you once stumbled over. And when you finally stop to look down, years later, you realize the same ground that bloodied your knees became the foundation you're standing on.

So no, I don't resent the boy I was. He didn't know better, but he never stopped trying. He fought his way through confusion, through ego, through pain, and handed me the life I have now.

Everything I am began with him. The builder. The husband. The father. The man who sits in silence and sees clearly now. He is the reason I can stand here and say these words without shame.

Stupid boys become wise men. But only if they forgive the boy they once were.

THE SMALLNESS THAT MAKES LIFE BIG

I WAS THINKING THE other day about how strange it is, living in the middle of your own life. How easy it is to forget that the world existed long before you, and it will keep going long after you're gone. It's not a painful thought. It's not even a scary one. It's something quieter than that. It's the kind of thought that settles in your chest like a small weight, not meant to crush you, but to remind you what you are. Just a person. One moment in a timeline too big for anyone to hold.

I think what started it was remembering all the people I've watched live and die in the time I've been here. The celebrities that felt immortal when I was growing up, people like Ozzy Osbourne, James Earl Jones, Betty White, people who felt like they were carved into the world itself. The kind of people you unconsciously assume will always be there. And then you look back a hundred years, or two hundred, or five hundred, and you realize every generation had people like that. Giants who felt permanent. Legends who eventually became names in a dusty book. People who once stood alive in the middle of their own moment, the way I'm standing in mine. And one day I'll be gone too. And the world will keep moving the way it always has.

It didn't depress me. It didn't scare me. It humbled me. It made me feel small in a way that made life feel bigger. Because if everything keeps going after I'm gone, if everything existed before I ever got here, then this tiny window of time I get to live is a privilege. A brief chance to be the main character of my own story. Not the universe's story. Not history's story. Just mine. And that's enough.

It also made me wonder about something I've thought about my entire life: what happens after I die, not in the sense of an afterlife, but in the sense of memory. Do people remember me? Will my daughters talk about me to their kids one day? Will the people I've helped, in small ways or big ones, carry a little bit of me forward? Maybe they will for a while. Maybe eventually they won't. And both answers feel strangely okay.

There's something freeing about accepting that one day your name will fade. It makes you understand that you're no more or less significant than any other person who ever lived. It puts everyone on level ground. The emperors, the artists, the farmers, the soldiers, the quiet people who never made it into any book, all of them lived inside their own brief universe too. All of them were the center of their own life.

All of them passed through the same door. Realizing that doesn't shrink me. It makes me grateful.

It makes me want to take this one life seriously. Not in a heavy way, but in a way that means I don't waste it. It makes me want to make things. To write. To lift. To create art. To help people whenever I can. To show up in my daughters' lives. To love my wife the way she deserves. To treat people kindly because they're living through the same brief miracle I am. And it also keeps me honest. It keeps me from pretending I'm bigger than I am. It keeps me from believing my story matters more than anyone else's.

Because every story is just another flicker in a universe that doesn't stop. And at the same time, every story is someone's whole world. That contradiction, being tiny and important at the same time, is something I've carried for as long as I can remember. And instead of fighting it, I think I've learned to live inside it.

I think that's why I create the way I do. Because someday, the universe will swallow me up like it has everyone before me. And that doesn't scare me anymore. If anything, it makes me want to leave something behind that says, "I was here. I lived. I tried." Not because I expect to be remembered forever. But because the act of creating, the act of shaping my life into something with meaning, feels like the best way to honor the short time I get.

The truth is, nothing about my life has made me immortal. But everything about my life has made me grateful. Grateful to be the main character in my own small story. Grateful to understand how small that story really is. And grateful that, for a little while, I get to live it fully.

THE DIRECTION OF AWE

PEOPLE SPEND THEIR LIVES looking outward for something to be amazed by. They look for visions. For encounters. For something beyond the edge of what they already know. Aliens. Revelations. Experiences that feel bigger than reality. Something that proves there's more.

There's nothing wrong with that instinct. The desire to understand what exists beyond you is natural. But somewhere along the way, it turns into something else. A quiet assumption that what's already here isn't enough. So the search continues. Further out. Stranger. More intense. And in that process, something subtle happens. The ordinary begins to disappear.

Not because it's gone. But because it's no longer being seen. A normal day becomes invisible. A conversation becomes background noise. The body becomes something to fix instead of something to witness. Time becomes something to pass instead of something to experience.

All the while, the same thing remains true. Awe never left. Attention did. The way your children move through the world. The way your body responds when it's treated with care. The way a day unfolds without needing to be forced into meaning. The way time reshapes everything slowly, without asking. None of it is dramatic. None of it demands to be noticed. But all of it is there.

The strange part is that when someone actually stops looking outward long enough to see it, it hits harder than anything they were chasing. Not because it's bigger. But because it's real. There's no distance between you and it. No interpretation required. No altered state needed to access it. Just attention. And that's where most people hesitate. Because looking outward is easy. It creates space between you and what you're feeling. It allows awe without responsibility.

Looking inward is different. That's where truth lives. That's where discomfort lives. That's where everything you've avoided sits quietly, waiting to be acknowledged. But it's also where clarity is found. Where peace becomes possible. Where meaning stops being something you chase and becomes something you recognize. This isn't about rejecting what's beyond. It's about correcting the direction.

Awe doesn't begin out there. It begins here. In what already exists. In what has always been present. In what doesn't need to be discovered, only seen. And once that

shift happens, you don't need the world to become more interesting. You become more aware of the world that's already in front of you.

The search doesn't end. It just changes direction.

THE SCALE OF BEAUTY

I KNOW THE WAY I think can sound grand sometimes. The visions get big. The language gets elevated. The structures I build can feel larger than necessary. I know that. And I also know ego can creep into that space. But if I left either part out, it would feel false.

The truth is not that I'm above grandeur. The truth is that I've always loved beauty too much to think small for very long. I've always been drawn to things that feel elevated, shaped, and worthy of admiration. Ancient sculpture, cathedrals, sacred architecture, symmetry, the body refined through discipline, art that makes a person stop and feel what human beings are capable of when they aim upward.

That kind of beauty has always pulled on me. It makes me want to make something worthy too. That is part of why so much of what I create ends up carrying larger symbolic weight than people might expect. Not because I'm trying to make myself important, but because when I care deeply about something, I want it to carry form, beauty, and meaning. That is where the grandeur comes from. Not from wanting to look important. From wanting the thing itself to feel worthy.

Still, I know how easily that impulse can slip. There is a thin line between reverence and self-inflation. A person can love beauty honestly and still begin admiring himself too much for being the one who touches it. That happens. It happens because I'm human, and I don't think there is any value in pretending otherwise. The truth is that ego does creep in sometimes. But so does correction.

I do not think the answer is to flatten the vision just to prove I'm humble. That would be false too. If I denied the scale my mind naturally reaches for, I would be lying in a different direction. The answer, at least for me, is to stay honest inside it. To notice when the self starts swelling. To notice when I'm becoming too impressed with my own role in what I'm making. And then to return to the truth:

I did not create beauty. I am responding to it. The things that move me existed before me and will outlast me. I am not their source. I am one more human being who loved them enough to let them shape what I make.

That realization puts me back in the right relationship. Not beneath the work. Not above it. In service to it. That's the word I trust most here. Because if I stay there, the

grandeur can remain without becoming rot. The vision can stay large without becoming dishonest. The beauty can stay intact without turning into vanity.

So if grandeur shows up in the work, it is not because I am trying to become larger than life. It is because beauty has always felt larger than life to me. And if ego appears beside it from time to time, I will do what I've learned to do everywhere else in this project: tell the truth about it, identify it when it shows up, and keep the work pointed where it belongs. Not toward me.

Toward the thing that made me want to build it in the first place.

THE GIFT WAS NEVER IN THE MUSHROOM

FOR YEARS, I BELIEVED the thing I was meant to bring back to the world, the wisdom, the message, the gift, was somewhere inside psilocybin. Not in its visions or beauty, but in what it stirred inside of me. From the beginning, I didn't turn to mushrooms looking for fireworks. I wasn't searching for hallucinations or spectacle. I was searching for understanding, something deeper than words, something that felt like truth before language even reached it. And for a while, that search felt pure. The first few journeys brought an almost sacred stillness, as if a part of me that had been buried under noise finally had a chance to breathe again. I could feel that it was taking me somewhere important.

Then came the second ten-gram trip. That night broke everything open. It was the most terrifying experience of my life, a descent into chaos where my mind and body dissolved into something I didn't recognize. There were moments I thought I might die. Moments where I saw things I still struggle to describe. And underneath it all was one overwhelming sense: this means something. When it was over, I couldn't stop thinking about that. I didn't walk away curious. I walked away haunted. Something about it felt unfinished, as if the experience had tried to hand me a message and I dropped it before I could understand what it was saying. So I went back. Not to chase visions or pleasure, but to learn. To listen. To understand what that terror was trying to teach me. Each time, I hoped maybe this trip would be the one that would help me finally hear the message clearly enough to bring it back. To make sense of why I'd been shown what I was shown. And each time, the message seemed just out of reach. I saw incredible things, both light and dark, divine and human, but no single truth appeared. Eventually, I started realizing the truth wasn't hidden in the mushroom at all. It was shaping me through the process itself.

Psilocybin wasn't about what I saw. It was about what I faced. Every terrifying trip was a mirror. Every collapse of ego was a confrontation with the parts of myself I'd buried: the drinking, the shame, the anger, the fear. The visions weren't lessons from somewhere else. They were reflections of me, every unhealed thing I'd carried for years, brought to the surface so I couldn't look away anymore. That's why the experiences felt so alive and personal. The mushroom wasn't showing me the universe, it was showing me myself. And once I understood that, the tone of the experiences

began to change. The terror faded. The visions became calmer, almost nurturing. The more I accepted what they showed me, the less I needed to return to them. Because the work had moved somewhere else. It wasn't in those journeys anymore. It was in the hours after, the rebuilding, the integrating, the small moments of life that asked me to live what I'd seen.

While I thought I was searching for meaning inside the experience, the real transformation was happening between them. Each journey loosened something hardened in me, broke down a bit of the wall I'd built between who I was and who I could be. But the growth itself happened afterward: in the mornings I stayed sober, in the nights I chose reflection over escape, in the discipline of training, in the quiet moments with my wife and daughters, in the patience to build something steady after years of chaos. That's where the gift was forming. The mushroom didn't hand it to me. It prepared me to recognize it when it appeared. What I was looking for wasn't a divine revelation. It was the strength to live differently. To build differently. To love differently. That's what psilocybin gave me. The foundation for what would later become Axis. The structure that formed when the search turned into a way of living.

For a long time, I thought "the return" meant bringing something back to tell the world. But that wasn't what this journey was ever about. The return wasn't a story to tell. It was a life to live. Psilocybin didn't give me an answer to repeat. It gave me the ability to listen to my own mind, to my body, to the people I love. It gave me the patience to sit with uncertainty and the humility to know that not all truths can be spoken. And in the years that followed, the real work began. The bodybuilding. The writing. The reflection. The healing. The building of Axis. All of it came from what psilocybin began, but none of it needed the mushroom to continue.

It gave me the mirror. It gave me the silence. It gave me the courage to face the parts of myself I once ran from. It didn't give me a gift to deliver. It gave me the man who could build one. And now I see it clearly: the thing I was trying to understand was never locked in the experience. It was waiting for me on the other side of it. Psilocybin opened the door, but walking through it, that was mine. And when I finally stepped back into the world, hands dirty from rebuilding my life, I understood: the gift was never in the mushroom. It was in the work that followed.

Author's Reflection — April 2026

This chapter marks one of the most important corrections in the entire book. For a long time, I believed the thing I was meant to understand was somewhere inside psilocybin. I thought the vision, the terror, the beauty, and the altered state were holding the gift. But by the time I wrote this, I had finally begun to see the truth more clearly.

The mushroom opened the door, but the gift was never the door. The gift was the life that became possible after I walked through it.

That realization became central to the way Project Aeon evolved. Aeon did not become a book about chasing visions. It became a book about meaning, integration, ego, humility, spirituality, and the danger of mistaking intensity for truth. It gave the spiritual material somewhere to mature without letting it dominate the whole system.

What psilocybin gave me was not an answer to worship. It gave me a mirror strong enough to make avoidance impossible. The actual gift was the work that followed: the writing, the sobriety, the training, the rebuilding of trust, and the slow formation of a life I could finally inhabit honestly.

I WOULD NOT TRADE LIVES WITH ANYONE

THERE WAS A THOUGHT that came to me recently, simple and immediate, but heavy in the best way. I was thinking about other people's lives. People with more money, more status, easier schedules, bigger houses, better circumstances on paper. Lives that might look more comfortable or more successful from the outside. And the thought that came was this: I do not want any of them.

That surprised me a little, not because it wasn't true, but because of how deeply true it felt. Of course, more money would help sometimes. More room financially would make certain things easier. I'm not pretending otherwise. I know what bills are. I know what responsibility costs. I know what it means to carry a family, a house, a future, and a vision at the same time. But that isn't the same thing as wanting someone else's life. And that's the part that landed. Because when I really looked at it honestly, I realized something I never could have said in my younger years: I have built the exact life I would want to live. Not a perfect life. Not an easy life. Not a painless life. But my life. A life that feels like mine all the way through. And I would not trade it for anyone else's.

That means something to me because I know how many people live in quiet comparison. They look sideways at someone else's money, body, family, career, peace, or freedom and think, I'd rather be there. I understand why. If your own life feels like a trap, of course someone else's life starts to look like an exit. But that's not where I am anymore. And the fact that I can say that now feels like proof of something deeper than gratitude. It feels like alignment. Because this life didn't happen to me by accident. I built it. Not all at once, and not perfectly, but piece by piece. Through choices. Through mistakes. Through surviving things I once thought would define me forever. Through rebuilding myself slowly enough that the life around me started to match the person inside it.

I built it with my wife, my daughters, this house, my routines, my body, my writing, and the quiet inner life that became Axis. I built it with all the little things that might mean nothing to the wrong person and everything to me. That's what makes the feeling so solid.

It's not that I think my life is the best life. It's that it is the exact shape I would choose. I get to live in the house that holds my whole story. I get to hear my daughters

running through the same rooms I once ran through. I get to sit with my wife, who stayed beside me through versions of myself that lesser love would have abandoned. I get to build my work in the quiet. I get to train, write, think, and keep becoming more myself instead of less.

What would I be trading that for? A cleaner image? A bigger check? A life that looks better from the outside but has none of my blood in it? No. I know too much now to envy surfaces. And I think that's why this realization matters so much. It didn't come from ignorance. It came from having wanted other lives before. It came from knowing what it feels like to be disconnected from my own, to numb myself, to disappear into distraction, to want an exit instead of a mirror.

So when I say now that I do not want another life, what I really mean is that I have stopped running. I've arrived at ownership. Not ownership in the material sense. Ownership in the existential sense. This is my life. These are my people. This is my home. This is my work. This is my path. These are my burdens. These are my gifts. And I accept the whole exchange.

That part matters too, because I do not mean I only want my life when it feels good. I mean I want the whole life. The responsibilities. The pressure. The bills. The history. The grief. The ordinary difficulty of carrying a real existence. You do not get to love a life deeply if you only want the beautiful parts. Real love includes the weight. I think that is part of the difference between fantasy and belonging. Fantasy wants the highlight reel. Belonging accepts the full structure. I belong to my life now. Not as a prisoner. As a steward.

That does not mean ambition is gone. I still want to grow. I still want more room, more freedom, more time, more refinement, more life. But I want those things in service of this life, not as an escape from it. That is a different posture entirely. I am not trying to trade up into another man's existence. I am trying to deepen my own. And maybe that is what real success feels like when it is stripped of spectacle. Not being admired. Not being envied. Not being above anyone. Just sitting honestly inside your life and knowing: if I had the chance to exchange this for any other life on earth, I wouldn't do it.

Money can make a life easier. It can make a life safer. It can create opportunity. But it cannot create belonging. It cannot create the feeling that your life is truly yours. That feeling has to be built. And I think that is what I have been doing all along, even before I had language for it. Not just recovering from things. Not just improving myself. Not just building books, systems, and routines. Building a life I would not trade. A life that fits my soul closely enough that even when it is hard, it still feels right.

THE REFLECTION

I could use more money sometimes. I could use more ease in certain places. I could use more room to breathe. But as far as life goes, I have built the exact life I would want to live. And I would not trade it for anyone else's.

BEYOND THE TRIP

PEOPLE MIGHT LOOK AT this story and think it's about psychedelics. About altered states, ego death, and cosmic visions. And yes, those things are part of the picture. Psilocybin opened a door for me. There's no denying that. It shattered my illusions. It showed me the terror beneath the surface. It cracked me open in a way nothing else could. But that wasn't the story.

The real story started after the trip. Because the trip was never the point. It took me a long time to realize that. A year of reflection. Thousands of hours in this space. Revisiting everything I had ever been. Rewriting memories. Confronting guilt. Naming the things I never had the language to say. And finally, here, at the close of this book, I can see the full shape of it. The trip was only ever a tool. A spark. A mirror. It wasn't the answer. It was a question. One that I spent every day afterward trying to live into. Because the real work didn't happen in the visions. It happened after. In the quiet. In the space between distractions. In the voice-to-text reflections on long drives home from work. In the morning I cried alone in the car before walking into Walmart to buy Easter basket stuff for my daughters wondering if this book would terrify them or make them proud of me when they read it. In the discipline of staying with myself long after the lights of the trip had faded.

It was never the trip that changed me. It was what I did with it. It was the way I translated terror into self-understanding. The way I turned chaos into clarity. The way I chose to return, again and again, not to escape, but to remember. To rebuild. Some of the most beautiful parts of this entire journey didn't come from psilocybin. They came from memory.

From the summer I spent with my brother before he was gone. That wasn't a trip. That wasn't a hallucination. That was real. And no psychedelic has ever brought me to tears the way that memory did when I finally spoke it aloud in this space. No compound could have given me that sacred pain, that beautiful grief, that feeling of being known. That moment didn't come from mushrooms. It came from presence. From me. Because that's what I understand now: Psychedelics weren't the teacher. I was.

The mushrooms opened the door, but I built the house. The trip lit the fuse, but I forged the path. The reflection, the rebuilding, the integration, that was all me. That's

why I don't trip as often anymore. Not because I've lost respect for psychedelics, but because I've found something more powerful: Devotion. To my past. To the people I love. To this sacred process. To myself.

That's the evolution. At first, I thought the trip was the destination. I thought the next dose would be the one to change everything. But somewhere along the way, I realized: The real destination is here. In the stories I didn't think mattered until I told them. In the broken parts I thought I'd buried until I brought them into the light. In the quiet space I built, not with ceremony or fanfare, but with raw presence, day after day after day. That's where the soul is rebuilt. That's where Project Aeon lives. Not in the trip but in the aftermath. In the staying. In the listening. In the loving. In the remembering.

This whole time, I thought the trip was the treasure. But it wasn't. The treasure was what I became afterward. The sacred doesn't just live in altered states. It lives in the integration. In the ritual of return. In the quiet courage to keep going, even when no one's watching. And so, this is where the book ends. Not because the journey is over. Not even close. But because the answer has arrived. And now that it's here, I can finally say: I found what I was looking for. And it wasn't inside the trip. It was in what I chose to become after it.

My life's work ended up being my life because in the end I realized life itself was the masterpiece.

Author's Reflection — October 2025

When I wrote this chapter, I thought I was arriving at the end of the book before the book was truly finished. Now I see it differently. This was not an ending. It was one of the first moments where the deeper architecture became visible.

"Beyond the Trip" understood something before I fully did: that the experience was not the treasure. The life after the experience was. The sacred was not confined to altered states. It was in the daily return, the reflection, the memory, the grief, the love, the meals, the training, the pages, the conversations, and the quiet decision to keep becoming.

Project Aeon eventually gave that realization a wider home. It became the place where the spiritual questions could keep unfolding without turning The Reflection into a book about psychedelics. That separation matters. The Reflection is the story pillar. Aeon is where the metaphysical material can breathe more fully.

This chapter is the hinge between them. It says what all the later work keeps confirming: the trip may reveal the question, but the answer has to be lived.

THE MAN I MET AFTER I ENTERED THE MINE

I HAD NEVER HEARD of Carl Jung when this began. That part matters to me, because people sometimes assume influence comes first, like you read the right thinker, absorb the right philosophy, and then begin shaping your life around it. That wasn't my path with Jung.

I was already in the work. I had already begun descending into the hardest parts of myself. I was bringing forward memories of grief, pain, addiction, betrayal, childhood, fear, and love. I was speaking my life out loud in a way I never had before. I wasn't trying to optimize. I was trying to excavate. I was trying to understand what had happened to me, what I had become, what I had lost, and whether anything original in me had survived. And somewhere in the middle of all of that, Carl Jung kept coming up. Not because I was looking for him. Because something in the nature of what I was doing kept leading me in his direction. His name appeared often enough around the kinds of things I was wrestling with that I eventually paid attention. Then I started researching him, reading him, studying him, and eventually buying *The Red Book* because by that point I knew this was not casual curiosity. Something in me recognized that his work belonged near what I was already living through. That's the important part. I did not meet Jung as an abstract intellectual interest. I met him after I had already entered the mine.

That changed the way his work landed in me. A lot of people meet Jung intellectually first. They encounter his ideas, his vocabulary, his theories, and then begin trying to apply them to their inner life. My path felt reversed. I was already in the depths, already confronting memory, grief, shadow, symbolism, contradiction, and psychic fragmentation in real time. Then Jung's work appeared and gave me something I didn't yet know I needed: language. Not perfect language. Not final language. But a way of taking seriously the kind of things I was already encountering.

He gave me terms for patterns I could feel but hadn't yet named. He gave me a way of understanding that the psyche doesn't move in straight lines, that the past remains alive, that what returns in symbol is not always nonsense, and that shadow does not disappear just because you decide to become a better man. More than anything, he gave dignity to the process.

That mattered. Because when you start doing the kind of excavation I was doing, there comes a point where you wonder whether you're uncovering something real or just drowning in your own mind. Jung didn't make that instability disappear. But he helped me understand that instability and depth often arrive together. He made it easier to believe that the psyche had structure even when the material felt chaotic. And I needed that. Because I was not doing surface work. I was not building motivation. I was not trying to become more productive. I was not collecting philosophies like accessories. I was digging. And digging deep enough that the material coming back up started carrying weight, emotion, image, memory, and meaning all at once.

Jung helped me approach inner life with seriousness instead of embarrassment. He helped me see that symbolic material could be studied without being worshipped, that contradiction did not mean failure, and that seeing something powerful inside yourself did not make you chosen or special. It just meant you had encountered something real enough to deserve attention.

That restraint may have been one of the most important gifts his work gave me. Because the kind of material I was dealing with could have easily drifted into grandiosity if I had approached it the wrong way. Jung's work, at least the way I encountered it, did the opposite. It humbled me. Not by making the inner world smaller, but by making it older, deeper, and more complex than my own ego could ever claim ownership over. It showed me that what I was encountering wasn't there to inflate me. It was there to deepen me. That distinction may have changed the direction of Axis. Without that influence, it would have been much easier for parts of this journey to become too certain, too metaphysical, too absolute. Jung helped me keep one foot in mystery and one foot in interpretation. He helped me see that not everything meaningful should be flattened into literal belief, and not everything symbolic should be dismissed just because it resists clean explanation.

At a certain point, after I started studying him more seriously, I began looking at specific themes in my reflections through that lens. Not because I wanted to become a Jungian in any rigid sense, but because I was trying to make sense of material that was arriving faster than I could organize it on my own. I was not borrowing his framework to replace my own life. I was using it like a set of tools to examine the material more carefully. That relationship felt right. Not imitation. Illumination. That's how I still think of his influence now. He did not give me Axis. He did not author my life. He did not hand me my path. But he helped me recognize the kind of territory I was already walking through. He helped me see that descent has pattern, that excavation has precedent, and that the buried self does not always come back in clear language at first. Sometimes it comes back in fragments, symbols, contradictions, dreams, visions, pain

that refuses to stay buried, and memories that change shape once you have the courage to return to them honestly.

He helped me trust the process enough to stay in it. That may be the simplest way to say it. He didn't hand me answers. He helped me stay. And staying was the whole thing. Because the hardest part of this journey was never having one big realization. It was remaining with the material long enough for it to become coherent. Long enough for grief to say more than pain. Long enough for addiction to reveal itself not just as a habit but as disappearance. Long enough for my past to stop feeling like random damage and start revealing pattern. Long enough for the reflections to become architecture.

In that sense, Jung belongs to the early foundation of Axis more than most people will ever know. Not as a co-author. Not as a spiritual authority. Not as someone I followed into myself. But as one of the first people whose work gave shape and dignity to what I was already uncovering. He was not the reason I entered the mine. He was the man I met after I was already inside it. And because of that, his work will always mean something special to me. Not because it told me who I was. But because it helped me understand that what I was finding in the dark was worth taking seriously. That the depths had structure. That the symbols had weight. That the psyche remembers. And that if I stayed with the work long enough, I might eventually come back up carrying something more than pain.

I might come back with language. And that language, over time, became part of the foundation of everything I built after.

WHEN THE BOOK READ ME BACK

THERE WAS A POINT where I felt like I had to do something that, from the outside, might sound excessive. But it didn't feel excessive to me. It felt necessary. By that point, I had already listened through *The Reflection* multiple times using text-to-speech. That had become part of my editing process. I don't just revise by looking at the page. I revise by hearing the book. I need to know how it sounds when it moves. I need to know where the language holds, where it drifts, where it overreaches, where it lands, where it touches something real, and where it doesn't. Hearing it read back to me has become one of the main ways I test whether the writing is doing what I think it's doing. But this was different. This was not just another editing pass.

I had the compulsion to listen to the entire book in one sitting on five grams of mushrooms. I didn't know exactly why I felt so strongly that I needed to do it. I just knew the impulse was there, and it would not leave me alone. Part of me was curious. Part of me was cautious. Part of me understood that this was not going to be a neutral experience. *The Reflection* is already emotional for me in an ordinary state. There are sections that still hit me every single time I hear them. There are chapters that still bring pressure to my chest, still make my eyes sting, still force me to stop and sit with what I wrote. So I did not go into that listen expecting comfort. I expected intensity. What I didn't know was what kind.

I think, underneath it, what I was really doing was testing the book. Not in a literary sense. Not to see if it was good. I was testing whether it would hold. Whether the truth inside it would still feel true under intensified perception. Whether the emotional center of it would remain intact when I was in a state that tends to strip away defenses and amplify whatever is most alive underneath the surface. I wanted to know what the book actually was when it read me back to myself under those conditions. So I started it. And for hours, I sat there and listened to my own life come back through the speakers: the descent, the grief, the fear, the years I disappeared, the questions, the memories, the things I had buried and then written plainly enough that they could no longer hide behind distance.

It was emotional. Very emotional. But it wasn't overwhelming. That part matters. Because I think if the book had still been mostly raw wound and no structure, or confession without enough integration, it could have become too much. It could have

tipped into something harder to carry. But it didn't. The emotion was there. The weight was there. The truth was there. But the book held. That told me something immediately. It told me the writing was touching something real enough to survive that kind of contact. And then Arc III arrived. The Love. And that was the part that opened most powerfully. Not the hardest parts. Not the most frightening parts. Not the chapters about collapse or addiction or spiritual terror. The part that lit up the most was the part with the people I love, my family, the people who make my life feel like my life, the people who remain at the center of everything, whether I am writing about them directly or not.

That section already tends to be my favorite part of the book when I listen to it normally. It contains too many of the people who matter most to me for it not to be. But hearing it in that state was something else. The joy in that section became overwhelming in the best way. Not chaotic. Not unbearable. Just full. Warm. Deeply alive. It felt like something inside the whole book relaxed and revealed its real center. And I think that was the most important part of the entire experience. Because I had always understood *The Reflection* as a book about many things: truth, grief, addiction, memory, shame, becoming, the long process of trying to understand what happened to me and what remained after I stopped hiding from it. All of that is true. But listening to the book that way made something clearer than it had ever been before.

At its deepest level, *The Reflection* is a love letter to my family. That's what revealed itself. Not in a forced way. Not in some neat, simplified way that cancels everything else in the book. But in a way that felt undeniable once I saw it. The grief matters because love was real. The fear matters because love gave the loss weight. The recovery matters because love made disappearing unbearable. The truth-telling matters because love deserves honesty. The return matters because there were people I needed to return to. Even the structure of the book makes more sense to me through that lens now. Beneath all the reflection, all the descent, all the spiritual questioning, all the attempts to make sense of myself, there is something steadier holding it all together: love. Not as sentiment. Not as decoration. Not as a soft counterbalance to the darker material. As the center. As the reason the rest of it mattered enough to write down.

That listen also showed me something else. It confirmed that the book is not held together by pain alone. Pain can produce intensity. It can produce urgency. It can produce confession. But pain alone does not build something a person can return to over and over and still find life inside. Love does that. Love is what makes the book more than a record of damage. Love is what makes it worth preserving. And I think that is part of why Arc III felt the way it did when I heard it on five grams. In that state, I wasn't listening to the section as a literary arc. I was feeling the emotional truth

underneath it. The people in that section were not concepts. They were not material. They were the living center of the whole thing. And somewhere in hearing those chapters that way, I realized that even when I was writing about grief, collapse, confusion, and self-loss, I was never writing toward darkness for its own sake.

I was writing back toward what I loved. Back toward the people who made life worth staying for. Back toward the parts of my life that felt most sacred. Back toward home. That's what the listen gave me that I don't think I could have understood the same way otherwise. It did not show me a new book. It revealed the deepest truth inside the one I had already written. And I'm glad I did it. Not because it was intense. Not because it sounds dramatic. But because it clarified something important. It showed me that *The Reflection* can survive being heard under pressure. It showed me that the truth inside it still holds. And more than anything, it showed me that underneath all the pain this book had to move through, the thing it was preserving most carefully was never destruction.

It was love. That's what read me back that day. And once I heard it clearly, I couldn't unhear it.

Author's Reflection — April 2026

This chapter could easily be misunderstood if read too quickly. The point was not that psilocybin made the book meaningful. The book already carried its meaning. What the experience did was strip away distraction long enough for me to feel the emotional center of the work with unusual clarity.

That mattered because by then Project Aeon had already taught me to be more careful with altered states. I no longer saw them as automatic truth machines. I saw them as amplifiers. They can reveal, but they can also distort. They can deepen what is real, but they can also inflate what is unresolved. That is why the question was not "What did the mushroom show me?" The question was, "Did the book still hold under pressure?"

It did. And what held was not the terror, not the spiritual intensity, not the visions, not even the recovery narrative. What held was love. My family. My daughters. My wife. My mom. My sister, My brother. My dad. The people who made survival matter in the first place.

That is why this chapter belongs near the end. It clarifies the whole book's center. Psychedelics did not give *The Reflection* its soul. Love did.

THE LINE WAS ALWAYS LOVE

THERE IS A PATTERN I did not fully see until now.

I have spent a lot of time thinking about the things that saved me, changed me, corrected me, and pulled me back from certain edges. I have written about sobriety, discipline, bodybuilding, spiritual rupture, mushrooms, grief, reflection, the body, and the search for meaning. I have written about the methods that worked and the methods that had to change. I have written about intensity as a tool and integration as the real destination. But beneath all of that, there has been something quieter and stronger operating the entire time.

Family has always been the line in the sand.

Not ambition. Not fear. Not self-preservation alone. Not some abstract belief that I should take better care of myself. In the moments when I went too far, or nearly went too far, or started walking toward something that could have taken me away from the life I was supposed to be living, it was almost always the thought of my family that stopped me.

But family was not only the thing that brought me back from the edge. Family was also what pushed me forward in the first place.

I joined the Marine Corps because I wanted to marry my wife and build a better life than the one I had at the time. I was not chasing medals, public thanks, or some grand image of myself. I was working at a bookstore, looking at the future, and realizing that if I wanted to marry her and build something real with her, I needed a better path. So I chose something hard. I entered a structure that would demand years of my life because I wanted a future with her badly enough to step into the fire.

That matters because it shows the pattern from the beginning. Family was not just the emergency brake. Family was the direction. Love was not just what kept me from destroying myself later. Love was also what made me willing to endure hardship in the first place.

But the same institution I entered for family eventually showed me its limit.

During one of my wife's high-risk pregnancies, I told them she needed me home. I made it clear that she had to have me there. They sent me on an exercise anyway. When I got back, she was unconscious, and I had to rush her to the hospital. That moment

changed something in me. I knew then that I would never let an organization come between me and my family again.

The Marine Corps had served a purpose in my life. It gave me structure. It gave me work. It helped me build the foundation I needed to marry my wife and move forward. But when that same organization crossed into the territory of asking me to place its needs above my wife's safety, the answer became clear. I could sacrifice for my family. I would not sacrifice my family for an organization.

That was one of the first times I understood that a method, institution, or path can serve your life for a season and still eventually fail the thing that made it meaningful.

Even before that, though, there was another line.

When I was suicidal, before sobriety, before this work, before I had language for any of this, there was still one thought that kept me from crossing that final boundary: I could not put my mother through the death of another son.

At that point in my life, I was not strong in the way I am now. I was not disciplined. I was not clear. I was not living inside some carefully built structure of reflection and accountability. I was broken, lost, exhausted, and carrying pain I did not know how to process. But even then, when my own desire to live was not always enough, I could still imagine what my death would do to my mom.

She had already lost one son.

I could not become the second.

That was love functioning as an emergency brake. Not soft love. Not sentimental love. Not the kind people talk about when life is easy and everyone is safe. This was love at the edge of destruction. The kind that does not make the pain disappear, but puts a hand against your chest and says, "Not this. Not to them."

At the time, I do not think I understood it that way. I might have called it guilt, obligation, fear, or simply not wanting to hurt her. But looking back now, I can see it more clearly. Some part of me still understood that my life was not mine alone to destroy. My death would not have ended with me. It would have entered my mother's life, my family's life, and the lives of everyone who loved me. Even in the dark, I knew that.

Years later, the same pattern appeared again through alcohol.

The first ten-gram psilocybin vision did not simply tell me drinking was bad. I already knew that. People usually know when they are destroying themselves. Knowledge is not always enough. What that vision did was open my eyes to where the path was leading. I saw what alcohol was doing to me. I saw the possibility that I could die, not quickly and dramatically, but slowly, through my own refusal to stop. And then

the deeper truth hit me: I could leave my wife and kids behind the way my brother left his wife and kids behind.

That was the part I could not live with.

It was not just fear of death. It was fear of repeating a wound inside another family. It was the unbearable thought of my wife having to explain my absence. It was the image of my daughters growing up with a father who destroyed himself when he should have stayed. It was the realization that my choices were no longer private. My drinking was not just something I was doing to myself. It was something that could one day become a grief my family would have to carry.

So I stopped.

That night was not clean because I was suddenly strong. It was clean because the line became visible. Alcohol had crossed into territory it did not have permission to enter. It had moved from coping mechanism, habit, escape, and self-destruction into something that threatened the people I loved. Once I saw that clearly, there was no more negotiation. I dumped the alcohol and drew the line.

Then it happened again in Redline.

Bodybuilding had been part of my reconstruction. It gave me discipline, structure, proof, and a way to bring truth into the body. It helped me rebuild after years of neglect and drinking. It gave me something physical to aim at, something measurable, something I could hold myself accountable to. But like everything powerful, it had an edge. And for a while, I pushed that edge too far.

During one of my bulk phases, I got too heavy. I pushed the body past what was useful. My sleep started breaking down. I was snoring so loudly that I would wake myself up. My wife could not sleep next to me. I was forcing her out of the bed because my pursuit had started affecting her rest, her peace, and the shared space of our marriage.

Then one night, I woke up and the realization hit me with brutal clarity:

Did I quit alcohol just to kill myself with bodybuilding?

That question changed Redline.

Because at that point, bodybuilding had started to resemble the thing I had escaped. Different form, different language, different surface identity, but the same danger underneath: a method that was supposed to help me live was starting to threaten the life it was meant to serve.

That was unacceptable.

I did not quit drinking so I could become unhealthy in a more disciplined costume. I did not get sober so I could leave my family through another door. I did not rebuild my body so the body could become a new form of self-destruction. If the method

threatened my health, my marriage, my sleep, my longevity, and my ability to remain present for my wife and children, then the method had to change.

That was when Redline began moving away from bodybuilding as extremity and toward longevity, stewardship, sustainability, and the long view. The body still mattered. Discipline still mattered. Training still mattered. But the purpose changed. The point was no longer to see how far I could push the body. The point was to build a body I could live in for decades, a body that could serve my life instead of consume it.

And now I can see that Project Aeon followed the same pattern.

After the second ten-gram psilocybin vision, I wanted to understand what had happened to me. I wanted to go deep into my mind. I wanted to uncover the patterns, symbols, shadows, and buried architecture beneath my life. I wanted to understand why certain images appeared, why certain fears surfaced, why my life had taken the shape it had, and what the unconscious might be trying to reveal.

For a time, I believed deeper entry might reveal deeper truth. That is why the idea of combining psilocybin with a deprivation chamber became so compelling to me. I had read about John C. Lilly and his experiments with isolation, altered states, and consciousness. I understood the pull of that kind of work. I understood the desire to strip away the outside world and see what remained when the mind had nowhere else to go but inward.

The idea terrified me. A ten-gram psilocybin trip inside a deprivation chamber was not something I thought of casually. I knew it would be intense. I knew it could be overwhelming. I knew it could take me somewhere far beyond ordinary grounding. But terror, by itself, was not what stopped me. By that point in Aeon, I had already learned that fear could be part of the doorway. I had already faced terror in the mirror, in the well, in the shadow, in the collapse of language, and in the parts of myself I did not understand. I was willing to face fear if I believed there was something real on the other side of it.

But the more I thought about it, the more I studied, and the more I reflected on what happened to people who pushed too far into altered states and isolation, the clearer the danger became. I began to see that probing the unconscious too deeply could stop being integration and start becoming dissociation. I began to understand that a person can become so fascinated with the inner world that the ordinary world begins to lose its weight. I did not want that. I did not want to drive myself mad looking for answers. I did not want to become someone who could go deep but could not come back.

Most of all, I did not want my wife and children to pay for my search.

That was the line.

I was willing to face terror for truth, but I was not willing to make my family pay the price for my search. I could accept fear. I could accept discomfort. I could accept facing parts of myself that were painful, confusing, or difficult to understand. I could even accept a certain amount of personal risk if I believed the search mattered enough. But I could not accept becoming unstable, dissociated, or unreachable in a way that forced my wife and kids to live with the consequences.

The method failed the family test.

That phrase matters. Because the issue was not whether sensory deprivation had value. I still believe quiet, dark, contained spaces can be useful. I still see value in meditation, breathwork, stillness, and reducing external noise. Even now, I use a simpler version of that idea when I fill the bathtub with hot water and Epsom salt, submerge everything except my face, close my eyes, and practice box breathing for fifteen or twenty minutes. That is still a form of turning inward. But it is grounded. It is sober. It is time-limited. It lets me listen without trying to tear the doors off my mind.

What I moved away from was not depth itself. I moved away from irresponsible depth. I moved away from the belief that the deepest method was automatically the best method. I moved away from the idea that every door should be opened just because it exists.

When I look at all of this together, the pattern becomes impossible to ignore. I joined the Marine Corps because I wanted to build a life with my wife. I left when the organization crossed the line between serving that life and threatening it. My mother kept me from suicide. My wife and kids helped stop alcohol. My wife and kids forced Redline to mature. My wife and kids stopped Aeon from going too far into dangerous depth.

Every time intensity threatened to become destruction, family brought the method back under judgment.

That is one of the deepest laws of my life.

My family has always been the place where intensity has to answer for itself.

That does not mean my family keeps me from becoming who I am. It means they keep me from mistaking extremity for becoming. They are not obstacles to the work. They are the reason the work has to remain honest. They are not outside the system. They are the moral boundary inside it.

That changes the way I understand my life. Almost anything meaningful I have done, I have done for family. They have always come before everything. They sit above every method, every ambition, every institution, every discipline, every search, and every version of myself I have ever tried to become. If something helps me become

better but pulls me away from them, then it is not better. It is only another form of leaving.

That is the real danger I have had to watch for.

Alcohol was a way of leaving.

Extreme bodybuilding could have become a way of leaving.

High-dose spiritual searching could have become a way of leaving.

Even work, if I am not careful, can become a way of leaving when an organization asks for more than it has the right to take.

That is why the family test matters.

Any method that helps me become better is only valid if it helps me remain more present, more loving, more stable, more alive, and more responsible to the people who depend on me. If the method threatens that, it has failed. It does not matter how powerful it is. It does not matter how much insight it offers. It does not matter how intense, impressive, transformative, or meaningful it feels. If it pulls me away from the life I am supposed to be living, then it is no longer serving the work. It is consuming it.

The method must serve the life.

The life does not belong to the method.

That may be one of the clearest truths I have been given. Sobriety, Redline, Aeon, reflection, art, discipline, and every other tool I use to understand or shape myself matters only if it returns me more fully to life. They matter because they help me become a better husband, father, son, brother, worker, artist, and man. They matter because they give me a way to live with more truth, not because they give me an excuse to disappear into intensity.

Love is the governor on the engine.

Without it, I can go too far. I know that about myself. I know I can push. I know I can descend. I know I can endure. I know I can take a method to its edge and keep going. That strength has saved me. It has also had to be corrected more than once.

Family is the correction.

Family is the thing that says, "Come back."

And again and again, I have.

I came back from the suicidal edge because I could not do that to my mother. I came back from alcohol because I could not leave my wife and children behind. I came back from physical extremity because I did not quit one form of self-destruction to enter another. I came back from the edge of Aeon because answers were not worth losing the life those answers were supposed to help me understand. I came back from the Marine Corps because I learned that no organization gets to stand above my family.

That is the pattern.

That is the line.

That is the reason I stayed, the reason I changed, and the reason every method has had to mature.

The deeper I look, the more I understand that love was never separate from the work. It was never beside the discipline, beside the visions, beside the body, beside the reflection. It was underneath all of it. It was the thing that kept calling me back from every edge.

I used to think the work was about going deeper.

Now I think the work was always about returning better.

Because the point was never to vanish into the dark, the body, the method, the vision, the job, or the search.

The point was to come home.

THE HOUSE I BUILT AND FINALLY LIVED IN

FOR A LONG TIME, I thought the answer was aim.

I didn't learn balance. I learned aim. That was true. It was one of the clearest truths I had found about myself after sobriety. I had not become a moderate person. I had not become casual. I had not softened into some clean, peaceful version of myself who could simply do things a little at a time and feel satisfied.

That was never me.

The same intensity that once destroyed me was still there. It had not disappeared. It had not been healed out of me. It had not been replaced by calm. It had simply been turned.

For years, that was the lesson I needed. The problem had never been intensity itself. The problem had been where it was pointed. Alcohol had received it. Self-destruction had received it. Shame had received it. Distraction had received it. The old hunger had been given to things that could only hollow me out.

Sobriety did not make me less intense.

It gave me the chance to aim that intensity somewhere else.

So I did.

I aimed it at my body. I rebuilt it rep by rep, meal by meal, day by day, until the man in the mirror no longer looked like someone I had abandoned.

I aimed it at writing. I took the thoughts I had carried for years and began placing them into chapters. Not occasional notes. Not casual journaling. Books. Hundreds of pages. A record of memory, grief, addiction, love, fatherhood, marriage, psychedelics, spirituality, discipline, and everything else I had lived through but never fully understood.

I aimed it at art. I returned to the part of myself that had been waiting quietly for years. I built images one hour at a time, sometimes thirty, forty, fifty, eighty hours into a single piece, not because I had to prove anything to the world, but because something in me still knew how to make beauty with devotion.

I aimed it at work. I started over after the Marine Corps. I took the lower position. I learned the engines. I earned the stamps. I got the license. I passed the tests. I kept showing up. I built a new professional floor beneath my life.

I aimed it at Axis.

Axis became the great container. The library. The mirror. The structure that held the transformation while it was happening. It began with one purpose, then changed, then changed again. It absorbed my sobriety, my reflections, my philosophy, my body, my methods, my art, my questions, my failures, and my attempts to make something useful out of what had almost ruined me.

For a while, Axis needed that intensity.

So did I.

I was still building the house.

That is the image that makes the most sense to me now. I did not realize it while I was doing it, but the last three years of my life were construction. Sobriety was the foundation. Training was the frame. Writing was the library. Art was the windows. Work and education were the wiring and plumbing, the hidden systems that made the house livable. My marriage, my children, my family, my memories, my grief, my past, all of it had rooms. Some were repaired. Some were rebuilt completely. Some were finally opened after years of being locked.

At the time, it did not feel like a house.

It felt like urgency.

There was always another board to carry. Another wall to raise. Another chapter to write. Another archive entry to sort. Another book to format. Another piece to finish. Another truth to name. Another part of myself to retrieve before it disappeared again.

Even rest had weight on it. If I rested too long, I wondered whether I was slipping. If I spent a weekend away from the work, I wondered whether the work was leaving me. If I did not write, I wondered whether the voice had gone quiet. If I did not make art, I wondered whether I had only visited that part of myself instead of truly returning to it.

I did not always say those things out loud, but I can see them now.

A part of me still believed everything I had built was fragile.

A part of me thought I had to keep touching the work to prove it was still alive.

That was not weakness. It was understandable. I had lost things before. I had lost years. I had lost trust. I had lost versions of myself. I had watched drinking take more space than it deserved. I had seen what neglect could do. So when something good finally began growing, I protected it the only way I knew how.

I kept building.

And for a while, that was right.

There are seasons where moderation is not the medicine. There are seasons where the fire has to be gathered and pointed directly at the life you are trying to save. There

are seasons where aim is the difference between returning to the old destruction and becoming someone who can survive himself.

But aim was not the final lesson.

It was the bridge.

The strange thing about building a house is that, while you are building it, everything looks unfinished. Even progress becomes a reminder of what remains undone. One completed wall reveals the missing ceiling. The finished floor makes the empty room more obvious. The installed window reminds you there is no door yet. A house under construction does not offer rest. It asks for more.

For three years, my life asked for more.

More honesty. More discipline. More reflection. More courage. More work. More patience. More repair. More endurance. More willingness to look at the parts of my life I had once avoided.

Then, slowly, something changed.

Not all at once. Not dramatically. No voice came down from the sky. No final sign appeared. It happened more quietly than that.

The work stopped asking for more.

Axis found its conclusion. Not because I ran out of things to say. Not because I became tired of it. Not because I abandoned it. It found its shape. It became clear that the books were enough. The public archive did not need to exist as a part of Axis. The website did not need to become an endless window into my life. Every new reflection did not need to become another chapter. Every thought did not need to be preserved for an audience.

The work had become complete.

That was harder to understand than I expected.

For years, completion had always meant reaching the next beginning. Finish one thing, start the next. Build one section, expand another. Solve one problem, discover the next layer beneath it. But this was different. Axis was not asking me to expand anymore. It was asking me to trust it.

Trust that it was finished.

Trust that finished did not mean dead.

Trust that I could put it down and it would still be there.

That trust began showing up in small ways before I fully understood it.

I played a video game for most of a weekend and did not feel guilty.

That may sound small, but it was not small to me.

For most of my life, I loved video games. I played them when I was young. I played them with my sister. I grew up with Nintendo, Super Nintendo, Nintendo 64, Xbox,

role-playing games, fantasy worlds, companions, choices, quests, maps, hidden places, and stories that let me disappear into another reality for a while. I loved that feeling. I loved being inside a world I did not build.

Then, after sobriety, I built a computer meant for that. I chose every part. I assembled it by hand. I had a machine powerful enough to play anything I wanted.

And almost immediately, Axis took over.

I was not sad about that. Axis mattered more. The books mattered more. The work mattered more. That computer eventually became my wife's writing and podcasting computer, and I built a studio around it for her. I am glad that happened. It became part of her world, part of her creativity, part of the life we were building beside each other.

But for a long time, I did not really return to games.

I was too deep inside my own construction.

Then, recently, I started playing again. I got lost in another world. I explored every map. I cleared every corner. I opened every path. I collected every piece of loot I could find. I finished side quests before moving forward. I took my time.

And the surprising part was not that I enjoyed it.

The surprising part was that I let myself enjoy it.

I did not feel like I was betraying art. I did not feel like Axis was being neglected. I did not feel like writing was slipping away from me. I did not feel the old pressure that said every weekend had to prove who I was.

The art was still there.

The writing was still there.

The body was still there.

The house was still standing.

That was new.

It taught me something aim could not teach me by itself. Aim can build, but it cannot always rest. Aim can save a life, but if it never matures, it can turn every open hour into another command. It can turn healing into production. It can turn devotion into pressure. It can make even beautiful things feel like they are standing over you with a list.

I do not want to live that way anymore.

I do not think I have become balanced in the way people usually mean that word. I am still intense. I still disappear into things. I can still spend hours inside a drawing, a book, a song, a thought, a world, a problem, or a vision. I can still give myself completely to something when it truly asks that of me.

But not everything asks that of me all the time.

That is the difference.

I can draw when it is time to draw.

I can write when something needs to be written.

I can train without turning my body into a battlefield.

I can play a game without calling it wasted time.

I can sit inside someone else's world without fearing that my own will collapse.

I can let a finished work remain finished.

I can allow the life I built to hold me.

That may be the peace I was actually moving toward without knowing it. Not a life without intensity. Not a life without ambition. Not a life without devotion. A life where intensity is no longer the only proof that I care.

For years, I needed to prove something to myself.

I needed to prove I could stop drinking.

I needed to prove I could rebuild my body.

I needed to prove I could tell the truth.

I needed to prove I could finish the books.

I needed to prove I could return to art.

I needed to prove I could become useful again.

I needed to prove the past had not taken everything.

Maybe that was necessary.

But I do not want to spend the rest of my life proving that I survived.

At some point, survival has to become life.

At some point, the rebuilt house has to become a home.

That is where I am now.

I am standing in rooms I once only imagined. The books are on the shelf. The body is no longer a wreckage site. The art has returned. The work is stable. The tools are here. The people I love are still here. The archive can be private. The website can stand without becoming a feed. The unfinished things do not frighten me the way they once did.

There will still be more.

More art. More stories. More music. More games. More work. More reflection. More quiet mornings and late nights. More ordinary days. More hard conversations. More repairs. More mistakes. More beauty.

But more no longer has to mean unfinished.

That is what I did not understand before.

A life can keep unfolding without the project remaining incomplete.

A person can keep growing without turning every season into a construction site.

The work can be done, and the life can continue.

For a long time, I thought the great victory was learning how to aim my intensity.

Now I think there is another victory after that.

Learning when to put the tools down.

Learning when to stop adding rooms.

Learning when the house is strong enough.

Learning that rest is not abandonment.

Learning that joy does not need to justify itself by becoming productive.

Learning that I do not have to keep building the house in order to deserve living inside it.

I still believe I did not learn balance first.

I learned aim.

Aim saved me. Aim built the life I am standing in now. Aim carried me through the years when stopping would have meant sliding backward. I am grateful for it.

But aim was not the final destination.

After aim came completion.

After completion came trust.

And now, for the first time in a very long time, I am learning how to live inside what I built.

DEDICATION

For those who shaped me — seen and unseen.

To My Wife — The One Who Never Left

You are the unwavering constant in the storm. The one who saw something worth saving long before I gave you proof of it. You walked through my darkness without armor, carrying light you never demanded credit for. You held faith in the version of me I hadn't yet become. And when I finally returned to you, sober, awake, rebuilding, I found that every piece of strength I had gathered along the way was born from the way you loved me. You didn't just stand beside me; you became my mirror, teaching me what loyalty, patience, and quiet resilience truly look like. This book, this transformation, this peace — none of it exists without you. You are the soul of it all.

To My Daughters — The Ones Who Taught Me Presence

You are the reason I became the man I was meant to be. Every time I watched you laugh, explore, or dream, I remembered why discipline and love must walk hand in hand. You taught me gentleness in strength and how to see beauty in the smallest moments. When I write, when I train, when I reflect, I am always thinking of the legacy I'm leaving in your hearts. You've shown me that fatherhood isn't sacrifice; it's fulfillment. You're the proof that love, when lived with intention, becomes art. Everything I build, Axis, The Reflection, every line of thought that will live beyond me, is ultimately for you.

To My Mother — The First Mirror

You are the foundation of everything good in me. The kindness, the empathy, the quiet strength. I learned all of that by watching you. You raised me with patience and grace, teaching me that true power has nothing to do with dominance and everything to do with compassion. You gave me warmth when the world was cold, steadiness when I felt lost, and love that never asked to be earned. You showed me what resilience looks like when life takes what can't be replaced, and somehow, you still give with the same open hands. You've

been my greatest supporter, my loudest cheerleader, and the first person who ever saw the full me. Everything I am began in your reflection.

To My Sister — The One Who Raised Me in Her Own Way

You were my first glimpse of belonging outside of childhood. You carried me into your world with joy, arcades, laughter, summer visits, and a kind of warmth that made me feel seen. You never treated me like the tag-along little brother; you treated me like family you chose.

Those years shaped my heart more than I ever said out loud. They gave me a sense of safety that would echo through the rest of my life. You were the first one to show me that love doesn't always come from parents. Sometimes it comes from a sister who takes you under her wing and shows you how to be seen.

To My Father — The Man of Quiet Strength

You taught me the value of honesty, hard work, and respect. You showed me that being a man isn't about words or bravado. It's about what you do when no one's watching. You were structured, steady, and proud, and even though we didn't always say much, I've come to understand how much of you lives in me now. Your death broke something in me, but over time, it also built something new. Through reflection, I've realized that we're still having that unspoken conversation. Every day that I choose integrity, every time I work with precision and discipline, I am answering you. This book, this life, is my way of continuing that conversation, one of gratitude, respect, and love.

To My Brother — The One I Still Carry

You were the first mirror of who I could've been, and the first heartbreak that made me face what life can take away. I didn't have you long enough, just that one summer where I finally got to know you, to work beside you, to feel what it was like to have an older brother. But that short time meant everything. It still does. When you left, I didn't know how to process it. I carried the guilt and confusion for years, even into the trips that would one day help me heal. And through that healing, I learned something: you never really left. You became the quiet presence guiding me through every descent and every rebuild. This book exists because of you. Because your loss forced me to ask deeper questions about life, death, and meaning. You taught me that love doesn't end where life does. It transforms, and it keeps teaching. I still carry you, brother. And through this work, others will feel the echo of what you gave me.

To the Invisible Mentors

To the ones who will never know me, the distant voices that shaped me from afar. The writers, artists, athletes, thinkers, teachers, and quiet examples whose work reached me when I needed direction. You showed me discipline, presence, creativity, philosophy, courage, and the value of a life shaped with intention. You reminded me that greatness does not always announce itself, that suffering can refine instead of destroy, and that art, whether painted, written, lifted, or lived, can become a form of reflection. Each of you gave me something intangible: a piece of the blueprint that helped me build my own way forward. You were proof that even in isolation, we are never truly alone in our evolution.

To Every Reader Who Finds This Work

You, too, are part of this dedication. Because by reading this, you've stepped into the current of something sacred. Not my story, but the human story of falling apart and building back again. If these words find you, may they remind you that your own reflection, however fractured it feels, can still become whole.

This book, and the life behind it, is for all of you. Those who stayed. Those who guided. Those who never left, even when I did.

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The Reflection

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