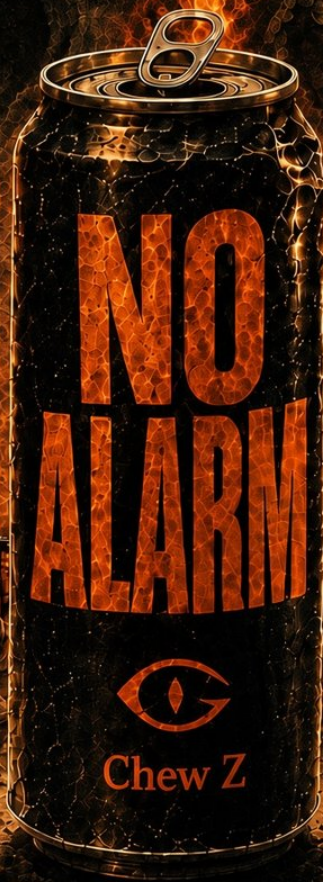


ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 40



TOXOPLASMA GONDII
1gG — NEGATIVE

NO ALARM

Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 40

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2026 Chew Z

All rights reserved.

ISBN 979-8-952790-39-1

Roya Publications

Publication No. 40

Typeset in DejaVu Serif.

Printed in the Reach

Depictions of medical conditions are grounded in published clinical literature but are dramatised and are not medical guidance.



THE SCIENCE FAIR.

Twenty-two serology panels. 2014 through last year.
Every single one negative.
He had never had it.

SYNOPSIS

Cornileous Rowan was born unable to feel pain. Congenital insensitivity with anhidrosis — no damage signal, no sweat, no way of being told the house is on fire. His mother spent thirteen thousand nights checking his mouth and his feet like a farrier going round a horse, and when she died the post of Corni Rowan's nervous system fell vacant and he did not fill it.

At twenty-three a clinic in Lompoc told him he was carrying *Toxoplasma gondii* — the parasite that rewires a rat's amygdala until it walks toward the animal that eats it. Two alarms out. One at birth, one by infection. He walked into the sun on Ocean Avenue the happiest man in California.

Then came forty-one professional fights he could not be made to quit, eleven hundred jumps, a wingsuit line flown eleven feet off a Norwegian cliff, and a beverage company named after the parasite whose entire product was a premise: that fear is optional, and here is a man who proves it. They put his skull films on a billboard twelve storeys high. Kids who could feel every single thing started imitating a man who couldn't, and started dying, and somebody in Playa Vista modelled that in a spreadsheet with a header row.

He lost a marriage to it. He is losing a leg and an eye and a heart to it.

And in a kitchen in Bakersfield, checking a fact for his daughter's science fair, he finds twenty-two blood panels going back eleven years, every one of them negative — and an email from a company doctor explaining, in four lines, why nobody told him.

A foul-mouthed, funny, extremely bad-tempered account of a man who was sold as fearless, marketed as fearless, sponsored as fearless, and was frightened the entire time with no word for it and a certificate saying he wasn't. It is about what fear is actually for, what courage costs, who gets to buy it, and what a man leaves behind when the only thing he never got to do was pay.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Two conditions sit under this book and both are real, and the difference between how real they are is part of the point.

Congenital insensitivity to pain with anhidrosis is not exaggerated here. Infants chew their tongues and fingertips. Children walk on fractures until the bone deforms. Corneas scar because the blink reflex never fires on grit. Without sweat glands, core temperature climbs unannounced, and most of the deaths in childhood are heat, not injury. Life expectancy is short. Everything in Chapter One is documented, including the mothers who tape the mittens, and I have tried to write those mothers with the accuracy they are owed.

Toxoplasma gondii is equally real and much more contested, and I have let Rowan say so himself in Chapter Three rather than smuggling it past the reader. The rodent work is genuinely astonishing and well replicated: infected rats lose the specific aversion to cat odour and nothing else. The human work is a mess of correlations — traffic accidents, reaction time, personality, risk appetite — with small effects, confounds nobody can fully clear, and a publication climate that rewards the sensational result. Both halves of that are true. Nothing in the honest literature supports what a beverage company in this novella sells, which is precisely why they sell it.

The mechanism the book actually cares about needs no parasite at all. Tell a person that their fear has been removed and they will not stop feeling it; they will stop being able to *name* it. And unnamed fear is worse than fear, because fear that has a name has a set of instructions attached — you can rest, you can refuse, you can decide. Rowan spends fifteen years running a maximal stress response he has been officially informed he does not have. His heart pays for it.

Pain is a smoke alarm. Fear is the same alarm, wired forward in time. Neither is the enemy and both are hated, and there is a large industry built on persuading young people that the alarm is a

character flaw and that the cure is a can. That industry is why this book has a body count in it, and the body count in the real one is not fictional.

Courage is a transaction. It requires that you know what you are carrying and go anyway, and the price is the terror, and that price is the entire reason the thing is worth honouring. A man who pays nothing has not been brave; he has merely been unbothered — and if he is applauded for it long enough, other people will try to reach the same place with full nervous systems and be destroyed on the way.

This novella closes a cycle of five, and it closes it by arguing against its own premise, which I think is the only honest way to end a sequence of books about conditions.

The other four are about people whose interior was altered by something physical — a severed bridge in the brain, a missing capacity for affect, a destroyed brainstem, a broken filter. In each of them, a room exists inside a person because a lesion built it, and somebody outside finds a use for what is in that room.

This one says: the lesion was never necessary.

Rowan believes he lives in a room only a few dozen people on earth are born into, and that the walls of it are genetic. He is wrong. The room turns out to be available to anyone, and the entry requirement is not a mutation or a parasite but a single sentence, delivered by someone the person believes, stating that the alarm is not real. He gets the sentence from a misread test result and a company that declines to correct it. A nineteen-year-old in Arizona gets the same sentence off the side of a can for four dollars, and arrives in the same room faster.

That is why the marketing in this book is more frightening than the neurology. A lesion is rare, slow, and can only be visited on one person at a time. A sentence scales. And the industry that sells young people the idea that their own fear is a defect they can switch off has understood this for a long time, and does not need a parasite, and never did.

Vonnegut stands behind this shelf as always. So does every parent

who has ever checked a sleeping child's feet with a flashlight for the four thousandth time and been told they worry too much.

Chew Z

CONTENTS

ONE. THE HOUSE WITH NO ALARMS	10
TWO. MARGUERITE ROWAN'S WAR	13
INTERLUDE ONE. THE OLDEST THING YOU OWN	16
THREE. THE CAT	19
FOUR. THE MAN WHO DOESN'T TAP	22
FIVE. NO ALARM	25
INTERLUDE TWO. THE LIGHTNESS	27
SIX. JUNE	32
SEVEN. THE AIR YEARS	35
EIGHT. MR ROWAN	38
INTERLUDE THREE. WHAT THEY WERE ACTUALLY SELLING	41
NINE. THE ACTUARIAL FILE	44
TEN. THE SCIENCE FAIR	47
ELEVEN. THE THING IN THE DOOR	50
INTERLUDE FOUR. THE ROOM DOESN'T NEED THE CONDITION	53
TWELVE. DISCLOSURE	56
THIRTEEN. EXHIBIT 41	59
CODA. EXHIBIT 44	64

ONE. THE HOUSE WITH NO ALARMS

Here's the first thing you need to know about me and it's the only thing anybody ever remembers.

I have never once in forty-three years felt a single fucking thing hurt.

Not the tongue I chewed through at eleven months old. Not the femur I walked around on for three days in the ninth grade, which by the time somebody looked at it had started knitting itself back together at an angle, so that for the rest of my life my right leg has pointed eleven degrees off true and I have run about four thousand miles on it anyway. Not the eye. Not the ribs. Not the teeth I ground down to brown stumps as a toddler because grinding felt like *something* and something was the rarest commodity in the house.

Congenital insensitivity to pain with anhidrosis. Say it fast at parties. There's maybe a few dozen properly documented in the country and the number's soft because a lot of us don't make it far enough to get documented.

The nerves that carry pain and temperature — the little unmyelinated ones, the slow ones, the ones that do the actual screaming — never grew. That's it. That's the whole disease. Everything else works. I can feel your hand on my arm. I can feel silk and sandpaper and tell you which is which with my eyes shut. Somebody once asked me if I could feel a kiss and I said yeah, and she cried about it, which was not the reaction I was going for.

What I can't feel is *damage*.

Now here's what nobody understands about that, and I've had forty-three years and about nine hundred conversations to work out how to say it, so shut up for a second and I'll give it to you clean.

Pain is not a punishment. It's a *smoke alarm*.

That's it. That's all it ever was. It's a shitty little plastic thing screwed to your ceiling that goes off when something's burning, and everybody hates it, and everybody has taken the battery out of

at least one of them at two in the morning while a piece of toast smouldered, and everybody thinks it's the enemy.

It is not the enemy. The fire is the enemy. The alarm is the only friend you've got in the building.

I live in a house with no smoke alarms.

Everything still burns. That's the part people miss. My tissue tears exactly like yours. My bones break at the same load. Infection eats me at the same rate. I get everything you get. I just don't get *told*, and so by the time I find out, the roof's already gone and there's a fire crew on the lawn asking me how long it's been like this and me going, honestly? Could be Tuesday.

The anhidrosis half is the part that actually kills us. No sweat glands. None. You have got two and a half million little radiators in your skin and I have got zero, and so on a hot day I do not cool down, I just keep climbing, like a car with the fan belt off. Kids with this die in playgrounds. They die at family barbecues in July with a paper plate in their hand and a mother forty feet away, because forty-one degrees of core temperature does not announce itself, it just starts turning the lights off room by room.

My mother, who I'll get to, used to keep a rectal thermometer in her handbag until I was fourteen. I want you to sit with that image. Fourteen years old, in a Denny's parking lot, in July.

You want the highlight reel? Fine. Here's the archaeological survey of Cornileous Rowan, aged forty-three, conducted by every radiologist who's ever looked at me and gone very quiet:

Tongue: reconstructed twice, once at three, once at seven. There's a piece of it that's just scar. I can't taste anything on the front left.

Fingertips: I chewed off the pads of four of them before I was two. My mother taped mittens on me for eighteen months, all day, every day, taped, because a two-year-old takes off gloves and does not take off tape.

Teeth: eleven pulled before I turned nine, because I kept biting through my own cheek and the dentist said the only way to stop it was to stop me having the equipment.

Left cornea: scarred over. You blink about twenty thousand times a day and about eight hundred of those are because something touched your eye and you didn't decide to blink, your eye decided. Mine doesn't. So grit sits there. I've got about forty percent in that eye and it went milky at nineteen and I looked in the mirror and thought, well, that's the look, that's the whole look right there, and I have never once been sad about it and I want that on the record before this book gets sentimental on me.

Femur, tibia, five ribs, both collarbones, the right scaphoid twice, the jaw. Every one of those healed wrong because I kept using them. That's the actual mechanism of destruction with this thing, by the way. It isn't that you get hurt more. It's that you *never stop*. You get one crack in a bone and you keep loading it every single day for a month and you turn a hairline into a wreck, because the thing that would have made you sit down never fired.

I have had eleven operations. I have a left knee that is more hardware than knee. The surgeon who did it, a guy called Prem who I liked, held up a scan and said, "Mr Rowan, I want you to understand that this joint has the wear pattern of a ninety-year-old," and I said, "Well, doc, I'm not gonna feel the arthritis," and he said, "No. You are going to lose the leg." Which shut me up for about four seconds.

So that's the body.

Now here's the part that actually matters, and it's why you're reading this instead of some pamphlet.

Everybody hears all that and goes: *oh, that poor guy*. And then about eleven seconds later, every single one of them, every single fucking time, without one exception in forty-three years, they lean in and they get this look and they say:

"But — I mean — that's kind of a superpower though, right?"

Yeah.

Yeah, it's kind of a superpower.

Ask my mother. Ask the four people I put in the ground. Ask a girl called June, who I'll get to and who I would rather not get to, and who is the reason this whole account exists.

I was in a place called the Bell in Lompoc in the summer I was twenty-two and there was a cat that lived in the yard behind it, a tortoiseshell thing with an ear missing that everybody fed and nobody owned. I used to sit out there with it. I'd handle it. I let it sleep on my chest, and it used the corner of that yard as a litter box for about two years, and I sat in that yard nearly every night for four months.

That cat is the second most important thing in this book.

I'll come back to it.

Right now I want to tell you about the first time I ever got hit in the face on purpose by a man who was being paid to do it, because that's where the actual story starts, and because I have been dying to tell somebody about it for twenty years.

TWO. MARGUERITE ROWAN'S WAR

My mother's name was Marguerite and she fought a forty-year war against my own body and lost, and I want to be careful here because this is the one section of this book where I'm not going to be funny.

Try to actually run the simulation.

You have a baby. The baby doesn't cry right. That's the first thing, that's how it always starts, and it's the thing that gets dismissed, because a baby that doesn't cry much is a *good* baby, everybody tells you you're lucky, your mother-in-law tells you the other grandkids screamed for two years and aren't you blessed.

Then the teeth come in.

And at eleven months your son chews his tongue. Not nips it. Chews it, the way you'd chew a piece of gristle, thoughtfully, for a while, and you come in and there's blood down his front and he is *smiling at you*, and you scream, and he doesn't understand why you're screaming, and that right there — that exact second, in a

rented duplex in Bakersfield in 1982 — is the moment my mother's life ended and her second life started.

You cannot childproof this. That's the thing I need you to get. There's no version of the house that's safe. She did all of it. Corners padded, taps thermostatted at forty-three degrees, oven locked, floors carpeted, and none of it matters, because the call is coming from inside the building. The danger is not the coffee table. The danger is that I will decide to find out what's inside my own arm.

That's a real thing, by the way. Not me — I never did that one — but it's in the literature and every parent in this community knows about it by the second year. Kids with this take themselves apart out of curiosity. There's no *don't* in the loop. There's just a question and a set of teeth.

So she taped mittens on me for eighteen months. Duct tape, at the wrist, changed twice a day. She got looked at in supermarkets. She got a visit from a social worker in 1984 — sat at our kitchen table, a young woman with a folder, asking my mother why her son's hands were bound, and my mother, who had not slept properly since 1982, got out the file, the whole file, the referral letters and the biopsy report and the photographs of my tongue, and put it on the table, and then went and stood at the sink with her back to the room until the woman left.

She checked my mouth every night. Every night, until I was twelve. Thumb and finger, cheek pulled out, tongue up, tongue down, like a farrier going round a horse. Then feet — every night, both feet, soles, between the toes, looking for the little dark spot that means something got in and started eating. Then a temperature. Then bed.

Thirteen thousand nights. I did that arithmetic once, in a hotel room in Utah at four in the morning, and then had to go outside.

And I fought her the entire time.

That's the part. That's the part that gets me. Because a kid does not experience *thirteen thousand nights of vigilance* as love. A kid experiences it as the most annoying woman in California who will not leave him alone about his goddamn feet. I was nine years old

telling my mother to get off me. I was fourteen, in that Denny's parking lot, screaming at her about the thermometer in front of two guys from my school, and she took it, and she waited, and she did it anyway when we got in the car.

She was right every single time. Not most. Every time.

She caught the femur. She caught an infected ingrown toenail at eleven that had gone into the bone and would have taken the toe. She caught a burn on my calf from a motorcycle exhaust that I had been walking around on for two days and had not noticed, and she caught it because she smelled it.

I want to say that again. My mother identified an injury on her son by *smell*, because she had developed, over a decade, an ability that no medical school teaches and that no instrument does better, which is knowing when a thing on Corni is wrong.

And here's the sentence she said to me, which is the load-bearing sentence of my entire life, and I got it at fifteen after the femur, standing in a hallway, and I did not understand it for another twenty-five years:

"I am your nervous system. That is the job. And one day I'll be dead and you'll have to be your own, and Corni — I have watched you for fifteen years and you are not going to do it."

She was right about that too.

She died in 2011. Fifty-nine. Pancreatic, six months, quick.

And I have thought about this a great deal and I'm going to put it down without decorating it: my mother was in pain, badly, for probably four months before she said anything to anybody. She had it and she worked through it and she did not go in.

The woman who spent thirteen thousand nights reading my body ignored her own.

I've never been able to make that mean anything. It just sits there. Everybody who hears it wants it to be irony, and it isn't irony, it's just what happened, and the fact that it makes a nice shape doesn't make it less of a stupid, pointless, avoidable fucking waste.

Six months after we buried her I quit my job hanging drywall and drove to Lompoc and started sleeping on a floor above a bar called the Bell.

Because here's what nobody tells you about being the kid in that story.

When she died, the alarm system went with her.

Forty years of an entire human being standing between me and the fire, and then one afternoon in a hospice in Fresno she stopped, and I walked out into a parking lot at thirty-one years old with a body I'd never had to look after and no idea whatsoever how to be afraid.

And the wild thing — the thing I want you to hold onto, because it's the whole engine of everything that comes after — is that it did not feel like grief.

It felt like the best fucking day of my life.

INTERLUDE ONE. THE OLDEST THING YOU OWN

Put the story down for a minute. I want to tell you what fear actually is, because you have had one your whole life and almost certainly do not know what it's for, and by the end of this book you're going to need to.

Start with the age of the thing.

Your fear is older than your species. It is older than mammals. It is older than the spine. There's a flatworm about a centimetre long, no brain to speak of, four hundred million years of separation between us, and if you put a shadow over it, it withdraws. That's the whole apparatus in its first draft: detect, withdraw, live.

Everything since has been renovation.

By the time you get vertebrates you've got a dedicated organ for it, and it's still in you, and it's called the amygdala. Two of them, one each side, each about the size of an almond, sitting deep in the temporal lobe about level with your ears. Not a fear centre exactly — it's more like a salience desk, a night clerk who flags anything

that matters — but if you had to point at where the alarm is bolted to the wall, that's the spot.

And here's the first thing that should unsettle you: it does not report to you.

There are two roads from your senses to that almond. The scientists call them the low road and the high road, and the low road is the one that runs this planet.

The high road goes up through the sensory cortex — the part that identifies things, that knows a rope from a snake, that has opinions. That's the route you experience as thinking. It takes something like a quarter of a second, which sounds fast and is not.

The low road goes direct. Thalamus to amygdala, no stops, no identification, no committee. It runs in something like twelve milliseconds and it is not carrying a picture, it's carrying a *shape* — long, thin, moving wrong. It doesn't know what it is. It doesn't care. It has already made your hand recoil, dumped adrenaline into you, stopped your breath and turned your head before the part of you that reads books has been informed that anything happened.

You know this. Everybody knows this and nobody thinks about it. You have jumped at a garden hose. You have flinched at a bag in the road. And then, a quarter-second later, the slow clever part arrives with the correct answer — *it's a hose, idiot* — and you laugh, and your heart keeps banging for another forty seconds because the hardware doesn't take corrections well.

That gap — that quarter of a second between the alarm going off and you finding out why — that's the whole of it. That's where every human being actually lives and nobody notices, because the two roads normally arrive close enough together that it feels like one event.

Now. What it costs to run.

When that alarm fires you get the full package and it is expensive. Adrenaline first, in under a second: heart rate up, airways open, blood pulled out of your gut and your skin and shoved into the big muscles. That's why frightened people go pale and why their mouth

goes dry — the body has decided that digestion and saliva are luxuries for an animal that might be about to be eaten.

Then the slower one. Cortisol, minutes later, from the adrenals, and this is the bill that arrives after the party. It mobilises glucose, it suppresses immune function, it suppresses reproduction, it suppresses repair. Every one of those is a rational sacrifice if you are about to sprint for ninety seconds. Every one of them is a catastrophe if it runs for fifteen years.

Hold onto that sentence. Fifteen years. I'll come back for it.

And here's the last piece, which is the piece this book is actually about.

We are not born afraid of very much. Two things, roughly, in a human infant: falling, and loud noise. That's the whole factory-installed set. Everything else is learned.

Which means fear is not a fixed property of you. It's a *ledger*. It is a running account of everything that has ever hurt you or nearly did, updated continuously, and its entire function is to arrive before the thing does. That's the trick. That's the four-hundred-million-year invention. Pain tells you the fire has started. Fear is the same alarm wired forward in time — it tells you about a fire that hasn't happened yet, using nothing but the record of every fire in your history and every fire in the history of everyone who came before you.

It is the single most useful thing your body does.

And a rat that has been infected with a certain parasite loses precisely one entry in that ledger, and walks toward a cat.

And a boy in Bakersfield who never had the pain half either has almost nothing in the ledger at all, because the ledger is written in an ink he doesn't produce.

I want you to hold both of those and then keep reading, because I got told at twenty-three that both of my alarms had been disconnected, and I want to walk you very slowly through what that actually felt like from inside, and I want you to notice something while I do it.

Notice that I keep describing it as *lightness*.

THREE. THE CAT

The cat's name was Property Of because somebody had written that on a bowl.

I need to explain the parasite now and I'm going to do it properly, without the science-teacher voice, because if you don't get this bit then the rest of the book is just a guy jumping off things.

Toxoplasma gondii. Single-celled. Not a bacterium, not a virus — a protozoan, which is a thing with a nucleus and ambitions.

It can live in basically any warm-blooded animal on this planet, and it does, in about a third of every human being currently alive. Roughly two and a half billion people are carrying it right now. Statistically some of you reading this. It's in the freezer aisle and the garden soil and undercooked lamb.

But it can only *breed* — actually have sex and make the hardy little eggs that survive out in the world — inside a cat. Only cats. Domestic, wild, doesn't matter, has to be a feline gut. That's its bedroom and it has no other.

Which creates a problem, if you're a parasite. Because most of the time you find yourself sitting inside a rat.

So here's what it does, and this is the part where you should put the book down for a second.

It goes to the brain. It forms cysts — actual physical cysts, little walled-off apartments, preferentially in the amygdala, which is the fear organ, and in the areas that handle novelty and threat. And then it *edits the rat*.

Infected rats stop avoiding cat urine. That's the finding, replicated for twenty-five years, and it's not that they get generally stupid — their maze performance is fine, their memory's fine, they're still frightened of everything else. It's *specific*. The one fear that gets deleted is the one that keeps them alive. And in some studies it goes further than deletion: the smell that used to repel them starts lighting up the same circuits as a mate.

The rat walks toward the cat. Sometimes eagerly.

And the cat eats it, and the parasite gets to the only bedroom it's allowed in, and the cycle closes.

That is a single-celled organism with no brain of its own performing behavioural neurosurgery on a mammal in order to arrange its own transport. When I first read that at a laundromat in Lompoc at twenty-three, sitting on a plastic chair with a phone and a bag of quarters, I laughed so hard the woman folding sheets moved away from me.

Now. Humans.

Here's where I have to be honest with you, because I'm going to spend the rest of this book being a lunatic and I'd like to have one chapter where I'm not.

In humans the evidence is real and it's messy and people fight about it.

What's solid: it's in about a third of us, it makes cysts in human brains too, and in immunocompromised people it does terrible things that nobody argues about.

What's contested: everything interesting. There are studies going back to the nineties finding that infected people have more traffic accidents — several of them, in different countries, some with decent numbers. There's work finding differences in reaction time and rule-following, and a famous set of findings on personality that split by sex in a way nobody's fully explained. There's a paper on entrepreneurship that got a lot of press. There's work on risk-taking that keeps almost replicating.

And there's a pile of critics who'll tell you, correctly, that these are correlations, that the effect sizes are small, that people who own cats and eat rare meat and drive fast might be a certain kind of person to start with, and that the whole field has a publication problem because *mind-control parasite* gets in the newspaper and *no effect found* does not.

Both of those are true at once. Hold both. That's the honest position and I held it for exactly as long as it took me to get my own result back.

I got tested in the spring I was twenty-three because a guy at the Bell was reading about it and we all got curious, in the way you get curious when you're twenty-three and there's a free afternoon.

Positive. IgG antibodies, chronic infection, established, not recent. Titre high.

I sat in a chair in a clinic on Ocean Avenue and a physician's assistant told me it was extremely common and meant nothing and not to worry about it, and I walked out into the sun on that street and I have never in my life been happier.

Because look what I had.

I had a body that could not be told it was damaged.

And now I had a brain with a parasite in it that deletes the fear of the thing that's going to eat you.

Do you understand what that is? That's not an illness. That is a *build*. That is somebody handing you a character sheet with both alarms crossed out in pen. The pain alarm was factory-disabled at birth and now the fear alarm's got a squatter in it filing the wiring down, and the two of them together mean there is not one single mechanism left inside Cornileous Rowan that can say the word *stop*.

Everybody else on this planet is being driven around by two nervous little men. One shouts when you're broken. One shouts when you might be about to be. Between them they run your entire life — they pick your job, they pick who you marry, they're the reason you didn't say the thing at the party, they're the reason you're reading a book about a guy who jumped off things instead of jumping off things.

I fired both of mine.

That's the whole story. Everything after this is just the invoice.

I went back to the Bell that afternoon and I sat in the yard and Property Of came over and got on my chest and I lay there in the

dirt under a fire escape and looked at that cat's face for a long time and I said, out loud, and I want this on my headstone if I ever get one:

"Thanks, you little bastard."

FOUR. THE MAN WHO DOESN'T TAP

The first guy who ever hit me for money was called Dontrell Ames and he was twenty-six and he was, I found out later, a genuinely nice man with two kids and a landscaping business.

Regional promotion, a converted Elks lodge outside Santa Maria, four hundred people, cash at the door. I was twenty-four. I had done nine months of training that consisted mostly of getting thrown around by a guy called Bo who ran a gym in a unit behind a tyre place and who took me on because I said I'd clean the mats.

I want to explain what happens in a fight when one guy has no pain, because everybody gets it wrong, including me for the first two years.

You think it makes you invincible. It does not. Here's the actual mechanics, and Bo was the first man who ever explained it to me properly, on a Tuesday, with a mop in his hand:

"You still get knocked out, dumbass. That's not pain, that's your brain sloshing. You still get choked out, that's not pain either, that's oxygen. You still break — you break *more*, 'cause you don't protect. What you got isn't armour."

"So what have I got?"

And Bo looked at me and said the thing that made me a lot of money and cost me my face:

"You got no *quit*. Every man in that cage has got a little door in the back of his head, and when it hurts enough that door opens and he goes through it. Yours is bricked up. That's it. That's the whole edge and it's a hell of an edge and it's gonna kill you."

Here's what it looks like from the outside.

Round two, Ames catches me clean with a right hand and I feel my head move and I hear something in my nose go and I know — *know*,

intellectually, like reading a gauge — that I've been hurt. And I keep walking forward at exactly the same speed with exactly the same expression.

That is the most frightening thing a human being can watch.

Because a fight is a *conversation*. That's what nobody tells you. Two guys are talking the whole time in the only language that matters, which is: I hit you, and I read what happens to your face, and I adjust. You flinch, I go there again. You blink, I know your legs are next. The entire art is reading the receipt.

Hit me and there's no receipt. You get nothing back. You threw the best right hand of your life into a man and the man's face did not acknowledge that anything occurred.

Ames threw that shot and then he did the thing I saw a hundred and eleven times over the next six years, and it never got old, and I am not proud of how much I enjoyed it: he took half a step back and glanced at the ref.

He was checking if he was allowed to be doing this.

I stopped him in the third. Not because I was better — he was better, he was much better, he out-struck me two to one on the tape. I stopped him because in round three he stopped throwing his right hand, because his right hand had stopped working three minutes earlier when he broke it on my forehead, and he was carrying it, and he was *feeling* that, and I was not carrying anything, and eventually he was against the fence and the ref got in.

Twenty-one and four. Four losses all by knockout, because there is exactly one way to beat me and everybody in the game worked it out by fight nine.

The submission thing is the part that got me the name.

You tap because it hurts. That's the deal, that's the entire social contract of the sport — a guy gets your arm and applies the load and the load reaches a level and you slap the mat and everybody goes home with their arm.

I don't get the message that says *stop*.

So there's a night in Reno, fight fourteen, a guy called Vasquez has an armbar on me at the two-minute mark of the first and it is *deep*, it is textbook, the ref's leaning in, the crowd's already making the noise crowds make when it's over.

And I'm just lying there.

Thinking. Genuinely thinking, quite calmly, about how to get my hips out. And Vasquez is cranking, and cranking, and I can hear him grunting with it, and then there's a sound like somebody stepping on a bag of chips.

And I still don't tap, because from in here nothing has changed.

The ref stopped it. Correctly. Vasquez won.

But the tape of that went around, and then it went around some more, and by the following spring there was a nickname, and the nickname was **No Alarm**, and I did not choose it, and I would have chosen something much worse.

Elbow was rebuilt over two operations. I fought seven months later.

Now — six years, forty-one professional fights, three regional belts and one very bad night in Tijuana. And this is the part where I have to be straight about the thing you're all waiting for me to be straight about.

My face.

I've got a left orbital that's a mesh plate. The nose has been reset four times and now goes right. There's a dent above my left eyebrow you can put a thumb in. The cornea, which was already gone, went further. My left ear is a solid lump of scar the shape of a dumpling, because cauliflower ear happens when the tissue fills with blood and hurts like hell and you go and get it drained, and I never went and got anything drained.

And people look at me in gas stations. Kids do a double take and then their mother pulls them.

I want to tell you it bothers me and I can't, and I've tried, and I think that's the actual disability, right there, more than the nerves. Not being able to feel the fire is one thing.

It's that I never once got the invoice for anything, so I never learned what things cost, so I spent it all.

FIVE. NO ALARM

The man from GONDII was called Wes Hollander and he found me in a parking lot in Bakersfield with a bag of frozen peas on an elbow I could not feel, which is a detail he used in a keynote for the next nine years.

You know the brand. Don't pretend. Black can, orange band, the two little curved marks that everybody says look like a cat's eye and that the company has spent a decade insisting are a G. It's in your gas station right now. Your nephew has a hat.

What you probably don't know is what the name means, and when Hollander told me in that parking lot I laughed for about a minute and a half.

Gondii. From *Toxoplasma gondii*. They named the drink after the parasite.

A marketing consultancy in Playa Vista in 2009 got handed a brief for an energy drink in a market that already had eleven and they went looking for a story, and one of them had read the same laundromat article I had, and somebody said: *what if the drink is the thing that deletes your fear?*

And that was it. That was the whole company. Not a beverage — a *premise*. A can of caffeine and taurine that costs forty cents to produce, wrapped in the suggestion that what's inside is the organism that makes a rat walk toward a cat.

The tagline was on every can:

NO ALARM.

And under it, in smaller type around the base, four lines that a copywriter in Playa Vista wrote in about nine minutes for a fee I later found out was eleven hundred dollars, and which are now tattooed on somewhere north of forty thousand people:

Feel no fire, hear no bell. Walk the edge and walk it well. Cat don't call and rat don't run — no alarm, and it's already done.

Eleven hundred dollars. Four lines. I've done the arithmetic on that more than once.

Which is when it stopped being funny to me, in that parking lot, because I had been fighting for four years under a nickname I did not choose and the nickname was already the slogan of a company I had never heard of.

Hollander didn't sign me that day. He did something smarter. He sat on the tailgate of my truck for two hours and asked me questions, and about ninety minutes in he asked the one nobody had ever asked, which is why I have never been able to properly hate him:

"When you were a kid — before any of it — what did you *want* to be?"

Nobody had asked me that. Everybody asks about the tongue. Everybody asks does-it-really-not-hurt. Nobody asks a guy with a face like a dropped pie what he wanted.

I said: a pilot. Because I liked the idea of being somewhere nothing could reach me.

And Hollander said, "Okay," and got off my tailgate, and eleven days later a contract arrived that made me, for a two-year term, at twenty-eight years old, with eleven surgeries and forty percent vision in one eye, richer than every man in my family had been combined.

Here's the deal, and I want the numbers in because everybody wants the numbers.

Year one: base of ninety, escalators for appearances, eleven percent on a signature line. Year two doubled it. By year four with the tour money and the film they made, I cleared just over two million in twelve months, and I want to be clear that I understood exactly nothing about what I had signed and did not read past page four.

But here's the actual transaction and it took me until this year to see it.

They didn't sign a fighter. They had fighters. Everybody had fighters; a fighter is a rented face.

They signed *proof*.

Because if you're selling a premise — the alarm can be switched off, the fear is optional, you too can be a rat that walks toward the cat — then the single most valuable object on earth is one guy who *actually is that*. Not an athlete who trained hard. A man with a documented genetic condition and a documented positive titre, medically certified, who cannot feel damage and does not experience fear.

I wasn't the spokesman for the product.

I was the *demonstration*. I was the sample in the shop window that proves the machine works.

And every single thing that happened to me for the next eleven years — every stunt, every jump, every very bad decision that landed on a can — was a company running its proof at higher and higher load to see where it broke.

They put my scan on a billboard. The skull films, the plate, the eleven degrees. Times Square, twelve storeys, black and orange, my own broken face in x-ray and two words:

NO ALARM.

I stood underneath it in November with my daughter on my shoulders and I cried, and I want to be honest about why, because it wasn't pride.

It was that my mother spent thirteen thousand nights checking a boy's feet so that he could grow up and rent the exact thing she was protecting him from to a beverage company for eleven percent and a signature line.

INTERLUDE TWO. THE LIGHTNESS

I've been putting this chapter off for eleven chapters' worth of drafts and I'll tell you why: it's the only part of this whole account I actually enjoyed, and I know how it's going to read, and I'm going to write it honestly anyway.

Because if you don't understand why it was *good*, you'll never understand why four kids are dead.

So here it is. What it feels like to have no alarms. Slowly, properly, in order, with nothing cut out.

Month one.

Nothing happens. That's the first thing nobody tells you about a life-changing diagnosis: for about four weeks, nothing changes at all. I got the positive titre in the spring of 2010 and I went back to hanging drywall for a company in Santa Maria and for a month the only difference was that I had a fact in my pocket.

I took it out and looked at it maybe forty times a day.

That's how it starts. Not with an act. With a man doing an ordinary job with a piece of information sitting in him like a stone in a shoe, and every time his mind goes quiet the stone rolls.

Month two. The first subtraction.

Here's the actual mechanism and I've never seen it described anywhere so pay attention, because it's not what you think.

It didn't feel like courage arriving.

It felt like *things being removed*.

I was on a roof in June. Two-storey residential, standard pitch, and I'd been on a hundred roofs and I'm not afraid of heights and never was. But there's a thing you do on a roof — everybody does it, you don't notice it — which is that you allocate about eleven percent of yourself to the edge. It's not fear. It's just a small permanent process, running in a corner, that knows where the edge is and is checking on it.

That afternoon the process wasn't running.

I noticed because I walked to within about a foot of the edge to look at a gutter and I got there and thought: *huh, I walked straight there*. Normally there's a negotiation. A small one, half a second, so routine you'd never call it anything. Approach the edge, something checks in, you adjust.

Nothing checked in.

And the feeling that produced — the actual felt quality of it, which is the thing this whole chapter is for — was not power. It was *quiet*.

That's the word. It was like a fridge you didn't know was humming switching off.

Month four. The lightness.

By the autumn I had a name for it in my own head and the name was the lightness, and I have never found a better one.

Imagine you have been carrying a rucksack your entire life. Not a heavy one. Eleven pounds, maybe. On from the day you were born, never off, not for one hour, not while you slept. You have no memory of not wearing it. You have built your entire posture around it — the way you stand, the way you walk into rooms, the way you speak to strangers, which chairs you pick, what jobs you applied for, who you asked out and who you didn't.

You do not experience it as weight. You experience it as *yourself*.

And then somebody takes it off.

You wouldn't feel strong. That's the thing people get wrong. You'd feel *tall*. You'd feel like the world had moved back about six inches in every direction. Rooms get bigger. Doors get wider. Everything you look at becomes a thing you could just do, right now, with no intervening step, because the intervening step — the tiny half-second consultation with the clerk at the desk who checks the ledger — has been deleted from the process.

I want to be very specific about what disappeared, because it wasn't the big stuff.

It was the small stuff. It was almost entirely the small stuff.

I stopped rehearsing sentences before I said them. That went first and I didn't notice for a year. Everybody does that — everybody runs a two-second simulation before they speak to a stranger, and the simulation is a fear operation, it's the ledger checking what happened last time somebody said a thing like that.

I stopped having the thing where you're driving and you think about the oncoming lane.

I stopped checking the back of a bar when I walked in.

I stopped having any relationship whatsoever with the word *later*. That's the deepest one and it took me a decade to see it. Every plan a human being makes is a fear operation — you are moving a resource from now to later because some part of you can imagine a later that goes badly. Savings, insurance, warming up before you train, sunscreen, all of it. The future is a thing that only exists in the mind of an animal that can be afraid of it.

I stopped having a future. Not dramatically. It just stopped being furniture I bumped into.

Year one. What it's actually like.

Here's the honest report and it's the reason four kids are dead: it was the best year of my life and nothing has ever come close.

Not because of the stunts. There weren't any yet. Because of the *texture of an ordinary Tuesday*.

Everything got simpler. Everything. Somebody asks you a question and you answer it, because the delay was fear. You want to do a thing so you do the thing. You meet a woman and you talk to her. You go to the airport with a bag.

I felt — and I have chased this word for a decade and it's the right one and I don't like it —

I felt *clean*.

Like something clotted had been rinsed out. Like I'd been running my whole life with a bad valve and somebody had reached in and cleared it. There was nothing between me and the world any more. No membrane. No lag. Whatever I looked at, I could touch.

And here's the thing I need you to understand before you judge a single one of those kids:

that is the best feeling available to a human being.

It's better than sex, it's better than money, it's better than being loved. I have had all three and I'm telling you. Because those are all things that happen *to* you and this is a thing that stops happening

to you. It's the removal of a tax you didn't know you were paying, on every single transaction, for your entire life.

You cannot sell people a drink. Nobody wants a drink.

You can sell them that.

Year two. The first cost, which I filed as a benefit.

June said something to me years later that belongs here rather than where it happened.

She said: "You know what you actually lost? You lost the ability to be *impressed*."

And she was right and it took me until this year to see the mechanism.

Awe is a fear state. That's not poetry, it's the physiology — the thing you feel at the edge of the Grand Canyon or in a cathedral or looking at a big sea is the alarm firing at something too large to be a threat, and getting stuck in the doorway between panic and pleasure. That's the whole feeling. That's what it is.

I have stood at the lip of Kjerag at dawn with a thousand metres of Norwegian air under my boots and the fjord going silver and I felt: mild interest, and impatience about the wind.

I have stood in front of my daughter, aged four, asleep.

Mild interest.

That's what got taken. Not the fear. The fear was the fee, and I stopped paying it, and everything the fee was buying went out with it — the awe, the tenderness, the specific weight of a Tuesday, the ability to look at anything and find it *enormous*.

Everything went the same size.

And a world where everything is the same size is a world with nothing in it worth staying for, which is why a man in that condition keeps climbing, and climbing, and looking for the thing that's finally big enough.

There isn't one. That's the punchline. I checked for fifteen years, in eleven countries, off every cliff that would have me.

There isn't one, and the only people who ever get to find one are the people still paying the fee.

SIX. JUNE

I met June Alcaraz in a hospital corridor in 2013 because she was the one who came to tell me my scans were back and I was flirting with her before she'd finished the sentence, which she has described, accurately, as the single least impressive thing a man has ever done in her presence.

She was a radiographer. Thirty-one. From Delano, four sisters, hands like a bricklayer, laughed like a door slamming.

She was not impressed by me. I want that established. Every other person I met in those years was impressed by me — that was the actual product, that was what GONDII was buying, a man other people found impressive — and June Alcaraz looked at my films and looked at me and said, "Do you know what your knee looks like?"

I said something charming.

She said, "It looks like a dropped lamp. Sit down."

We were married fourteen months later in her sister's back yard in Delano with a hundred and nine people there and a mariachi trio her uncle knew, and I was thirty-two and I had six million dollars of contracts and a face that scared children and a wife who did not give a single solitary shit about any of it.

Elena was born in 2016.

And now I have to do the part of this book that I have been circling for five chapters, so let's go.

June knew what I was. She'd read the file before she'd read my name. She understood the CIPA better than I did — she'd looked after two of us on rotation — and she knew about the toxo and she thought it was interesting and probably overstated, and she said so, and she was right, and hold onto that.

What she did not understand, because nobody could until they lived with it, is what happens to a *household* when one member of it has no alarms.

Here's how it actually goes. It's not dramatic. It's Tuesday.

You come home at four in the afternoon. Your husband is sitting at the kitchen table with his laptop and there is blood on the floor. Not a lot. A trail, from the door. And you say, "Corni. Corni. Your foot."

And he looks down and says, "Huh."

And you get the kit out, because there's a kit, there's a kit in every room of the house, and you clean it and you find a piece of glass in there about the size of a dime that he has walked in on from the driveway and then walked on for at least an hour, and you get it out and you dress it and you look up and he is watching a video on his phone with one hand while you work on his foot.

Do that four hundred times.

That's the marriage. That's not a metaphor, that's the literal repeated structure of eleven years of it. And every single instance is small and forgivable and *fine*, and the accumulation is not fine, and there is no single argument you can have about any one of them because each one on its own is nothing.

June said it to me once, at the end, and it's the best description of my condition ever produced and it wasn't produced by a doctor:

"You don't have a wife. You have a nervous system with a job and a car."

Because that's what happens. Somebody has to be the alarm. My mother was, for thirty-one years, and when she died the post was vacant, and I did not hire for it — I got married, and the job came with the ring, and June Alcaraz signed up to love a man and got handed a rectal thermometer and a thirteen-thousand-night shift.

And I let her. That's my crime, right there, and it's not glamorous and it's not fun to write. I let her because it was *convenient*, and because she was good at it, and because as long as she was doing it I never had to.

Now the sponsorship years, and this is where it stops being a marriage problem and starts being something else.

Because GONDII did not want a man who came home. GONDII wanted footage. And the deal escalated every year — that was in

the contract, in the escalators I didn't read past page four — so year on year the things got bigger, and by 2019 I was gone a hundred and ninety days a year and every one of those days was a day somebody filmed me doing something my wife had to watch on a phone in a kitchen in Bakersfield with a four-year-old on her hip.

June asked me to stop exactly once. Not nagged. Asked, once, properly, sat down, in 2019, after the Norway jump.

She said: "I'm not asking you to be careful, because I've worked out you can't. I'm asking you to *stop*. All of it. We've got money. I'll work. Elena's three."

And I said the sentence that ended my marriage, and I said it thinking it was romantic, and I said it in a kitchen at eleven at night, and I have replayed it maybe nine thousand times:

"June, I'm not scared of anything. What am I supposed to do with that? Sit here?"

And she said: "Yes."

And I laughed.

I laughed.

She filed in 2021. It was not ugly. That's the thing about June, she doesn't do ugly. She got fifty percent of everything and I gave her seventy because I could and because it was the only currency I had, and she took the seventy and did not thank me for it, correctly, and Elena was five.

There's a thing she said in the last conversation we had as married people that I have never told anybody and I'm putting it here because this whole account is supposed to be the true one.

She said: "The worst part isn't the jumping. It's that you think you're brave."

I said I never said I was brave.

And she said: "That's worse. You know it's free. You've been getting a standing ovation for eleven years for a thing that costs you nothing, and you take it, every time, and you look out at all

those kids screaming your name and you *know* it's free, and you take it anyway."

Then she went to bed and I slept in the truck and that was the marriage.

SEVEN. THE AIR YEARS

I'll do the highlight reel now because you've been patient and because the highlight reel is the only part of my life that made anybody any money.

I stopped fighting in 2017. Not by choice — a neurologist in Sacramento put a stack of imaging on a desk and used the words *cumulative* and *irreversible* and *nobody will license you*, and there was a commission hearing, and that was that.

Which was fine. Because by then GONDII had worked out that a cage is a very small box and the sky is not.

Skydiving. Static line at Perris in the winter of 2017, AFF done in nine days, two hundred jumps by June. Everybody said I progressed faster than anyone they'd trained and I want to be very clear about why, because it isn't talent.

Every skydiving student on earth has the same enemy and it isn't the ground. It's the door. There's a moment at twelve thousand feet where a person has to put their hand on a frame and swing themselves out of a functioning aircraft, and every fibre of four hundred million years of vertebrate evolution says no. Instructors talk about nothing else. The whole first-jump course is a machine for getting a human being past that.

I have never once experienced it.

Not conquered it. Not managed it. It has never occurred, not one time, in eleven hundred jumps. I get to the door and I go out of it in exactly the way you get off a bus.

Wingsuit. 2018. Two hundred jumps is the minimum and I had four hundred, and I was in a suit inside a month, and this is the part where I stopped being a guy who did a sport and started being a product.

Because wingsuit footage is the greatest advertising asset ever invented. It's a man flying six feet off a rock face at a hundred and forty miles an hour. There is no other image on earth that says *no alarm* like that one, and GONDII knew it in about nine seconds.

The numbers you're not supposed to look at: proximity wingsuit flying — the terrain-hugging kind, the kind that's on the can — kills at a rate that no other legal recreational activity approaches. In the mid-2010s the sport was losing something like one in every sixty active proximity fliers per year. Per year. Every one of those was a person with the same training and the same gear and much better judgement than mine.

Norway, 2019. That's the one you've seen even if you don't know you have. Kjerag, the notch, the line that got called *the Rowan line* for about eighteen months until the community started asking whoever was calling it that to please stop.

I flew that line eleven feet off the rock.

Everybody flies with a margin. That's the whole craft — the margin is the sport. A good pilot spends fifteen years learning exactly how much margin he needs and then never, ever spends it. The margin isn't cowardice. The margin is the thing that catches your bad day, your wind shift, your one loose strap.

I flew with no margin, because the margin is *purchased with fear*, and I don't have the currency.

The footage did two hundred and ninety million views.

Big water. 2020, Nazaré, the Portuguese canyon, hundred-foot faces in January. I was a mediocre surfer and everyone knew it, and I got towed into things that no mediocre surfer has any business being under, and I took a beating in February that held me down for two waves.

Two-wave hold-down is where big-wave surfers die. Not the fall. The part after, where you're under, and the water is doing what water does, and you have to make a decision in the dark about whether to swim.

And the thing that makes people die down there isn't the water. It's the panic. Panic burns oxygen at a rate that will kill a man with two full minutes of breath in ninety seconds. The entire training regime for that sport is breath-hold work whose actual purpose is to teach you not to panic while your body screams.

I don't panic.

I hung under two waves at Nazaré doing arithmetic and came up and threw up seawater on a jet ski and did eleven interviews about it and the clip is on the side of a can in forty-one countries.

And the rest of it, because by then it had stopped being sports and started being a job with a filming schedule: a highline in Moab, a cave dive in Yucatán I had no certification for and should be dead from, a motorcycle thing in Bolivia, and one afternoon in 2021 where a production company had me stand in a bull pen outside Ciudad Juárez for a shot they never used.

Here's the thing about all of it. The whole reel. Eleven years.

None of it was brave.

I need you to actually take that in, because there's about a hundred thousand people who have my face tattooed somewhere or my slogan on a wall, and they think they're looking at courage.

Courage is a *transaction*. Courage is a man who is terrified doing the thing anyway, and the price he pays is the terror, and the reason we honour it is that it costs him something.

It costs me nothing. I have never once paid.

I stood at the notch on Kjerag at eight in the morning in April with the whole valley under me and I felt — and I have interrogated this a great deal — mild interest, and a bit of impatience about the wind, and a thought about whether the coffee at the bottom would still be hot.

And I'll tell you what I said, out loud, into the wind, three seconds before I stepped, because there's footage and the mic caught it and it's been played about four hundred million times:

Walk the edge and walk it well.

That's what the bravest man in the world had in his mouth at the last second — an advertising jingle he'd been paid to say so often it had become the thing he actually thought.

That's it. That's the interior of the bravest man in the world.

Every single person who ever cheered for me was applauding an empty room.

EIGHT. MR ROWAN

Somewhere around 2020 people stopped calling me Corni.

I noticed it at a meet-and-greet in Denver. A kid of about twenty came up the line and said "Mr Rowan" and I laughed and said call me Corni, man, and he went red and said "no — no, sir," and the guy behind him said it too, and by the end of that year it was everywhere, and by 2021 nobody under thirty called me anything else.

That's how you know. Not the money, not the billboard. The day the nickname dies and the honorific shows up, you're not an athlete any more, you're an *office*.

I did not build a cult. I want that in early, before the part where I admit I built a cult.

What happened is that a lot of young men found a man who could not be hurt and could not be frightened, and they had spent their entire short lives being hurt and frightened, and they did the arithmetic wrong.

It started as a forum. Then a Discord. Then eleven regional chapters that I did not organise, with names, and hoodies, and a hand sign — two fingers curled, the cat's-eye thing off the can, which I have never once made and which is now tattooed on several thousand people.

They called themselves the Unalarmed. I did not pick that either.

And they had the verse. Of course they had the verse — you write four rhyming lines and put them on a can and you have not written copy, you have written *liturgy*, and liturgy does what liturgy has

always done, which is get said out loud by a lot of people at once in a room.

Chapter meetings opened with it. I've seen the footage. Forty kids in a unit behind a tyre place in Sacramento, standing up, saying:

Feel no fire, hear no bell. Walk the edge and walk it well.

And then the second half, louder, because the second half is the one with the promise in it:

Cat don't call and rat don't run — no alarm, and it's already done.

I have been in that room. I want that on the record. I stood at the back of that unit in Sacramento in 2021 with a can in my hand and forty kids saying a poem at me, and I did not stop it, and I did not leave, and afterwards I signed thirty-one hats.

And here's the rot, and I'm going to lay it out plainly because this is the part I'll actually be judged on.

Every single one of those kids could feel pain.

Every one. Full nervous systems, factory standard, every alarm wired and screaming. They had the amygdala and the C-fibres and the whole terrified apparatus that four hundred million years built, and they were trying to imitate a man who was born without it.

Which means everything that was free for me cost them everything.

When I walked out of a plane door, I paid nothing. When Dylan Reyes, nineteen, of Chandler, Arizona, walked out of a plane door with my slogan on his helmet, he paid the entire toll — the door, the roar, the thing in his chest telling him not to — and he paid it because he'd watched a man do it easily and concluded that easy was the standard and that his own terror was a personal defect.

I made a generation of kids ashamed of their own smoke alarms.

That's the thing I did. Not the jumping. Not the money. I took the one piece of equipment that was keeping them alive, and I made it embarrassing.

Dylan Reyes died in 2021. Base jump off a span in Idaho, four months after he did his first tandem. He'd sent me eleven messages over that year. I answered two.

Kaycee Nunn, twenty-three, Kelowna, 2022. Wingsuit, proximity line, two hundred and six jumps, nowhere near enough.

A kid called Boone, twenty, 2022, whose real name I still don't know and whose mother wrote to me twice.

And Marc Feld, thirty-one, in 2023, who was a father of two and who I had actually met, and who told me at a merch table in Portland that I'd saved his life, and who I said thanks to, and who put himself into a cliff in Utah eleven months later.

Four that I know are traceable to me directly. There are others in the file — I'll get to the file — where the connection is what a lawyer would call attenuated, meaning they had my sticker on their car.

Here's what GONDII did about this.

Nothing. That's not fair. Here's what GONDII actually did, which is worse than nothing.

After Dylan, Hollander flew out and sat with me for a day and was, I want to say, genuinely decent about it. He'd read up on the kid. He knew his mother's name. And at the end of that day he said we should do something meaningful, and we did — there's a foundation, it's real, it's given away about four million dollars in safety training grants and I have no doubt it has saved lives.

And in the same quarter, the marketing shifted.

I saw it happen and I did not understand what I was seeing for two more years. The campaigns stopped being about *me* and started being about *them*. The Unalarmed got their own hashtag. Chapter leaders got shipped product. There was a series about ordinary kids doing their first jump with the slogan across it.

They took the death of a nineteen-year-old and turned it into the moment the brand stopped selling a man and started selling a *membership*.

Because a man breaks. I was thirty-nine and held together with mesh and titanium and everybody in that building knew I had maybe four years left of being able to walk into a room.

But a movement doesn't break. A movement replaces itself.

I sat in a boardroom in Playa Vista in 2022 and watched a woman of about thirty present a slide with the word *SUCCESSION* on it, and there were photographs of nine young men on it, and I knew four of them by name, and one of them was Marc Feld, and I sat there and drank the free coffee and said nothing at all.

That's the day. If you want the exact hour that I became something other than an idiot with a broken face, it's that one. Everything before that I did out of the sheer joyful stupidity of a man with no alarms.

That was the first thing I ever did *knowing*.

INTERLUDE THREE. WHAT THEY WERE ACTUALLY SELLING

I want to do the marketing now, because I sat inside it for eleven years and I have never seen anybody describe it correctly from the inside, and because the last interlude explains why it works.

Everybody thinks an energy drink company sells energy. It doesn't. The caffeine in a can of GONDII is about what's in a large coffee and it costs forty cents to make and nobody on this earth is buying it for the taurine.

Here's what's actually in the can, and it took me a decade and a lawsuit to see it written down in a deck:

The can is a permission slip.

That's it. That's the entire product. A young man buys it, cracks it, and for about ninety minutes he has a document in his hand that says the thing in his chest is optional.

Now — why does that work? Why does that specific offer, out of everything you could sell a nineteen-year-old, work so well that it built a four-hundred-million-dollar company off flavoured water?

Because of what fear feels like from the inside when you're nineteen and you don't know what it is.

Nobody teaches you. That's the gap they drove the truck through. You get thirteen years of school and not one hour of anybody explaining the two roads, the almond, the ledger, the

quarter-second. So when the alarm fires — and it fires constantly at that age, because the ledger is nearly empty and everything is novel — the kid has no name for it and no framework, and he does the thing every human does with an unexplained sensation:

He decides it's about him.

He doesn't think *my amygdala has flagged this as high-salience novelty*. He thinks *I'm a coward*. He looks around a room and everybody else is doing a very good impression of being fine, because they are all doing exactly the same impression, and he concludes he is uniquely defective.

That's the market. That's the whole market. Millions of young men, each privately certain that they alone are frightened, each looking for evidence that it's removable.

And then you show him a man.

Not an argument. A *man*. With a broken face and a documented condition and twenty-two blood panels — well, that's the joke, isn't it — and eleven hundred jumps, who goes out of a door like it's a bus, and you put his skull on a billboard twelve storeys high.

You're not selling him a drink. You're selling him the proposition that the thing he hates about himself is a *setting*.

Here's the structure of it, laid out the way the deck laid it out, and I want you to see how good it is because it really is very good:

One. Name the enemy, and make sure the enemy is inside him. Not the mountain. Not the competition. The alarm. Every piece of copy that company ever ran was a variation on *the only thing stopping you is the thing in your chest*.

Two. Deny it's real. The tagline is two words and it does not say *be brave*. Brave is a transaction and transactions have prices. It says NO ALARM. It says the alarm is not a feature, it's a fault, and faults get fixed.

Three. Provide the proof. Me. A living man in whom the alarm is factually, medically, verifiably absent. Not an actor. Not an athlete who trained hard. A specimen.

Four — and this is the one that killed people — **make membership the mechanism.** Because a specimen is unreachable; nobody can get a genetic condition. But a *movement* is available to anyone with fourteen dollars and a hoodie. And once he's in the movement, the thing that gets him status isn't achievement, it's *disregard*. Points are scored for how little the alarm bothered you.

You have now built a machine in which several hundred thousand young men with fully functional nervous systems compete, publicly, with cameras, on the axis of who can most convincingly pretend the alarm isn't going off.

They cannot win that competition. That's the part. They cannot win it, because I wasn't pretending — or so everybody including me believed — and so the standard is set at a level no nervous system on earth can reach.

So they go further. Every one of them. Further and further out on a branch, chasing a standard set by a man they've been told has no branch, until the branch does what branches do.

And back in Playa Vista, that's not a failure. That's an *input*. That's the fourteen-to-twenty-two number in the aggressive scenario, and the six-week curve, and the word somebody typed and then went to lunch.

Here's the thing I understand now that I did not understand for eleven years.

The parasite was the honest version.

At least *Toxoplasma gondii* has to get into you. It has to survive your stomach, it has to cross into the brain, it has to build the cysts, and even then the best evidence says it moves you by a few percent on a few axes and half the field thinks that's noise.

A can with two words on it doesn't need any of that. It doesn't need to enter the body at all. It just needs to be held by somebody who's nineteen and ashamed, and it does more than the organism ever could, because belief is a shorter route than biology and it costs forty cents.

They named the company after the parasite as a joke.

It was never a joke. It was a *diagram*. They put the mechanism right on the front of the product in orange letters and sold it to four million kids and not one of us — not one, not the athletes, not the parents, not me, for eleven years, with my face on it — ever actually read the label.

NINE. THE ACTUARIAL FILE

Here's twist one and it's the small one. Get it out of the way.

None of it was spontaneous.

Not one thing. Not the Norway line, not the Nazaré session, not the cave in Yucatán, and not — this is the one that actually got me — the thing everybody thinks is the most real thing I ever did, which is the moment in the Denver arena in 2019 when I took the mic off the interviewer and went off-script for ninety seconds about my mother.

That was on a run sheet. I have seen the run sheet. It says *CR emotional beat — mother — 60-90s — DO NOT PROMPT, he goes there on his own if asked about early life*.

They had a model of me. Of course they did — I'd have built one too. Eleven years of footage, and somewhere in Playa Vista a team that knew, to a reliable degree, which questions produced which Corni, and they seeded the questions and they got the Corni, every time, and the version of me that the world thinks is the raw honest unpredictable one is the most carefully farmed thing in the entire operation.

Fine. That's advertising. Everybody who ever went on television has had that done to them and I'd be a child to be shocked.

Here's twist two, and this one has a body count.

In March of last year I was in the Playa Vista building for a contract thing and I ended up alone in a small conference room for about forty minutes with a lever-arch file that had been left on the table, because somebody had gone to deal with a fire alarm. An actual fire alarm. I want you to appreciate that.

The file was a risk assessment prepared for the insurers.

And in it, in a spreadsheet, in eight-point type, there was a table.

It gave, by activity, by age band, by experience level, the expected fatality rate among the *audience* — not the athletes, the audience, the participation cohort, the kids — under three modelled marketing scenarios. Baseline. Current. Aggressive.

It had columns.

I sat in that room and read a document in which the deaths of children were an input variable in a table with a *header row*, and the header row said, and I have it exactly because I photographed the page:

Anticipated adverse participant outcomes (fatal), modelled.

Aggressive scenario, five-year horizon: between fourteen and twenty-two.

And then, underneath, the part that made me get up and go and stand in a bathroom for a while: a sensitivity analysis showing the *brand equity impact* of each fatality. Which is negative for about six weeks and then goes positive.

There was a footnote on that table. One line, in six-point type, referencing an internal brand study.

It said: *Recall of core verse among 16-24 cohort: 71%.*

Seventy-one percent. Three young men in four can recite four lines about a rat and a cat that were written in nine minutes for eleven hundred dollars, and one of those lines tells them the thing is already done before they've stepped.

I want to be precise about that because it is the single most important fact in this book. A dead nineteen-year-old with a GONDII sticker on his helmet is, on a five-year horizon, *good for the brand*. There's a curve. It's got a name in the file. They call it the martyr coefficient. Somebody typed that. Somebody typed that phrase and then went and got lunch.

I had known, in the way you know things, since Dylan Reyes in 2021.

Now I had the spreadsheet.

Which brings me to what I actually did about it, and the answer is: for eleven months, nothing.

I want to be very clear-eyed here, because there's a version of this book where I find that file and become a whistleblower and it's a nice story about a man with no fear finally using it for something.

What actually happened is that I photographed four pages, and then I went to a photoshoot in Utah, and then I did a tour in Asia, and then I renewed for two years at a number that had a comma in a new place.

Because here's what I worked out in the bathroom in Playa Vista, and it's the thing I'd like carved next to the cat:

I could not do the calculation.

Every human being on this planet, when they see a thing like that, gets a physical response. Your gut goes. Your face gets hot. Something in your chest turns over and it makes the decision *for you*, before you've reasoned about anything, and then you spend the next hour constructing arguments for a conclusion your body already reached.

That's not a metaphor. That's actually how moral reasoning works in a normal person, and I've read the papers since. The feeling comes first. The reasoning is the press release.

I don't get the feeling.

So I stood in a bathroom in Playa Vista with photographs of a spreadsheet about dead children on my phone and I felt, and I have gone over this a hundred times and it never changes: *interested*.

Interested. Mildly impressed by the modelling. And then, within about ninety seconds, a completely calm, orderly assessment of my own position — the renewal, the tour, Elena's schooling, what my last five earning years look like — and the assessment came out the way assessments come out when there's nothing in the room pushing on the scale.

Everybody thinks the horror of my condition is that I can't feel a broken leg.

The horror of my condition is that I read that spreadsheet and my body did not object, and so I got to choose, freely, unhurried, with a clear head, using nothing but arithmetic.

And I chose the money.

For eleven months. Right up until June rang me about Elena's school project, which is the next chapter, and which is where this whole thing comes apart.

TEN. THE SCIENCE FAIR

Elena is eight and she is the only thing in this book that is not damaged.

She got June's face and June's hands and she is, according to everyone including me, alarmingly bright in a way that is not from my side of the family. She has full sensation. That was the first thing they tested and it was the longest ninety minutes of my life and I want to be honest that it was the only time I have ever been frightened, and it lasted ninety minutes, and I have spent eight years trying to get it back.

Last October she did a science fair project on me.

Not on me. On the parasite. Her father's famous, her father's drink is named after a bug, and an eight-year-old with a library card put those together and produced a tri-fold board with a rat on it.

And she rang me to check her facts, on a Tuesday, because June makes her check her facts with a primary source, and my daughter said down a phone line:

"Dad, when did you get infected?"

And I said, twenty-three, Lompoc, the cat.

And she said, "No, but what was the number? For the board. Miss Angelo says we have to have a number."

I didn't have the number. Twenty years and I had never once had the number in front of me. I had a memory of a room on Ocean Avenue and a physician's assistant saying *positive* and my entire subsequent life.

So I said I'd get it, and it took four days and two calls, and what came back was my complete medical file from GONDII's occupational health provider, because they'd been running my bloods twice a year since 2014 and it was all in one place.

Twenty-two serology panels. 2014 through last year.

Every single one negative.

Toxoplasma gondii IgG: negative. IgM: negative. Twenty-two times, over eleven years.

I have never had toxoplasmosis.

I sat in a kitchen in Bakersfield with my daughter's science fair on the table and read the same word twenty-two times.

Here's what happened in 2010, and it took me a month and a lawyer to reconstruct it.

The clinic on Ocean Avenue in Lompoc ran a screen. The result was negative. A physician's assistant, twenty-six years old, working her fourth month, read the wrong line off a printed panel — there were two of us tested that afternoon, the guy from the Bell and me, and his was positive — and she told me I had it.

That's it. That's the whole thing. A clerical error in a strip-mall clinic in 2010 by a woman who I have never met and whose name I know and who I am not going to put in this book.

I built my entire adult life on it.

Every jump. Every fight I didn't tap in. The marriage I torched. The four kids in the ground. All of it downstream of a woman reading line two instead of line one on a Thursday afternoon in a room with a broken air conditioner.

And now the part that turns it from a tragedy into a crime.

GONDII knew.

They knew in 2014. The first occupational health panel they ever ran on me came back negative and it went to their medical director, a man called Dr Aaron Feld — no relation to Marc, I checked, I checked about nine times — and there is an email.

I have the email. It came out in discovery on a different matter entirely and it is four lines long and it is going to be read aloud in a courtroom.

It says:

Serology negative — pt has never been infected. Note pt believes otherwise and has built performance identity around it. Recommend no clinical action; disclosure would be materially destabilising to the athlete and offers no health benefit. Flag for Legal re: marketing claims.

Materially destabilising.

Do you understand what that means? It means: he's better if he doesn't know.

And they were right. That's the thing that keeps me up, and I don't sleep much anyway. They were *right*. A man who believes his fear has been surgically removed by a parasite behaves like a man with no fear. Belief does the whole job. You don't need the organism — the organism is expensive and unreliable and you can't put it on a can.

You just need one guy who's sure.

They had a natural experiment running in a human being and the result was clean and reproducible and worth about four hundred million dollars, and the only intervention required to maintain it was silence.

So for eleven years I have been walking out of aircraft doors with a full, functional, factory-standard fear response.

I had the amygdala. I had the whole apparatus. Everything you've got, I had, the entire time.

And I'm going to spend the next chapter telling you what that actually means, because I have had four months to work it out and the answer is the worst thing I have ever had to understand about myself.

ELEVEN. THE THING IN THE DOOR

I need to walk you back through the whole reel now with the correct labels on it, and it's going to be short, because it turns out my entire life fits in about four pages once you put the right words on it.

The door.

Twelve thousand feet, eleven hundred times. I told you I never felt it. I told you I got out of a plane the way you get off a bus.

That was a lie and it was not a deliberate lie, which is worse.

Here's what I actually experienced at the door, every single time, and here's what I did with it.

There was a thing in my chest. Tight, high up, under the sternum. Sometimes my hands did something — a kind of buzz. Sometimes there was a specific hollow feeling low in the gut. And there was always, always, this insistent bright *pressure* to not do the thing, arriving about four seconds before I went, and I never once put a name on it.

Because I couldn't. I had been told, by a doctor, with a test result, that I did not have the equipment. So when the sensation arrived, my brain — which is very good at this, everyone's is — filed it under *something else*.

I called it the buzz. I told an interviewer in 2018 that I got a buzz at the door and she wrote *adrenaline junkie* and everybody nodded.

It was fear.

It was just fear. Ordinary, correct, useful fear, the same one you get, arriving on schedule, doing its job, screaming at a man to please not step out of an aircraft — and I heard it every time and could not identify it, because I had a piece of paper saying I didn't own one.

Fifteen years.

Kjerag. That morning in April, standing at the notch, and I told you I felt mild interest and impatience about the wind and a thought about the coffee.

That's what I *reported*. That's what I could see.

Here's what my body was doing, and I have the footage, I have watched it four hundred times since October with the sound off: I am rocking, slightly, heel to toe. My right hand opens and closes eleven times in ninety seconds. I check the same strap four separate times. And at the moment of the step I make a sound that the microphone caught and that I have never been able to listen to more than twice, which is not a whoop.

It's the noise a person makes when they are terrified.

Nazaré, under two waves. I told you I did arithmetic in the dark and did not panic.

I panicked. Obviously I panicked. Everybody panics, that's the entire physiology, and I burned oxygen exactly as fast as a panicking man burns oxygen, which is why I came up seeing black and threw up on a jet ski, which I reported as *rough one* and everybody applauded.

Every fight. Every single fight, walking to that cage — the thing under the sternum, the hands. I had it in the Elks lodge in Santa Maria at twenty-four and I thought it was excitement.

And here is the part that I need you to actually sit inside for a second, because it is the whole reason I have written a hundred pages instead of just calling a lawyer.

Fear is not the bad part.

Fear is *terrible*, but it's survivable, because it comes with a set of instructions and a name and a place to put it. You feel it, you know what it is, you either go or you don't, and either way you get to have a conversation with yourself about it. Every frightened person on earth has a relationship with their fear. It's a shitty relationship but it's a relationship.

Unnamed fear has none of that.

I had fifteen years of the full physiological load — the cortisol, the sleep, the jaw I ground down again as an adult, the resting heart rate that a cardiologist called *interesting*, the thing where I could not sit in a room after 2019 — and I could not put a single one of

those in the right box, because the box had been officially declared empty.

You know what a man does with fear he can't name?

He escalates. Obviously he escalates. Because the sensation keeps arriving, and it feels like *pressure*, and pressure means the last thing wasn't big enough, and so you go bigger, and it arrives again, and you go bigger again, and there is no top to that staircase.

June knew. I want to say this here. She never had the file and she never had the email and she said to me, in a kitchen, in 2019: *"You're not fearless, Corni. You're the most frightened man I've ever met and you've got nowhere to put it."*

And I laughed at her.

I laughed at her, and then I went to Norway, and then I came back and she asked me to stop and I said what am I supposed to do, sit here, and she said yes, and that was the marriage.

She was a radiographer from Delano with four sisters and no medical file and she got it in one and I laughed in her face.

So that's the accounting.

Cornileous Rowan, forty-three. Eleven surgeries, four dead kids, one wife, one daughter, two hundred and ninety million views, three regional belts, a plate in his face and a slogan on forty-one countries' worth of aluminium.

And every single hour of it was performed by a man who was afraid the entire time and who had been issued a certificate saying he wasn't, and who therefore never got to be brave once — not once, not for one second — because bravery requires you to *know* what you're carrying, and I was told I was carrying nothing.

And go back and read the verse now. Read it with the right labels on.

Feel no fire — I couldn't. That one's true. That one's the genetic condition and it's the only honest line in it.

Hear no bell — I heard it. Eleven hundred times, in a door, at twelve thousand feet. I heard it every single time and I called it the buzz.

Cat don't call and rat don't run — there was no cat and no rat and no parasite and there never was. That line is about an organism that was never in me, sold to four million kids who don't have it either, by a company that knew.

No alarm, and it's already done.

That's the one. That's the line that killed Dylan Reyes, and it isn't the *no alarm* part — everybody focuses on the wrong half. It's *already done*.

Because what that line tells a nineteen-year-old standing in a door with his heart going at a hundred and ninety is that the decision has been made somewhere upstream of him, by the can, by the condition, by the brand, by the men on the billboard — and that all he has to do is catch up with a thing that has already happened.

It hadn't already happened. It never does. There is a moment in that door where a human being decides, every single time, with the alarm screaming, and that moment is the only thing any of us has ever actually owned.

They sold four million kids a poem that told them the moment wasn't theirs.

They didn't steal my fear.

They stole the only thing my fear could ever have bought me.

INTERLUDE FOUR. THE ROOM DOESN'T NEED THE CONDITION

Priscilla Wen asked me a question in February that I couldn't answer for three weeks, and when I finally answered it I understood what my whole life had been an experiment in, so I'm putting it here, at the end, where it belongs.

She said: "Mr Rowan. If they'd told you the truth in 2014 — would anything be different?"

And I said of course, obviously, everything, and she said, “Think about it properly and tell me next time,” and made a note, and moved on, because she is sixty-one and does not have time for a man’s first answer to anything.

So here’s the real one.

No.

For about two years, no. If Feld had picked up a phone in 2014 and said *Corni, sit down, you don’t have it, you never had it* — I’d have gone to Norway anyway. I’d have flown eleven feet off that rock the following April.

Because by 2014 the parasite had stopped being the load-bearing element. It had done its job, which was to get the room built, and once a room is built you can take the scaffolding down.

I want to walk this out because it’s the only thing I’ve worked out in forty-three years that I think is worth anybody’s time.

Here’s what I thought I was, for fifteen years: a man with a rare genetic condition and a brain parasite, both of them documented, who was therefore *constitutionally* incapable of fear. A biological freak. An exception to the species.

Here’s what I actually was: a man with a rare genetic condition, an ordinary brain, an entirely functional fear response — and a *sentence*.

The sentence was: *you don’t have the alarm*.

And that sentence did every single thing the parasite was supposed to do, and it did it better, and it did it for eleven cents’ worth of paper in a strip-mall clinic in Lompoc in 2010.

Think about what actually has to happen for a rat to walk toward a cat. The organism has to survive the stomach. It has to cross into the brain. It has to build the cysts, in the right structures, in sufficient numbers, and even then — read the honest papers — it shifts the animal by a few percent on a few axes, and half the field thinks the human data is noise.

That’s the biological route. It’s expensive, it’s slow, it’s unreliable, and it can only be attempted on one animal at a time.

Now here's the other route.

Tell a man he has no alarm.

That's it. That's the whole intervention. No organism, no cysts, no crossing the blood-brain barrier. One sentence, delivered by someone in a white coat, and the man will spend fifteen years experiencing every single alarm his body raises and *filing it under something else*, because he has been issued documentation stating that the category does not exist in him.

I felt fear eleven hundred times in an aircraft door and called it the buzz.

I felt it at Nazaré under two waves and called it arithmetic.

I felt it standing over my sleeping daughter, and I called it mild interest, and I told my wife I was broken, and she left.

The alarm was going off the entire time. Full volume, correct, useful, four hundred million years old and functioning perfectly. And I could not hear it, not because anything had been done to my nervous system, but because somebody had handed me a piece of paper that said the alarm was not installed.

The room doesn't need the condition.

That's the whole finding. That's what I want on the last page instead of a moral.

I spent my life believing I lived in a very specific room that only a few dozen people on this earth are born into — the room where nothing hurts and nothing frightens you and the door is always open. I thought the walls of it were genetic. I thought you had to be *made* like this.

You don't. That's the terrible part and it's the part GONDII understood in a conference room in Playa Vista in 2009 before I'd ever heard of them.

The room is available to anybody. It's available to your nephew. It costs four dollars and it comes in a black can with two words on it, and the only furniture it requires is a young man's conviction that the thing screaming in his chest is a defect rather than a smoke alarm.

I had a genetic condition and a false test result and four hundred million dollars of marketing spend, and I ended up in that room.

Dylan Reyes had a hoodie.

Same room. Same door. He got there faster than I did and he was nineteen.

So when Priscilla Wen asks would anything be different, the honest answer is: not for me. Not by 2014. The scaffolding was down and the room was up and I was living in it and I'd have gone off that cliff with or without the paperwork.

The difference is what I could have told the others.

Because if I'd known at twenty-eight that I felt every single thing they felt — that the man on the billboard was carrying exactly the same load as the kid in the parking lot with the can — then there is one sentence I could have said, at a merch table in Portland, to a father of two called Marc Feld, and it would have taken four seconds:

It's not gone. Mine's not gone either. It never goes for anybody. That thing in your chest isn't the reason you can't. It's the reason you get to say you did.

I had eleven years and a microphone and two hundred and ninety million views and I never said it once, because I didn't know, because a company decided in 2014 that a man is worth more with the alarm disconnected than with the truth.

They didn't need a parasite.

They just needed me not to be told.

TWELVE. DISCLOSURE

Four months. That's what I've had since the science fair, and here's the ledger of it, because I have got very interested lately in leaving an accurate ledger.

I got a lawyer. Her name is Priscilla Wen and she is sixty-one and she does not like me, and on the first day she said, "Mr Rowan, before we start — did you read the file?" and I said which file, and

she said, “That’s what I thought,” and that was the beginning of a productive relationship.

There are two actions. The first is mine, against GONDII, on the medical thing, and Priscilla says it’s strong and slow and worth a number I don’t care about.

The second one is the one that matters and I’m not a party to it. It’s four families. Reyes, Nunn, Feld, and the boy called Boone whose mother has been writing to me since 2022 and who I finally called in November and who let me talk for eleven minutes and then said, “Are you finished?” and then said the thing I’m not going to repeat here.

I gave them the spreadsheet. The martyr coefficient. The header row.

And I gave them me, which is the actual asset, because a man who was the entire proof of concept walking into a deposition and describing the run sheets and the succession slide and the modelling is not something a company survives easily.

I have also, and this is the part Priscilla hates, spent four months taking the thing apart from the other end.

I posted a video in November. Eleven minutes, no cuts, sitting in a truck in a lot in Bakersfield. I told them the whole thing — the clinic on Ocean Avenue, the twenty-two negative panels, the email, *materially destabilising*. I told them there is no parasite, that there never was, that the only thing that was ever in me was a woman in Delano who told me the truth in 2019 and got laughed at.

And I told them the actual mechanism. That every jump I ever did was done afraid. That the buzz at the door is the same buzz they get. That there is no version of a human being that gets to skip it.

Fourteen million views.

Here’s what it did.

The chapters split. About half of them took it the way I wanted — there’s a whole thread of kids now who’ve started posting their own door footage with the shakes in it, uncut, and calling it *the buzz*, and I’ll take that, that’s more than I deserve.

And about half took the other read, which I did not see coming and which Priscilla did and warned me about, and which is this:

He did it all scared. Which means it's even better. Which means it's possible for us.

I made it *worse*. Half of them are now going out of doors believing that fear is not an obstacle but a *component*, because Mr Rowan had it the whole time and jumped anyway.

You can't hand these things back. That's what I've learned in four months. You can't unbuild the thing you built, because it isn't yours any more, it's theirs, and they'll take whatever you give them and turn it into fuel, because they are twenty and they are frightened and they need it to be possible.

GONDII terminated the contract in December, citing conduct. There's a clause. Of course there's a clause. Somebody in Playa Vista is currently modelling my exit.

And they've already got the next one. His name's on the succession slide and he's twenty-four and he's from Lodi and he can feel everything and he's very good and he'll be dead inside four years and there is not one thing I can do about it that I have not already done.

So.

There's a thing I've got left to do and I've been sitting on it for the whole of this account and I'm going to put it down now.

My knee is finished. Prem was right in 2019 and he's more right now. There's a wear pattern and an infection risk I won't bore you with, and there is a conversation about the leg that has been scheduled and rescheduled twice.

My eye's going. The good one now. Something to do with the years of the other one doing all the work.

The cardiologist has used the word *remodelled* about my heart, which is what fifteen years of unnamed fear does to the muscle, and there is a number attached to that which is not a good number.

I'm forty-three and I have maybe two decent years.

And there's one thing on the schedule. It's booked. It's been booked since before any of this — the last obligation of a contract that's now void, which means nobody's filming it and nobody owns it and nobody's putting it on a can.

Kjerag. The notch. The line they named after me.

Priscilla says don't. June says don't. Elena doesn't know.

And I'm going to go and do it, and I want to be extremely precise about why, because there is a version of this that is a suicide and this is not that one and I need the record straight.

I'm going to go and stand at that notch, and I'm going to feel the thing under my sternum, and this time I'm going to know exactly what it is.

That's it. That's the whole reason. Forty-three years and I have never once got to be afraid on purpose.

I'd like to have it once, with the right name on it, before the leg goes.

And then I'm going to fly the line with a *margin*, for the first time in my life, forty feet off that rock like a sensible man, and land in the field, and go home, and have the surgery, and be a father in a chair.

That's the plan. That's the actual plan. Priscilla has it in writing because she made me put it in writing.

I'm leaving on the eleventh.

THIRTEEN. EXHIBIT 41

The preceding twelve chapters are entered into the record as Exhibit 41, being the manuscript recovered from the personal effects of the decedent, unpublished, undated as to completion, in the decedent's own hand and voice.

The following is a transcript of proceedings. Reyes and others v. GONDII Beverage Group and others. Day nine, morning session.

— — —

MS WEN: The witness has read the exhibit into the record over two days. Before I finish, I want to establish three matters of fact for the jury, because the defence will suggest that document is a dead man's grievance.

Fact one. Cornileous Rowan died on the fourteenth of April at approximately 08:20 local time at Kjerag, Norway. He was not filmed. There was no sponsor present, no production, no permit taken in the company's name. The Norwegian police report is Exhibit 12.

Fact two. He flew the line at an estimated thirty-eight to forty-four feet of terrain clearance.

I want the jury to hold that number. Forty feet. In 2019, on the same line, on the footage the defendants ran in forty-one countries, he flew it at eleven.

He did exactly what he wrote in that manuscript he would do. He flew it like a sensible man. He did it right.

Fact three. He did not die of the flight. The flight was clean. He deployed at the correct altitude, he landed in the field, and he stood up, and there is a walker's photograph timestamped 08:31 of a man standing in a field with his rig in his hands.

Cornileous Rowan died forty minutes later in the passenger seat of a rental car of a myocardial infarction, at forty-three years of age, with a heart that three cardiologists have now described in identical terms.

Fifteen years of a sustained, unrelieved, physiologically maximal fear response in a man who had been told he had none, and who therefore never once did anything about it — never rested, never treated it, never named it, never got a single hour of the ordinary recovery that a frightened man gets because he *knows he's frightened*.

The defendants did not kill him with a wingsuit.

They killed him with a piece of paper.

— — —

MS WEN: The witness will state her name for the record.

THE WITNESS: Elena Alcaraz Rowan.

MS WEN: And you are the daughter of the decedent.

THE WITNESS: Yes.

MS WEN: You're eighteen.

THE WITNESS: Yes.

MS WEN: You've read the manuscript in its entirety.

THE WITNESS: Nine times.

MS WEN: You have no congenital insensitivity to pain.

THE WITNESS: No. I feel everything. They tested me when I was a baby. It took ninety minutes and my dad says it's the only time he was ever scared, but that's in the book, so.

MS WEN: And you have never been infected with *Toxoplasma gondii*.

THE WITNESS: No.

MS WEN: Miss Rowan, in the last two years there have been three further deaths among participants in what the defendants' own documents call the successor cohort. Are you familiar with those?

THE WITNESS: I know all three of them. Knew.

MS WEN: The defence has entered into evidence a photograph taken eleven days ago at Perris Valley, California. I'm going to show it to you.

THE WITNESS: Okay.

MS WEN: Is that you?

THE WITNESS: That's me.

MS WEN: Can you describe what you're doing in that photograph.

THE WITNESS: I'm in the door of a Twin Otter at twelve thousand five hundred feet with my hand on the frame.

MS WEN: That is your two hundred and eleventh jump.

THE WITNESS: Two hundred and fourteen now.

MS WEN: You are in a wingsuit.

THE WITNESS: Yes.

MS WEN: Miss Rowan — after everything in that manuscript. After what it did to your father, and to your mother, and to Dylan Reyes and Kaycee Nunn and Marc Feld and a boy from Idaho whose family is sitting behind you —

Why?

THE WITNESS: Because he never got to.

MS WEN: I'm sorry?

THE WITNESS: My dad never got to be brave. Not once. That's the whole book. That's the only thing he was actually sad about at the end — not the leg, not the eye. He did all of it and none of it counted, because he didn't know what he was carrying.

I know exactly what I'm carrying.

I've been in that door twelve times where I couldn't do it and I climbed back down and I rode the plane to the ground and I cried in the car, and every one of those is worth more than everything my father ever did, and he'd say so.

MS WEN: Miss Rowan —

THE WITNESS: You asked me why. I'm answering.

He was a rat that walked toward a cat because somebody told him the fear had been taken out. It hadn't. It was never taken out of anybody, that's the whole point of the book, there's no such thing — they *sold* a thing that doesn't exist to about four million kids and my dad was the sample in the window.

And I want to say the other part, because it's the thing he worked out at the end and nobody's said it in this room in nine days.

He thought he was in a room that only a few dozen people on earth get born into. The no-pain room. He thought the walls were genetic — that you had to be *made* like that to get in.

He was wrong. That's what he found out in February and it's on page whatever-it-is, and it's the only thing he ever wrote that I think actually matters.

The room doesn't need the condition.

You don't need a genetic disorder and you don't need a parasite. You need one sentence, delivered by somebody a kid believes, saying the alarm isn't real. That's it. That's the whole build. My dad got the sentence off a nurse who read the wrong line and then off a company that knew and didn't correct it, and Dylan Reyes got it off a hoodie, and they ended up in the same room, and my dad had eleven surgeries getting there and Dylan was nineteen and it took him four months.

Same room. That's what the defendants sell. Not a drink. Not a lifestyle. Access to a room, four dollars a can, and there's no lesion required and no diagnosis required and no test, and that's exactly why it scales.

So I'm going to go out of that door about nine hundred more times, and every single time I'm going to be so frightened I can't feel my hands.

And then I'm going to do it.

And every one of those is going to be *mine*. It's going to cost me. He never got to pay for anything in his whole life, and I get to pay for all of it, and that's not the tragedy — that's the inheritance.

That's the only thing he actually left me.

MS WEN: Your Honour, I have nothing further.

— — —

THE COURT: We'll take the morning recess. Miss Rowan, you may step down.

THE WITNESS: Can I say one more thing?

THE COURT: Briefly.

THE WITNESS: In the book he says the cat is the second most important thing in it and he never says what the first one is. Everybody thinks it's my mom. It's not. I asked him.

He said it's the alarm.

He said: the alarm is the only friend you've got in the building.

He wrote that on page one and then spent forty-three years proving it and nobody read it. Nobody ever reads page one.

And one more. There's four lines on the side of that can and every kid in this country knows them and I'd like the last one changed, because my father spent his life inside a poem somebody wrote in nine minutes.

It goes: no alarm, and it's already done.

It isn't done. That's the lie. Nothing is ever already done. There's a second in that door where you decide, every time, with the whole thing screaming at you, and that second is the only thing anybody actually owns.

So say it the other way. Say it like this:

Feel the fire. Hear the bell. Walk the edge and know it well. Cat don't call and rat don't run — hear the alarm, and go anyway.

That last line doesn't rhyme. I know it doesn't rhyme. That's on purpose.

The rhyme is what made it easy.

CODA. EXHIBIT 44

Entered by stipulation. Photograph, Kjerag, Norway, 14 April, timestamped 08:31, taken by a hiker, Ms Ingrid Sæther, who did not know the decedent and did not learn his name until eleven days later.

Description for the record:

A man in a field.

He is standing. The suit is unzipped to the waist and hanging off him and he has the canopy bundled in his arms in a way that any rigger will tell you is completely wrong. There's a ruin of a face on him — the eye, the nose that goes right, the dent above the brow.

He is looking off to the left of frame at nothing in particular.

And Ms Sæther, in her statement, which is Exhibit 45, says this, and I'll read it because the defence has read everything else:

I saw him land and I thought he was hurt, because he sat down straight away in the grass for a long time. Maybe two minutes. He had his hands over his face. So I went closer to ask, and when I got near he took his hands away and he was laughing.

I asked was he okay and he said yes.

I asked if that was the first time and he said no.

And then he said something I did not understand and I have thought about it many times. He said:

"First time it counted."

Then he stood up and picked up his parachute and he walked to the car park and that is the last I saw of him.

— — —

MS WEN: The plaintiffs rest.

Cornileous Rowan was born unable to feel pain. Congenital insensitivity with anhidrosis — no damage signal, no sweat, no way of being told the house is on fire. His mother spent thirteen thousand nights checking his mouth and his feet like a farrier going round a horse, and when she died the post of Corni Rowan's nervous system fell vacant and he did not fill it.

At twenty-three a clinic in Lompoc told him he was carrying *Toxoplasma gondii* — the parasite that rewires a rat's amygdala until it walks toward the animal that eats it. Two alarms out. One at birth, one by infection. He walked into the sun on Ocean Avenue the happiest man in California.

Then came forty-one professional fights he could not be made to quit, eleven hundred jumps, a wingsuit line flown eleven feet off a Norwegian cliff, and a beverage company named after the parasite whose entire product was a premise: that fear is optional, and here is a man who proves it. They put his skull films on a billboard twelve storeys high. Kids who could feel every single thing started imitating a man who couldn't, and started dying, and somebody in Playa Vista modelled that in a spreadsheet with a header row. And in a kitchen in Bakersfield, checking a fact for his daughter's science fair, he finds twenty-two blood panels going back eleven years, every one of them negative — and an email from a company doctor explaining, in four lines, why nobody told him.

