


I Lost My Mind

# Then Found My Way Back



What chronic sleep deprivation really looks  
like - and why I'm sharing this before it's  
too late for you.

A faint, glowing brain silhouette is centered in the background, surrounded by a soft, golden glow and scattered light particles. The brain is rendered in a light, almost ethereal tone, with its gyri and sulci visible. The overall background is a light, hazy blue with a subtle gradient and a fine, sparkling texture of small, golden particles.

For every ambitious person who has ever whispered to themselves,  
“Just one more hour... I’ll sleep when I’m done.”

I wrote this for you.  
I was you.

# Before we begin A LETTER TO YOU



You picked up this. That already tells me something about you.

You are someone who pushes hard. You have goals that matter to you - deeply. You are probably juggling more than most people around you can even imagine: studying, working, building something, taking care of others. You wear your busyness like a badge of honour.

And somewhere along the way, you started sleeping less. At first it was manageable. Then it became normal. Then it became the only way to survive the week.

Maybe you've already noticed some cracks. You forget words mid-sentence. You read the same paragraph three times and nothing sticks. You wake up feeling just as tired as when you went to bed. You run on caffeine and willpower and a quiet, nagging dread that something is wrong – but you push it down because stopping is not an option right now.



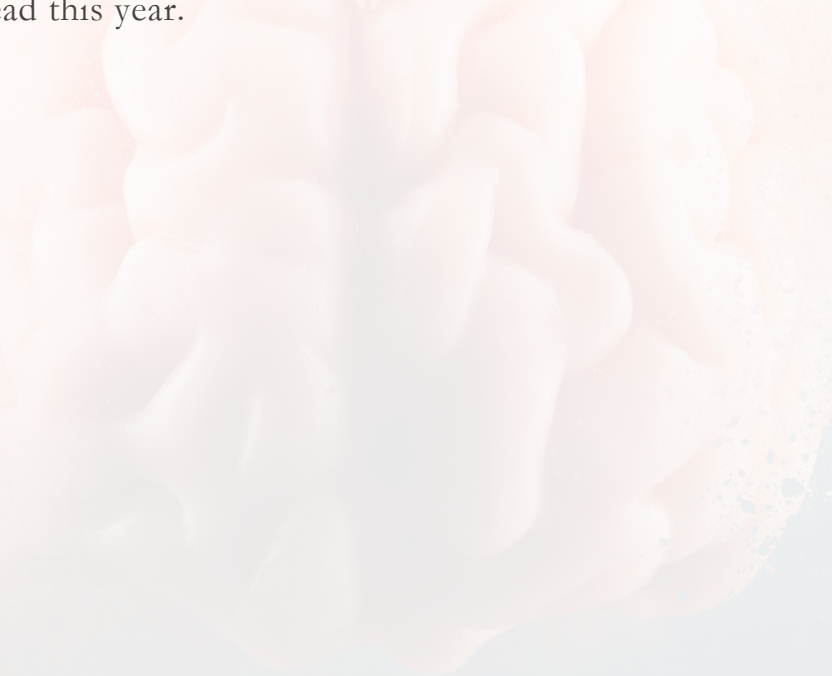
*I thought I was just tired. I didn't know I was losing myself.*

That was me. I was a 30-year-old medical student and part-time hospital worker (a paramedic at ICU) who genuinely believed that sleep was a luxury I couldn't afford. I thought I was strong enough to power through. I thought my brain – which had always been my greatest asset – could handle it. I thought I was different.

I was wrong. And the way I was wrong changed my life forever.

I am writing this because I want to give you what I wish someone had given me: the unvarnished truth. Not a polished success story about how I overcame adversity. The real story – with all its discomfort and shame and permanent consequences – because that is the only story that might actually stop you from going where I went.

This is not a book that will judge you for how you got here. But it will tell you the honest truth, even when it is uncomfortable. Because that truth might be the most important thing you read this year.



# Chapter one

## THE PERSON I USED TO BE



### MY IDENTITY

#### What Made Me, Me

Let me tell you who I was before any of this happened, because it matters. It matters because the thing that sleep deprivation took from me first – and most – was the thing I had built my entire identity around.

I was the person with the exceptional memory. Not in a showy way – it was simply how my mind worked. I retained things effortlessly. Conversations from years ago. Details from a lecture I had attended once. The exact wording of something I had read six months before. People asked me things they couldn't remember themselves, and I almost always knew the answer.

Beyond memory, I thought in ways that felt natural to me but that others sometimes found striking. I could hold complex ideas in my head simultaneously. I could see connections between things that appeared unrelated. I could reason through difficult problems quickly and with confidence. My logical mind was, quite simply, the thing I trusted most in the world.

I had grown up being told I was intelligent. I believed it – not arrogantly, but genuinely. It was my foundation. When everything else felt uncertain, I always had that.

I tell you this not to boast about what I had, but to help you understand what it meant to lose it. Imagine the thing you are most proud of about yourself. The quality you rely on most. The one that defines how you see yourself and how you navigate the world. Now imagine waking up one day and realising it is gone.



“

*My brain was my identity. And I was slowly destroying it  
– one sleepless night at a time.*

# THE DECISION

## The Dream That Started Everything

At thirty years old, I made a decision that I had been circling for years. I enrolled in medical school.

It was not an impulsive choice. I had thought about medicine for a long time – the pull of wanting to understand the human body, to be genuinely useful to people in moments that mattered. But life had taken me in other directions first, and then I had simply run out of reasons to keep postponing it. I was thirty. The moment to act was now.

What I did not fully account for was everything else that would not stop when I started. I was not a 22-year-old with nothing but lectures and social life to manage. I had a life. A job. Real responsibilities. Financial pressure. And so I made what seemed like the only practical decision: I would keep working part-time at the hospital and study at the same time.

I sacrificed time with friends. I cancelled plans so many times that people eventually stopped making them with me. I gave up weekends. I gave up evenings. I gave up the hobbies that had filled my time and given me joy. I told myself it was temporary. I told myself the sacrifice was worth it for the goal at the end.

And then I started sacrificing sleep.

I knew sleep was important. I had read about it. I understood it intellectually. I just believed, somehow, that I was the exception. That my determination and my naturally strong mind would carry me through. I was wrong in a way I will spend the rest of my life reckoning with.

For months, I averaged between two and five hours of sleep per night. Sometimes less. I existed in a state of perpetual exhaustion that I had normalised so completely I could no longer remember what it felt like to be well-rested. Caffeine was not a choice – it was the only thing standing between me and collapse. Or so I thought.



## Chapter two

# THE SLOW UNRAVELLING



## THE WARNING SIGNS I MISSED

### How It Started

The first thing I noticed was the forgetting. Small things. A word I was reaching for in conversation that simply wasn't there. A name I had known perfectly well for months. I dismissed it almost immediately. Everyone forgets things when they are busy. I was very busy. This was normal. I was fine.

Then came the headaches. Not occasional ones – constant, low-grade pressure behind my eyes that was simply always there. I attributed them to screen time, to stress, to the demands of studying dense medical material. I bought better painkillers. I kept going.

Then the exhaustion crossed a threshold I had not previously encountered. I had been tired before – genuinely tired, the way you are after something physically demanding. This was different. This was a heaviness that did not lift. I had no energy reserves at all. Tasks that should have taken thirty minutes took two hours, not because I was distracted, but because my brain was simply moving through fog.

I stopped walking to university. I started taking taxis everywhere. I – a person who had always been physically active, who had never been the kind of person who avoided a twenty-minute walk – could not get on a bus. The stimulation of other people, the unpredictability of public transport, the sensory noise of the city all felt like too much. A taxi was a quiet enclosed box, and that was what I needed.

## **1** THE FORGETTING BEGINS

Words disappear mid-sentence. Names of people I have known for months simply vanish. I tell myself I am distracted. Everyone forgets things when they are tired.

## **2** THE HEADACHES

A constant, low-grade pressure that never fully leaves. Then full migraines that put me in a dark room for hours. I buy stronger painkillers and keep studying.

## **3** THE ENERGY COLLAPSE

I stop being able to walk to university. I take taxis everywhere. I – always active – cannot get on a bus. The world feels too loud, too much, too fast.

## **4** THE CAFFEINE DEPENDENCY

Coffee stops working. I drink more. Energy drinks. More coffee. My sleep, already broken, becomes even shallower. I do not connect these things.

## **5** THE EMOTIONAL NUMBNESS

Nothing makes me feel anything, and I don't care about anyone. I am managing this. I tell myself I am managing this.

# THE TRAP

## The Caffeine Vicious Cycle

Here is the thing about caffeine that I did not understand at the time, and that I now want you to understand completely: it does not give you energy. It blocks the signal that tells you that you are tired. The actual exhaustion is still accumulating – underneath, in your body, in your brain – and caffeine is simply preventing you from perceiving it accurately.

Caffeine has a half-life of five to seven hours. This means that the coffee I was drinking in the afternoon – and then the evening, because the afternoon coffee had stopped being enough – was still fifty percent active in my bloodstream at midnight. It was blocking the adenosine receptors that my brain needed to build the sleep drive that would let me fall asleep and stay asleep.

So the caffeine was making my sleep worse. Worse sleep made me more exhausted. More exhaustion meant I needed more caffeine. The cycle tightened, week by week, until I was in a trap I could not see because I was too depleted to see anything clearly.

### THE SCIENCE

People who sleep 6 hours per night for two weeks perform as badly on cognitive tests as someone who has been awake for 24 hours straight – but they report feeling only slightly sleepy. You stop noticing how impaired you are. This is the most dangerous aspect of chronic sleep deprivation: the warning system itself breaks down.

I was in this state for months. And I thought I was managing.

# Chapter three

## THE DAY EVERYTHING BROKE



### THE COLLAPSE

#### What Happened at Work

I am going to tell you what happened on the day I collapsed, because I think you need to hear it. Not the sanitised version. The real one.

I was at work. I remember arriving. I remember the beginning of the shift. And then there is nothing – a gap of several hours that my memory simply does not contain – and then I am in a hospital bed, being looked at by people I know professionally, with the particular combination of concern and professional composure that medical staff wear when something serious has happened.

I was conscious throughout, apparently. I was interacting with people. I was responding to questions. My body was functioning. But the part of me that forms memories, that was present in any meaningful sense, was not there. I was running on some kind of automatic, and the self that I think of as me had simply checked out. I had wet myself and the incontinence continued thereafter.



I signed a discharge form against medical advice while in this state. I did not understand what I was doing. This is not a dramatic embellishment. This is what chronic sleep deprivation can do to the most fundamental functions of your mind.

I left the hospital. I found somewhere to sleep. That night, as I tried to fall asleep, I experienced hypnagogic hallucinations – vivid, terrifying images and sensations at the threshold of sleep that jolted me awake every time I came close to losing consciousness. My brain, overwrought and under-repaired, could not even perform the basic function of transitioning safely into sleep.

I checked into a hotel. A change of environment, I thought. Something different. And somehow, briefly, that small change was enough to allow my body to find some rest. It was the first real sleep I had had in longer than I could accurately remember.



*I thought a change of scenery would fix me. I did not understand that what was broken could not be fixed in a single night.*

# THE AFTERMATH

## The morning after

The next morning, I walked back to my apartment. Or tried to. I stepped outside and stood on the pavement and did not know which way to turn. Not because I had forgotten the route – I had walked it hundreds of times – but because my brain could not perform the simple spatial orientation required to choose a direction. I stood there for what felt like a very long time.

When I arrived home, I tried to do laundry. I stood in front of my drying rack with clothes in my hands and could not understand what to do next. I am not using this as a metaphor. I stood there and tried, logically, to work through the steps of the task. I knew there was a sequence. I could not access it. I stood there for several minutes before I put the clothes down and sat on the floor.

In the days that followed, I took time off work. I thought I needed rest. I thought it would pass. It did not pass quickly. What unfolded over the following weeks and months was something I was completely unprepared for.

FEW

COLLEAGUES' NAMES  
I COULD RECALL

~3

MONTHS BEFORE  
I COULD DRIVE AGAIN

6+

MONTHS OF GRADUAL  
RECOVERY

# THE FULL PICTURE

## What the Damage Looked Like

I am going to be specific, because vague descriptions of cognitive impairment do not convey what this actually felt like to live through.

I could not remember the names of most of my colleagues. People I had worked alongside for months, whose faces I saw every day, whose voices I recognised – I could not retrieve their names. I would look at someone and feel the name somewhere in my mind, inaccessible, like a word on the very tip of your tongue but worse, because it never came.

I was not able to drive. My brain could not process the constant stream of simultaneous information that driving requires – the other cars, the road markings, the pedestrians, the mirrors, the decisions. It was too much input happening too fast. I knew I would be a danger to myself and to others. I did not drive for months. I did not recognise my cousin. We had grown up together. I had known his face my entire life. We met and I looked at him and knew, intellectually, that he was someone I should know, but I could not place him. The recognition that should have been instant and automatic simply did not fire.

I was not certain of my grandmother's name.

I need you to sit with that sentence for a moment. My grandmother. The woman I had known my entire life. The woman whose name I had said thousands of times. I had to think about it. I had to reach for it. I was not certain I had the right name.



This is not a story about an extreme medical case that could not happen to you. This is a story about what happens when a young, healthy, intelligent person consistently sleeps two to five hours per night for months. The brain can only absorb so much damage before it stops functioning. There is no exceptional willpower that overrides this. There is no level of ambition or intelligence that makes you immune.

## Chapter four

# THE LONG ROAD BACK

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### RECOVERY

#### **What Getting Better Actually Looked Like**

I want to tell you about recovery honestly, because I think the way recovery stories are usually told does a disservice to anyone who is going through one. They tend to follow a narrative arc: crisis, insight, turning point, restored self. That is not what happened to me.

What happened was: weeks of being barely functional, followed by months of being partially functional, followed by a very slow process of rebuilding that required me to completely rethink my relationship with work, with ambition, with sleep, and with my own mind.

In the first weeks, I did almost nothing. I slept. Not well at first – my sleep was fragmented and strange, and I would sometimes wake at three in the morning with a heart rate that felt like panic even though there was nothing to be afraid of. But I slept. More than I had in months. And very slowly, things began to come back.

The names returned first. Not all at once – in fragments. A colleague’s name would surface during a quiet moment, and I would feel a small, strange relief, like finding a possession I had assumed was permanently lost. My grandmother’s name became certain again. I could look at my cousin and recognise him immediately.

The coordination improved. The laundry ceased to be an unsolvable problem. I could navigate my own street. After about three months, I was able to drive short distances, though it tired me quickly in a way it never had before.



*Recovery is not being restored to who you were. It is building someone new from what remains. That person can be strong. But the building takes time, and it takes honesty about what was lost.*

# THE TRUTH

## What Stayed Changed

I want to be honest with you about something, because I think you deserve honesty more than you deserve a comfortable narrative.

My memory recovered substantially. I can function at a standard level. By most measures, I am fine.

But I am not who I was before. The effortless, automatic precision of my memory – the quality that had defined me for my entire adult life – did not fully return. I now use systems and tools and habits to compensate for what used to come naturally. I am more careful. More deliberate. The confidence I had in my own recall is different now – tempered by the knowledge of what can happen, and by the awareness that some of what I lost did not come back.

I tell you this not to frighten you, but because I think you need to know it is possible to cause damage that persists. The brain is remarkable in its capacity for recovery. It is not infinite in its capacity for repair. The damage I did to myself in those months of chronic sleep deprivation left marks that I carry permanently.

I was young. I thought I was different. I thought I was strong enough to be the exception. I want you to hear this clearly: I was not the exception. There is no exception. The only way to protect your brain is to protect your sleep.

## Chapter five

# THE LIES WE TELL OURSELVES



## **HUSTLE CULTURE**

### **The Myths That Put Me Here**

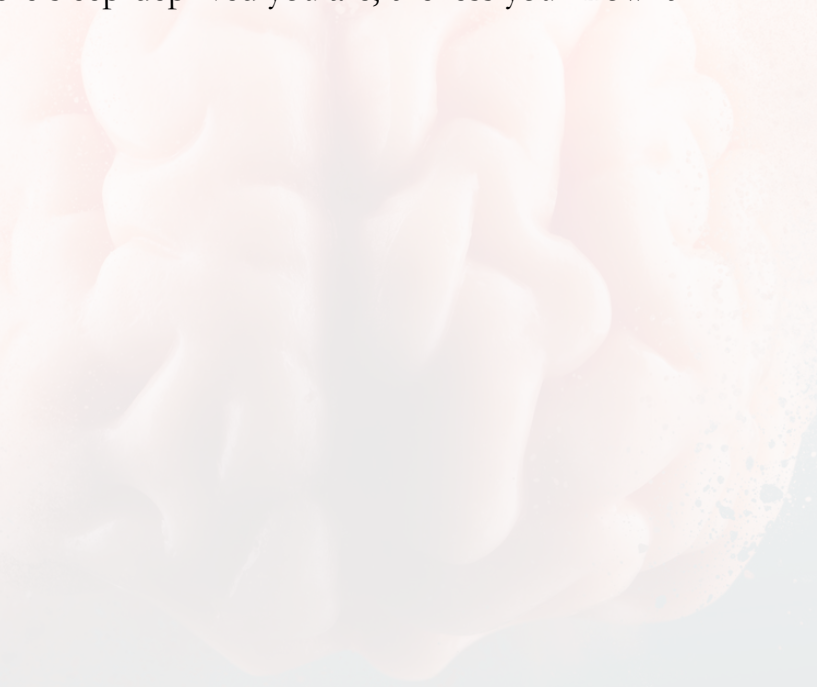
I grew up in an era that glorified the grind. The language of ambition was the language of sacrifice: sleep less, do more, outwork everyone, rest when you're dead. I absorbed this completely. I believed that the people who achieved the most were the people who needed the least sleep, and that needing sleep was a kind of weakness – a limitation that the truly driven learned to overcome.

This belief is not just wrong. It is the opposite of the truth. The people who perform at the highest levels in cognitively demanding fields – medicine, law, academia, elite sport – are, when you actually look at the research, almost universally people who protect their sleep with extraordinary rigour. They do not sacrifice sleep for performance. They understand that sleep is the foundation of performance.

The mythology of the sleepless high achiever persists because the people who are actually sleepless don't tend to rise to the top – they burn out. And the people who do rise to the top are often reluctant to discuss the structures and habits that support their performance, because “I protect eight hours of sleep every night” does not sound as compelling as “I outworked everyone.”

### THE RESEARCH

Studies consistently show that people who sleep six hours per night for two weeks are as cognitively impaired as those who have been awake for 24 hours straight – but rate themselves as only mildly sleepy. We lose the ability to accurately assess our own impairment. The more sleep-deprived you are, the less you know it.



## When Exhaustion Becomes Your Identity

There is a particular trap that high-achieving people fall into that I think is worth naming directly, because I fell into it completely.

When you spend long enough being exhausted, exhaustion becomes part of how you see yourself. You become “a person who can handle it.” Someone tough. Someone who does what others won’t. You start to feel pride in the deprivation, because it is evidence of how hard you are working, how seriously you are pursuing your goals.

And then, when the consequences start to appear, you explain them away – not just to others, but to yourself – because acknowledging them would mean acknowledging that the thing you are proud of is actually destroying you. It would mean being wrong about something fundamental.

I was wrong. It took a collapse, a hospital bed, and months of fragmented recovery to force me to admit it. I would give a great deal to have admitted it earlier.



*The hardest part was not the forgetting, or the headaches, or the collapse. The hardest part was admitting that the thing I called strength was actually a very expensive form of self-destruction.*

## Chapter six

# WHAT I KNOW NOW



## WHAT I LEARNED

### **The Thing I Wish I Had Known**

If I could go back and sit down with the thirty-year-old version of myself who was about to enrol in medical school and take on a part-time hospital job at the same time, this is what I would tell her.

Your brain is not a tool you use. It is who you are. Everything that makes you the person you are proud of being – your memory, your reasoning, your creativity, your emotional intelligence, your capacity to connect with other people – all of it runs on sleep. Not as a nice-to-have. As a non-negotiable biological requirement.

When you sleep, your brain is doing the most important maintenance work it ever does. It is consolidating everything you learned that day, locking it into long-term memory. It is clearing toxic waste products that accumulate during waking hours. It is repairing the neural connections that allow you to think clearly. It is regulating the emotional systems that allow you to stay stable under pressure. Without enough sleep, none of these things happen properly. And the effects compound, night after night, until the damage becomes visible.

You are not special. I say that with love and with the weight of experience. There is no level of ambition or intelligence or willpower that makes your brain exempt from the consequences of chronic sleep deprivation. The research is overwhelming. The anecdotes are everywhere, if you know how to read them. And I am one of them.

Protecting your sleep is not a sign that you are less committed to your goals. It is the most intelligent thing you can do in service of them. You cannot build the life you want with a brain you have damaged beyond repair.



# A DIRECT QUESTION

## Are You Already There?

I want to ask you something, and I want you to answer honestly – not to me, but to yourself.

How many hours do you actually sleep, on average, each night? Not the number you intend to sleep, or the number you think sounds acceptable. The actual number. The one you would be embarrassed to say out loud.

And how many of the following do you recognise in yourself right now?

Forgetting words you know perfectly well. Reading something several times without it landing. Relying on caffeine before you can function at all. Headaches that are simply always there. A short fuse – emotions that flare faster and hotter than you expect. Waking up tired. Lying down exhausted but unable to sleep. Feeling, somewhere underneath everything, like you are not quite running on all cylinders anymore.

If more than three of those are familiar, your brain is sending you distress signals. I know how easy it is to explain each one away individually. I did it for months. They are not individual inconveniences. They are a pattern. And patterns, if you know how to read them, tell you where you are headed before you arrive.



What happened to me is not an extreme case. It is the logical end of a path that many driven, intelligent, ambitious people are currently walking. The only difference between you and me is that you are reading this before you reach the end of the path. Please use that advantage.

# To close A PROMISE



When I stood over that drying rack, unable to work out how to hang a piece of clothing, I was not thinking about the future. I was not making promises or planning what I would do if I recovered. I was thinking only one thing: if I find my way back, I will be grateful. For the ordinary things. For the words that come when I reach for them. For knowing which direction home is. For being able to hang a piece of clothing on a rack without having to think about it.

That is still what I feel. Every day.

You are reading this because something in you recognised a warning. Something in you is paying attention. I want you to trust that instinct.

You do not have to experience what I experienced. You do not have to stand on a pavement unable to choose a direction. You do not have to search your own memory for your grandmother's name. You do not have to lose the thing that makes you most yourself.

You just have to make a different choice than the one I made. And you can make it now, before the cost becomes irreversible.



*Your goals are worth pursuing. So is your brain. You do not have to choose between them – but you do have to understand that one is the prerequisite for the other.*

I had to change my job. I moved to different town. Then I started over.

The dream didn't survive, but I created another one. My life moved differently than I planned, because I am different than I was. That is a sentence I have made peace with. I would rather you never have to say it.

Everything happens for a reason.  
In my case it turned out quite successfully, however my memory will probably never be the same it used to be.

Don't rely on the fact that you'll end up okay too.

With care and honesty,

**Martina**