

The Quiet Asterisk

How Probability Softens the Hard Edges of Life

Subu Sangameswar

First Published Mar 2026

© 2026, Subu Sangameswar

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without the prior written permission of the publisher, except for brief quotations in reviews.

This book is a work of nonfiction. Names, characters, and certain details have been changed or anonymized in places to protect privacy. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

The ideas in this book are offered for reflection and exploration. They are not intended as medical, psychological, legal, or financial advice. Readers are encouraged to use their own judgment and seek professional guidance when appropriate.

Acknowledgements

This book grew slowly.

It took shape through conversations that did not seem significant at the time, through periods of uncertainty, and through long stretches of not knowing what should come next. Much of it developed before it had a clear form. Many people contributed to it without realizing they were doing so.

Several years ago, my marriage ended. In its aftermath, I found myself revisiting events from across different years, attempting to assemble them into a coherent explanation. There was comfort in that process—in the sense that the past could be made legible by connecting its parts. Over time, however, I began to recognize how readily the mind constructs narratives that feel satisfying, even when the connections themselves are tenuous. That realization became an important foundation for this book.

I am grateful to the friends who listened without offering solutions, who allowed uncertainty to remain unresolved, and who engaged thoughtfully with questions that resisted easy answers. I am especially thankful to those who challenged my assumptions and encouraged clearer thinking.

My thanks also to the individuals whose experiences appear in these pages, directly or indirectly. Their willingness to speak honestly about confusion, disappointment, and persistence made this work possible.

I would like to acknowledge Google Gemini¹ for assistance in developing the visual elements of the book through iterative prompting.

Finally, I am grateful to the readers. By engaging with this book, you participate in its central task: attending carefully to experience without the promise of certainty.

¹ <https://gemini.google.com/app>

NOTES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

PROLOGUE: THE QUIET ASTERISK

INTRODUCTION: BUMPING INTO THINGS

CHAPTER 1: LAW OF SMALL NUMBERS

CHAPTER 2: REGRESSION TO THE MEAN

CHAPTER 3: BAYES THEOREM

CHAPTER 4: BASE RATES

CHAPTER 5: CONJUNCTION FALLACY

CHAPTER 6: FALSE POSITIVES

CHAPTER 7: LAW OF LARGE NUMBERS

CHAPTER 8: INDEPENDENCE

CHAPTER 9: RANDOM WALKS

CHAPTER 10: EXPECTED VALUE

APPENDIX – A GENTLE WALK THROUGH UNCERTAINTY

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Prologue: The Quiet Asterisk

What Do We Mean When We Say “Probably”

I say the word *probably* more than I realize.

I probably won't need a jacket. It'll probably rain later. That's probably fine. Probably not a good idea.

The word slips into conversation without resistance. It's soft. Noncommittal. It lets me speak without staking too much on being right. I don't remember learning it, but I use it constantly. It shows up in emails, texts, small decisions, and quiet reassurances to myself. It's how I smooth uncertainty into something manageable. When I say probably, I'm not predicting the future so much as admitting I don't fully know it. I'm saying, *this is my best guess, given what I've seen so far.*

What's strange is how comfortable this feels in the mundane—and how quickly it deserts me in the meaningful. While I use the word probably for the weather or the traffic, my heart tends to deal in absolutes. How natural it is to live this way—half-certain, half-adjusting—without ever naming what I'm doing.

Probability lives here, in this word. Not as a calculation, but as a posture.

We like to think of probability as something technical. Numbers. Percentages. Forecasts. Charts with neat axes. Something other people use—meteorologists, economists, gamblers. But long before we ever see a formula, we are already probabilistic creatures. We wake up and assess the day. We decide whether to trust someone. We choose whether to speak, to wait, to act. Each decision is based on partial information, past experience, intuition, mood, and hope. We weigh what might happen against what we can tolerate.

We do this all day long, without writing anything down. When a friend doesn't text back for three days, I don't think, *they are probably busy*. I think, *they are definitely moving on from this friendship*. When a project at work hits a snag, I don't think, *this is probably a temporary delay*. I think, *this is a disaster*.

In those moments, a "small and tight" feeling takes over my chest. My pulse quickens. I stop being a "probabilistic creature" and become a judge delivering a final verdict on a case that hasn't even finished yet. I treat my anxiety like a prophecy.

The Dinner Party and the Asterisk

A few years ago, I had a realization during one of these spirals. I was convinced—with 100% certainty—that a funny comment that I made at a dinner party – landed incorrectly ending a

developing friendship. I had said something I thought was funny; the friend had gone quiet. For next forty-eight hours, I replayed those three seconds of silence until they became a mountain. I mourned the friendship. I checked my phone for a "*we need to talk*" text that never came. I felt the physical weight of a door closing.

When the "data" finally arrived—a mundane text from that same friend asking to meet up at a bar for a drink—the relief was followed by a sharp, cold sense of embarrassment.

I had been so sure. And I had been so wrong.

That was the day I started practicing the Quiet Asterisk.

The Asterisk² is a mental footnote I've learned to attach to my own certainties. It's a tiny, silent mark I place at the end of my loudest fears. It looks like this:

- *This person is mad at me **
- *I am going to fail this **
- *Nothing is going to work out **

The asterisk represents the missing data. It's the acknowledgment that my perspective is a map, not the territory. It's a reminder that I am currently standing in the middle of a "Random Walk," and I cannot see where the next step leads. Probability, I've realized, isn't just about math. It's about the humility to add that asterisk. It's the pause between a feeling and a reaction. It's the space where we admit that while our fears are loud, the world is usually much noisier—and much more complex—than our immediate panic suggests.

The Language of the Unknown

To live with the asterisk, we have to understand the language of the unknown. We often use terms like chance, odds, and probability interchangeably, but they feel different in the gut. If we are going to navigate a life without certainty, we need to know which tool we are reaching for.

Chance is the visceral stuff. It's the coin in the air. It's the feeling of a "maybe" humming in the room. Chance is what we feel when we walk into a room of strangers or buy a lottery ticket. It is chaotic, singular, and deeply personal. It's the "What if?" that keeps us awake at night. It's the sense you get when you hesitate before crossing the street. The flicker of worry when you send a message you care about. The quiet hope you don't quite want to name.

Odds are different. Odds are about stakes. When we talk about the odds, we are talking about a transaction. We are asking: *What do I have to risk to get what I want?* Odds are the language of the gambler, yes, but also the language of the person deciding whether to quit their job or ask for

² Asterisk - the character * thought of as being appended to something typically in order to indicate that there is a limiting fact or consideration which makes that thing less important or impressive than it would otherwise be

a second date. Odds take the "chance" and give it a price tag. Odds feel external, even when they're not. They give uncertainty a posture—leaning one way or another.

Probability, however, is the quiet governor of the whole system. If chance is a single coin flip, probability is what happens when you flip the coin ten thousand times. It is the long-view. It is the "map of tendencies" that tells us that while anything can happen today, certain things are likely to happen over time. Probability is the cooling agent. It's the logic that allows us to look at a singular disaster and say, "This is an outlier, not the end."

Probability doesn't care how we feel. It doesn't argue. It doesn't persuade. It just governs outcomes. Probability doesn't promise anything. It offers proportions. It describes tendencies across time, not guarantees in the moment. This is part of why it frustrates us.

We want certainty. Probability offers distribution.

We want meaning. Probability offers frequency.

And yet—whether we acknowledge it or not—this is the system we're living inside. Probability isn't about prediction so much as expectation. It doesn't tell us what *will* happen. It tells us what *usually* happens, given enough time.

Finding Expected Value

In formal mathematics, Expected Value is a formula used to determine the long-term average of a random variable. It's how insurance companies set premiums and how professional poker players decide whether to fold. It's the sum of all possible outcomes, each weighted by its probability. But in the architecture of a life, Expected Value is something much more profound. *It is the "sum total" of living with the asterisk.*

When we look at our lives through the lens of Expected Value, we stop obsessing over whether a single "bet" (a project, a conversation, a relationship) succeeded or failed. Instead, we look at the value of the attempt.

If you make a choice that is kind, curious, and well-reasoned, and it "fails"—that is, the outcome is negative—the Expected Value of that choice remains high. You made a good bet on a better version of the world. Conversely, if you act out of malice or fear and happen to "win," the Expected Value of that behavior is still low. You are building a life out of bad bets that will eventually catch up to you.

Expected Value is the ultimate expression of the Quiet Asterisk. It says: *I cannot control the outcome of this specific moment, but I can control the quality of the attempt.*

This book isn't about formulas. This book is an exploration of that posture. It's about how concepts like the Law of Small Numbers, Regression to the Mean, and Bayes' Theorem aren't just

for textbooks—they are the tools we use to keep that asterisk quiet and steady. They are how we learn to live half-certain and half-adjusting. They are how we remain human while the outcomes remain unknown. We live in the space between the odds. We live in the footnote. And we find that while certainty is impossible, a life made of high-value attempts is more than enough - the quiet logic beneath ordinary days.

Introduction: Bumping Into Things

The Pinball Effect

I like to imagine myself as a pinball³.

Not the heroic kind. Not the shiny one that lights up the board. Just a small steel ball, launched into motion, bouncing around a crowded machine.

This image first came to me while standing in line somewhere—probably a coffee shop, though it could have been anywhere people queue with mild resentment. I was watching how easily my plans were being altered. I'd meant to be quick. I wasn't. I'd chosen the short line. It wasn't. I'd assumed things would move smoothly. They didn't. Around me, other people were having similar days. You could tell by the way they shifted their weight, checked their phones, sighed in unison. No one was doing anything wrong. Nothing had gone dramatically off course. We were just colliding with one another's trajectories. That's when it struck me how much of life works this way.

We talk about plans, paths, and goals as if life were a straight line. As if progress were mostly a matter of intention and effort. But lived experience feels different. It feels more like motion through a crowded field of forces.

You move. You bump into something. You adjust. You get bumped again.

Sometimes the collisions help. Sometimes they don't. Often, they're neutral. Just part of the movement. This isn't fate. And it isn't chaos. It's something in between. *A space of probabilities.*

Every day, I wake up with a loose plan. A sense of what I expect will happen. And every day, that plan is altered—slightly or significantly—by things I couldn't have predicted. *A delayed train. A conversation that lingers. A message that doesn't arrive. A chance meeting that does.* None of these are personal. None of them are random in the sense of being meaningless.

The Story of the 8:12 Train

I once had a Tuesday that was supposed to be a straight line. I had a meeting in Washington DC—the kind of meeting that felt like the "center of the board." My plan was simple: leave the house at 7:45, walk the three blocks to the station, and board the 8:12 train.

But the pinball machine was crowded that morning.

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pinball>

The first "bump" was a neighbor's dog that had slipped its collar. I spent exactly four minutes—the precise length of my "buffer" time—helping herd a frantic beagle back behind a gate. A minor deflection. Then, a block from the station, I hit a second collision: a delivery truck had double-parked, forcing a crowd of commuters into a narrow, slow-moving single file.

By the time I reached the platform, the 8:12 was a receding orange blur.

In that moment, I did what we all do: I delivered a final verdict on a case that hadn't finished yet. I stood there, heart racing, thinking, "*I am a failure. I am the kind of person who misses the most important train of the year.*" I treated my frustration like a prophecy of a ruined career.

I sat on a wooden bench to wait for the 8:32, feeling the weight of the "missed connection." But while I sat there, an old colleague I hadn't seen in five years walked onto the platform. He had been deflected too—a late taxi, a lost key. We started talking. By the time the next train arrived, we hadn't just caught up; he had mentioned a role his firm was struggling to fill—a role that ended up being the actual turning point of my professional life.

If I had caught the 8:12, I would have had a "successful" day. But because I was bumped off my trajectory, I had a transformative one.

Looking back, missing that train wasn't a "bad play" or a moral failure. It was just a collision in a high-density space. I was a steel ball hitting a series of independent motions—a beagle, a truck, a crowd—and being nudged into a different "maybe".

The Quiet Asterisk belongs at the end of that morning's panic: *I missed my train and everything is ruined **. The asterisk represents the missing data: the 8:32 train and the person waiting on the bench.

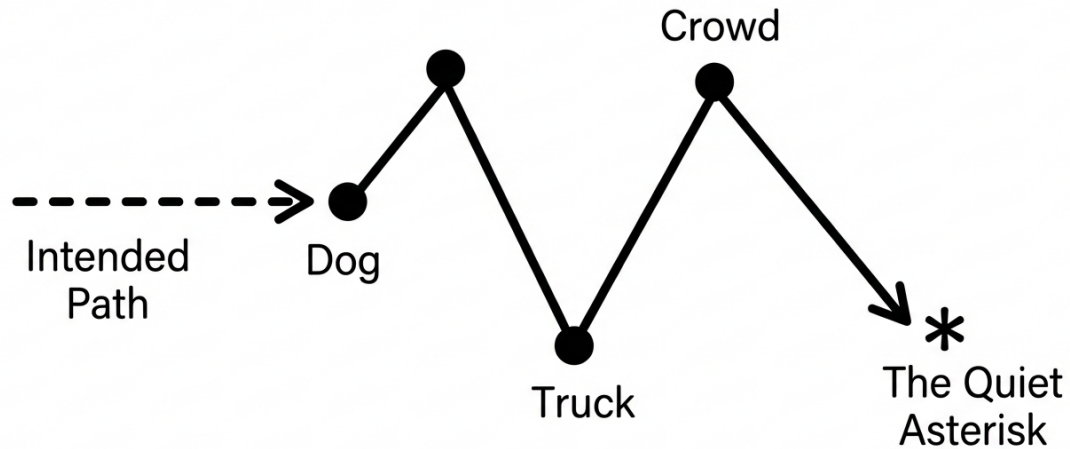


Figure 1: The Pinball Effect (Intended vs. Actual Path)

This is what I mean by the pinball effect. Life isn't a straight shot toward a target. It's a series of deflections. They're just the result of many independent motions intersecting. When something goes wrong, it's tempting to interpret it as failure. As if we misplayed the ball. As if we should have chosen better. But often, we're not failing. We're just navigating a high-density space. This reframing changed how I understood my own disappointments.

Missed opportunities stopped feeling like moral judgments. Delays stopped feeling like personal insults. Setbacks stopped feeling like verdicts. They became collisions. Part of the terrain. This doesn't make them painless. But it makes them legible. And yet—even knowing this—we keep trying to predict things.

We check the weather compulsively. We refresh inboxes. We read reviews for things we'll experience for ourselves in an hour. We forecast careers, relationships, moods. We want to know where the ball is going. This desire isn't foolish. It's human. Prediction gives us a sense of orientation. It lets us prepare emotionally. It helps us decide when to invest and when to hold back.

The problem isn't prediction itself. It's mistaking prediction for control.

Probability doesn't give us a script. It gives us a map of tendencies. And most of the time, we treat tendencies as promises. When those promises aren't kept, we feel betrayed—by the world, by ourselves, by our expectations. What this book tries to do is slow that moment down. To look more closely at the ways we misunderstand chance, overinterpret outcomes, and draw sweeping conclusions from very small samples. To notice how often we confuse story with likelihood, and fear with fact. Along the way, a few concepts will surface—not as lessons, but as companions. The law of small numbers, which explains why a bad morning can feel like a bad life. Bayes' rule,

which shows how our past experiences color what we believe now. Random walks, which describe how much of our path is shaped by others we barely notice. Expected value, which helps explain why we keep trying even when the odds aren't great. You don't need to remember these probability names or concepts. You only need to recognize their presence. Because they're already at work. When you decide whether to trust someone again. When you assume a pattern based on few experiences. When you keep going despite uncertainty. This is probability in its everyday form. Not abstract. Not cold. Not detached. It's the quiet logic beneath ordinary choices. It's what allows us to function without certainty.

I'm not interested in using probability to optimize life. That way of thinking tends to flatten it. I'm interested in using it to soften life. To introduce a little humility where we're too certain. A little patience where we're too quick to judge. A little compassion where we're too eager to assign blame. Probability doesn't tell us what matters. It reminds us how little we can know in advance. And that reminder, I've found, can be oddly freeing.

If life is motion through a crowded space, then success isn't about avoiding collisions. It's about staying in motion long enough to learn how to move with them.

This book begins there. With a ball already in play

Chapter 1: Law of Small Numbers

The Grocery Story

I was already tired when I walked into the local whole food's grocery store, which is not unusual. It was late afternoon, that soft, indecisive hour when the day hasn't quite ended but your patience already has. The store smelled faintly of citrus cleaner and overripe bananas. Someone was playing music over the speakers—something cheerful and harmless that I didn't recognize but mildly resented anyway.

I only needed a few things. Bread. Milk. A lemon. I told myself this as if it were a moral position, a promise of efficiency. I even picked up a basket instead of a cart, which always feels like a small act of optimism. *I will not linger*, I thought. I am not the kind of person who wanders.

Of course, wandering happened anyway. It always does. I paused too long deciding between two nearly identical loaves of bread. I checked the dates on the milk, even though I know I'll finish it well before it matters. I stood in front of the lemons, selecting one as if there were meaningful differences between them, as if the wrong choice might ripple outward into the rest of my evening.

By the time I reached the checkout area, the store had filled up. Carts were lined up at angles that suggested frustration rather than geometry. People stood with their weight shifted onto one leg, staring ahead or down at their phones. The moment had arrived: choosing a line.

This is where I like to believe I have experience. I've been grocery shopping for years. Decades, even. I know to look for the line with fewer items. I know to avoid carts piled high with produce that will need to be weighed. I know to be wary of customers holding coupons or checks, though I also feel bad for thinking that way. We're all just trying to buy food.

I scanned the options and chose what looked like the fastest lane. Only two people ahead of me. One with a basket like mine, one with maybe ten items. No children. No obvious complications. The cashier was young and quick, moving with the practiced rhythm of someone who has scanned thousands of barcodes and learned not to think about it too much.

I stepped into line with the quiet satisfaction of someone who believes they've made a good decision.

The trouble began with the lemon.

The woman ahead of me placed it on the conveyor belt last, after her bread and her yogurt and her bag of spinach. The cashier scanned it once. Then again. A small pause. The cashier tilted the lemon, as if the barcode might be hiding somewhere else, modest or shy.

“It’s not coming up,” the cashier said.

The woman frowned. “That’s strange.”

They both looked at the lemon. I looked at the lemon too, as if my attention might help. The cashier typed something into the register. The screen made a sound that was not encouraging.

“I’ll need to do a price check,” the cashier said.

This is the moment when time begins to stretch. Not dramatically. Just enough to notice.

The cashier picked up the phone. Someone on the other end didn’t answer right away. The woman ahead of me shifted her weight. I felt something small and tight form in my chest, the way it always does in moments like this. It wasn’t anger exactly. It was the awareness of delay. The sense that something had gone slightly wrong with the plan I hadn’t admitted I was making.

I checked my watch. I didn’t actually need to be anywhere. That somehow made it worse.

As we waited, I began to think the thoughts I always think in these moments. *Why does this always happen when I choose a line? I should have gone to the other one. I knew better.*

I glanced sideways at the neighboring checkout. That line was moving. Items were scanned. Bags were filled. People paid and left. The person who had been behind me there was now ahead of me in life, or so it felt.

This is where the story usually gets dramatic in my head. Not outwardly. I stood there quietly, basket in hand, face neutral. But inwardly, I was building a case. This was evidence, I told myself, of a pattern. *I have bad luck with grocery store lines. I am the kind of person who picks the slow one. This is who I am.*

It’s a strange thing, how quickly we draw conclusions from tiny samples. One lemon. One line. One afternoon. And suddenly it feels like a verdict.

The price check took longer than it should have. Someone had to walk to the produce section. Someone else had to confirm the code. The lemon sat on the counter, innocent and gleaming. It had no idea what it was doing to us.

The woman ahead of me apologized, though it wasn’t her fault. The cashier smiled and said it was no problem, though it clearly was, at least a little. I nodded, even though no one was apologizing to me directly. I wanted to be gracious. I wanted to be the kind of person who is gracious in situations like this.

But internally, I was negotiating. *If this happens one more time, I thought, then it really means something.*

I don't know what that something was supposed to be. That the day was cursed. That the universe had singled me out. That I should have stayed home. The specifics were vague, but the feeling was familiar.

Eventually, the lemon was resolved. It cost less than a dollar. The receipt printed. The woman gathered her bags and left. It was my turn.

The cashier scanned my items quickly. I paid. I walked out of the store. The whole delay, start to finish, had probably added five minutes to my life.

In the parking lot, loading my groceries into the car, I felt faintly embarrassed. Not because I had done anything wrong, but because of how much I had felt. How much meaning I had assigned to a small inconvenience.

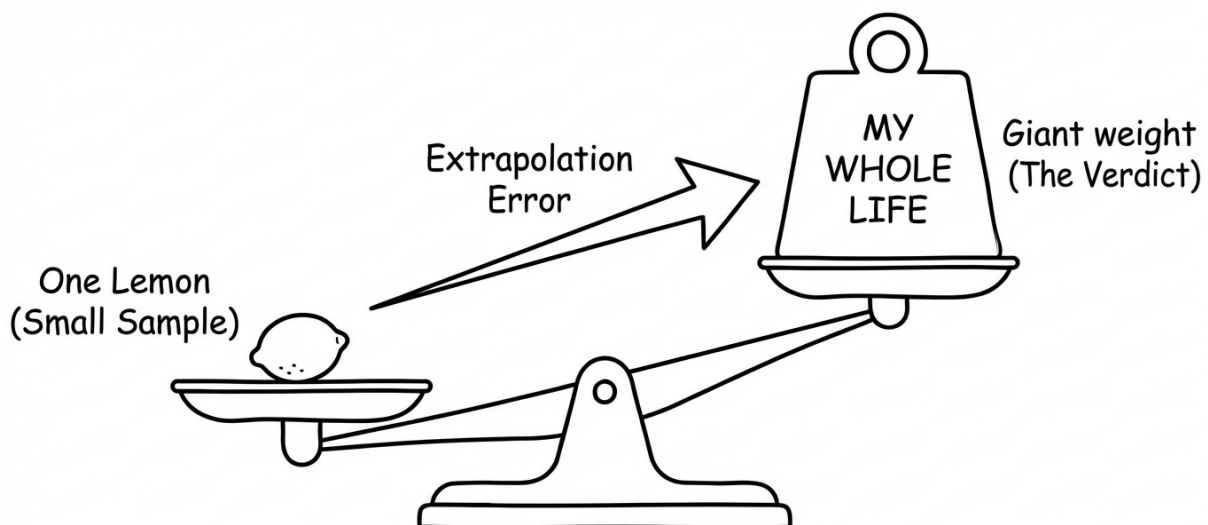


Figure 2: The Law of Small Numbers (Mistaking Noise for Truth)

This happens more often than I like to admit. Not just in grocery stores. Everywhere. If I have one awkward conversation in the morning, I start to believe I'm bad at talking to people. If I make a small mistake at work, I assume I'm slipping. If a plan falls through, I begin to question my judgment. One data point becomes a diagnosis.

I know, intellectually, that this is unreasonable. I know that small samples are unreliable. These are just randomness clusters. That a bad moment does not predict a bad day, and a bad day does not predict a bad year. I know this the way I know vegetables are good for me. But knowing something and feeling it are different processes. They move at different speeds.

There's comfort, oddly enough, in believing that small events are meaningful. If the slow line is *about me*, then at least there's a story. There's an explanation. The alternative—that things just happen, unevenly and without regard to fairness—is harder to sit with.

We want patterns. We want lessons. We want the universe to be legible.

Growing up, I learned early to read into things. A teacher's tone. A delayed phone call. A raised eyebrow. These were signals, I thought, if you paid close enough attention. Miss enough of them, and you'd be caught off guard. So, I learned to extrapolate. Quickly. One comment could color an entire day. One look could revise a relationship. It felt safer that way, even when it wasn't. But the problem with extrapolating from small numbers is that it shrinks the world. It turns isolated moments into permanent traits. It mistakes noise for truth.

Most days are made up of minor frustrations that resolve themselves if we give them time. The printer jams. The meeting runs long. The coffee is weaker than expected. These are not messages. They are just occurrences.

Still, I struggle with this. I struggle not to take things personally that are not personal. I struggle not to assume that today's inconvenience is tomorrow's pattern. Sometimes I wonder how many judgments I've made—about myself, about others—based on too little information. How many times I've labeled a person difficult because of one bad interaction. How often I've decided I was failing because of one off day.

I think about the woman with the lemon. For all I know, she was late picking up a child. Or she was distracted. Or she had just had a hard conversation before walking into the store. Or maybe she was fine, and the lemon was just a lemon. I think about the cashier, doing her job, apologizing for something she couldn't control. I think about how easily frustration slides onto the nearest available surface.

By the time I got home, the moment had faded. I put the groceries away. I sliced the lemon and squeezed it into a glass of water. It tasted exactly as expected.

Later that evening, I tried to remember why I had been so bothered. The specifics were already blurring. What remained was a faint awareness of how quickly my mind had rushed to judgment, how eager it had been to generalize.

There's a kind of mercy in recognizing this tendency. Not fixing it entirely—that feels unrealistic—but noticing it. Catching myself in the act of turning one moment into a story about who I am.

Now, when I find myself in a slow line, or stuck in traffic, or waiting longer than I think I should, I try something small. I tell myself: *This is just one data point*. I don't always believe it. But saying it creates a little space.

In that space, I can breathe. I can look around. I can remember that most of life is made up of averages, not outliers. That patterns take time to form. That a single lemon does not define a day. It's a modest practice. It doesn't make me serene. I still feel the tug of impatience, the itch to conclude. But it softens the edges.

And maybe that's enough.

As I've learned to forgive the universe for its small, random inconveniences, I've also begun to wonder what other assumptions I'm carrying forward without realizing it—assumptions built from old experiences, outdated evidence, half-remembered patterns. Somewhere between one moment and the next, between what happened before and what might happen again, there's a quieter question forming. Not *what does this mean?* but *what else could be true?*

That question lingers, gently, as I move on—into the waiting, the revising, and the long, patient work of updating what I think I know.

Chapter 2: Regression To the Mean

After A Very Good Day.

Jan 9, 2026. The day arrived as usual and everything went right without warning, which is usually how these things happen. I woke up before my alarm, rested but not smug about it. The light in the room was the good kind—soft, forgiving, not too bright. My phone had no new messages asking for explanations or apologies. The weather app said it would be mild, and for once it was correct.

Nothing extraordinary happened. That was the remarkable part.

I made coffee and didn't spill it. I found my keys on the first try. The train arrived when it was supposed to, which felt almost suspicious. At work, the meeting ended early. Someone laughed at a joke I hadn't rehearsed. An email I'd been quietly worried about turned out to be fine. Better than fine, actually.

By mid-afternoon, I noticed myself noticing. This is always the danger point. Once you become aware that things are going well, you begin to treat it like a fragile arrangement, something that could be revoked at any moment. I moved carefully through the rest of the day, as if I might jinx it by acknowledging it too loudly.

On the way home, I bought myself a pastry I didn't need. I ate it slowly, standing on the sidewalk, crumbs collecting in the crease of the paper bag. It tasted better than it should have. I felt briefly, almost sheepishly, lucky.

That evening, sitting on the couch, I reviewed the day the way one might review a movie they enjoyed but didn't fully understand why. I felt lighter. Calmer. More capable. I thought, not for the first time, *Maybe I've finally figured things out.*

This thought did not last.

The next morning was fine. Perfectly fine. Nothing went wrong. Nothing went especially right either. The coffee tasted ordinary. The train was a little crowded. Work unfolded as expected. By late afternoon, I felt a vague disappointment I couldn't quite justify. It took me a while to realize what I was reacting to. Not failure. Just contrast.

The problem with a very good day is not that it ends. It's that it quietly recalibrates your expectations. What felt like ease becomes the new standard. Anything less begins to register as loss. I have done this my whole life. I suspect most people have.

When something unusually good happens—a compliment, a stretch of productivity, a feeling of closeness—I start to believe, without quite admitting it, that this is how things should be now. That the line has shifted upward. When it drifts back down to where it usually lives, I feel wronged.

But nothing has been taken from me. I'm just back where I started.

There's a term for this, though I didn't learn it until later: *regression to the mean*⁴. Extreme outcomes, good or bad, tend to be followed by more typical ones. The peak is not sustainable. Neither is the valley. Over time, things return to average. This is not an exciting idea. It doesn't promise improvement. It doesn't reward effort directly. It simply describes gravity.

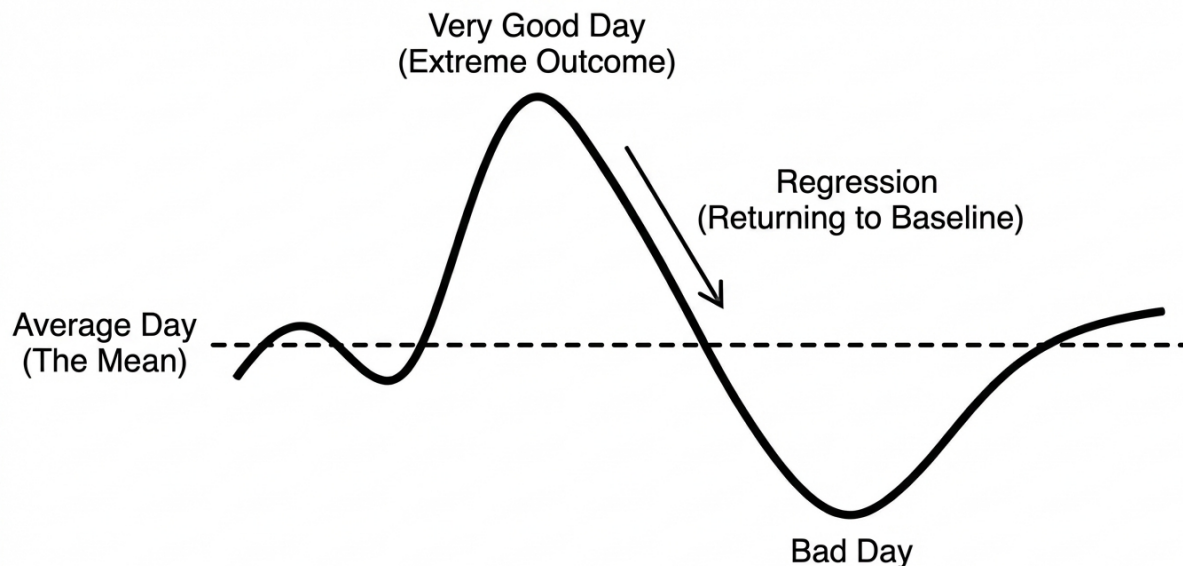


Figure 3: Regression to the Mean (The stabilizing force)

I used to resist it. I wanted my good days to mean something permanent. I wanted them to be proof of progress, evidence that I was getting better at life. When they faded, I took it personally, as if I'd failed to maintain something I'd earned. I did the same with bad days, too, though in a different way. One difficult week could convince me that I was declining. That something had slipped. That I was headed in the wrong direction.

Both interpretations were wrong, just in opposite ways.

Most of my days are unremarkable. They fall somewhere in the middle. This is not a complaint. It's a description. I wake up. I do what needs to be done. I get tired. I eat dinner. I watch something mildly distracting. I go to bed. These days don't announce themselves. They don't make for good

⁴ <https://conjointly.com/kb/regression-to-the-mean/>

stories. They don't produce clear lessons. They are, statistically speaking, where most of my life happens.

And yet, I spend an outsized amount of energy interpreting the exceptions.

When I feel unusually confident, I start planning as if that confidence will be available on demand. I say yes to things I would normally hesitate over. I imagine a version of myself who has permanently upgraded. When I feel unusually low, I start pulling back. I cancel plans. I lower expectations. I tell myself I'm being realistic, when in reality, I'm responding to a temporary dip. In both cases, I mistake a fluctuation for a trend.

I see this pattern in others too, though it's easier to notice from the outside. A friend has a great run at work and starts to believe they've finally cracked the code, only to feel disoriented when the next project stalls. Another friend has a string of rejections and begins to question their entire path, even though nothing fundamental has changed.

We comfort each other by saying things like, "You're just having a week," or "You were due for a break." These phrases are truer than they sound. They acknowledge the swing without assigning it too much meaning.

Still, when it comes to ourselves, we're less forgiving. We expect consistency from our moods, our performance, our relationships. We treat deviation as diagnosis. I remember once finishing a project that had consumed me for months. It went well. People were pleased. I felt competent in a way that was rare and intoxicating. For a few days afterward, I floated. Then, inevitably, the feeling faded. I sat down to start something new and felt clumsy, unsure. My first thought was that I had lost something. My second was that I had fooled everyone the first time. Neither was true. I was simply back to normal, which only felt like loss because I'd been somewhere else.

There's a quiet cruelty in how we narrate these returns. We call them slumps. We frame them as failures to sustain excellence. We forget that excellence, by definition, is exceptional.

Most of us are not meant to live at our peaks. Peaks are landmarks, not residences. Understanding this has softened some of my harsher self-judgments. Not eliminated them—I'm not that enlightened—but softened them. When I notice myself mourning the absence of yesterday's ease, I try to ask a gentler question: *What is normal here?* Normal is not glamorous. Normal includes fatigue. Normal includes distraction. Normal includes days that don't add up to much. Normal also includes quiet competence, small kindnesses, tasks completed without fanfare. These things don't spike the graph, but they hold it steady.

There's relief in letting good days be gifts instead of promises. In enjoying them fully without demanding that they repeat. There's relief, too, in letting bad days be what they are—temporary deviations, not forecasts.

I still catch myself bargaining with the universe after a particularly smooth stretch. *If things could just stay like this*, I think. As if staying were an option. But life doesn't work that way. It oscillates. It wobbles. It moves around a center that's less exciting than we'd like, but more stable than we fear.

Once, after a run of unusually productive mornings, I rearranged my schedule to match that energy. I signed up for early meetings. I committed to deadlines that assumed clarity and focus. When the energy receded—as it always does—I blamed myself for not maintaining it. Now I try to plan for the average version of myself. The one who needs reminders. The one who gets tired. The one who sometimes struggles to begin. This version is not broken. It's representative.

There's a kindness in designing a life that fits your typical capacity rather than your best-case scenario. It leaves room for rest. It allows for recovery. It doesn't punish you for returning to baseline.

I've started noticing how often culture celebrates sustained highs without acknowledging the machinery behind them. We praise consistency as if it's purely a matter of will. We treat burnout as a surprise rather than a predictable outcome. Regression to the mean is not a failure of discipline. It's a feature of being human.

This doesn't mean effort is meaningless. It means effort operates within limits. You can influence the average over time—slowly, gradually—but you can't abolish variation. Some days will still rise above the line. Others will dip below it. Neither requires a rewrite of your story.

When I think back to that very good day—the easy morning, the smooth conversations—I try now to remember it accurately. Not as evidence of a permanent shift, but as a moment of alignment. A reminder of what's possible, not a demand. The next day didn't need to match it. It only needed to be itself. There's a subtle freedom in accepting this. It takes pressure off joy. It lets happiness arrive without forcing it to justify its existence. And it changes how I interpret disappointment. Instead of asking, *what went wrong?* I'm more likely to ask, *what was I expecting?* Often, the answer is: too much continuity.

As I've grown more aware of these patterns, I've become curious about another habit that shapes how I experience uncertainty. Not how I react to highs and lows, but how I interpret new information altogether—how the past sneaks into the present, coloring my expectations before I even realize it.

Because even when I know that today is just today, I still carry yesterday with me. Old experiences whisper predictions. History leans forward, trying to explain what comes next. And that, I've learned, is a different kind of probability problem entirely—one that has less to do with averages, and more to do with belief.

Chapter 3: Bayes Theorem

Waiting for the Text

I don't remember when waiting for messages became such a charged activity, only that it did. At some point, a silence that once felt neutral began to feel loud. My phone, face down on the table, started to carry emotional weight far beyond its size.

This particular evening, I was waiting for a text from someone new. Not new in a dramatic sense. We weren't in the middle of a love story or a conflict. We'd met recently, talked easily, exchanged numbers without ceremony. A few messages had gone back and forth. Nothing urgent. Nothing heavy. Still, when I sent the last message—something light, almost throwaway—I became alert in a way that surprised me.

I put the phone down and tried to do other things. I washed a mug that didn't really need washing. I straightened a stack of mail I wasn't going to open. I checked the time, even though I had no deadline. Every few minutes, I glanced at the screen, just in case it had lit up quietly and I'd missed it.

It hadn't.

At first, the waiting felt ordinary. People get busy. Phones get silenced. Life intervenes. I know this. I've been the person who didn't reply right away for perfectly innocent reasons. But as the minutes stretched, my mind began its familiar work.

Maybe she's busy, I thought. This felt reasonable. Comforting, even. A little later: *Maybe she saw it and meant to respond but forgot*. Still reasonable, though slightly less comforting. Then: *Maybe I said something odd*. This one landed differently. It carried a faint sting. By the half-hour mark, the story had shifted again. *Maybe she's not that interested after all*. This thought arrived with more confidence than it deserved. Nothing new had happened. No additional information had entered the system. And yet, my interpretation of the same silence kept evolving, drifting steadily toward something more personal and more painful.

What struck me later was not how anxious I felt—that part was familiar—but how certain I became, based on so little. A single unanswered message began to outweigh all previous evidence. The friendly conversation. The shared laughter. The easy tone. These things faded into the background as the silence took center stage. It was as if my mind had reassigned the probabilities without telling me it was doing so.

I've noticed this pattern often enough to recognize it now. When new information arrives—or fails to arrive—I don't interpret it on its own. I filter it through what I already believe. Or what I fear. If I'm feeling confident, a delayed response is just a delay. If I'm feeling uncertain, it's a

verdict. *The past is never as quiet as we think it is. It hums beneath the present, offering commentary.*

Years ago, I had a friend who was habitually late. Not in a charming, absentminded way. In a way that made you feel slightly foolish for being on time. After enough waiting, I learned to expect it. When she said she'd arrive at seven, I planned for seven-thirty. When she was late, I felt irritated but unsurprised. That history shaped my expectations. It became the lens through which I interpreted her behavior. But I've also carried other histories. Relationships where silence preceded withdrawal. Jobs where delayed feedback meant trouble. Situations where waiting was not neutral, but ominous.

Those experiences taught me something too. Not always accurately, but persuasively. So, when I wait now—whether for a message, a response, a decision—I'm never starting from zero. I bring a whole archive with me. Old outcomes. Old disappointments. Old patterns that may or may not apply.

There's a formal way to describe this - The idea that we update our beliefs as new evidence comes in, but that the update depends on where we started. Our prior beliefs matter. They shape how much weight we give to what's happening now. *Bayes' Theorem*

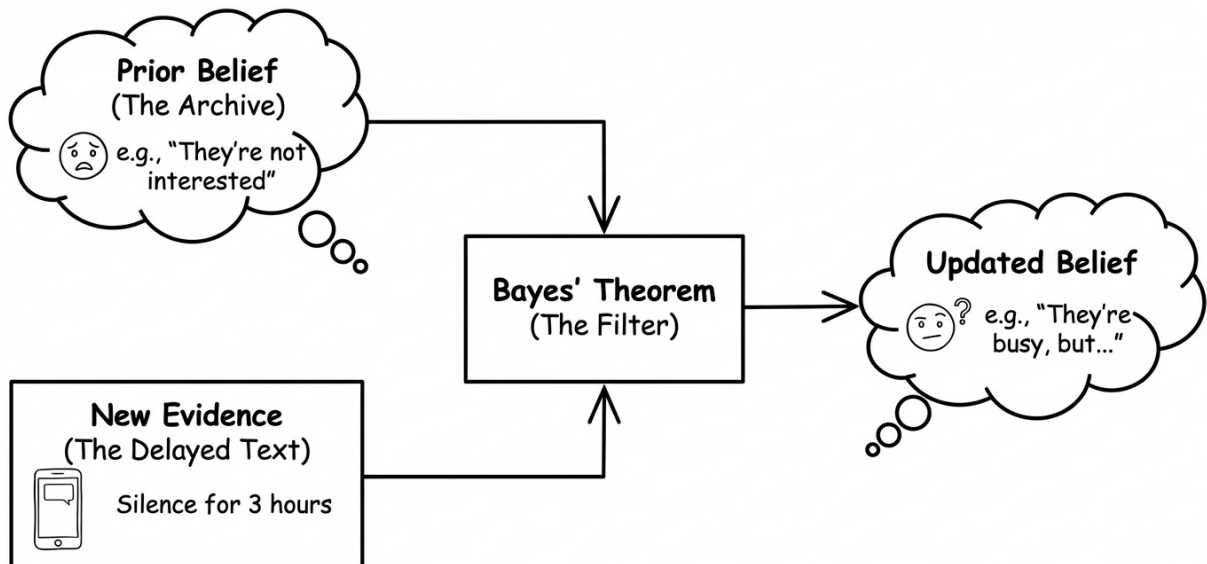


Figure 4: Bayes' Theorem (Updating Beliefs with New Evidence)

But I didn't need the terminology to feel its effects. I was living them. That night, I eventually received the message. It was brief. Friendly. Entirely unremarkable.

Sorry—just saw this.

That was it. No explanation. No emotional content. Just a fact.

The relief I felt was immediate and disproportionate. My body relaxed as if it had been bracing for something physical. I laughed at myself, softly, alone in my kitchen. Nothing had changed, really. The silence had meant exactly what it meant at the beginning: nothing in particular. But my interpretation had traveled a long distance in the meantime.

Bayes' Theorem is essentially a formula for how to change your mind when you see new evidence. It suggests that your "New Belief" should be a mix of two things: what you knew before (the Prior) and how likely this new evidence is.

In the kitchen, my "Prior" should have been high. I had hours of "Prior Data" telling me this person was friendly and engaged. But as the clock ticked, I performed a common cognitive glitch: I let a single piece of "New Data"—the silence—completely overwrite the Prior.

In a proper Bayesian calculation, I would have asked: Given that this person is friendly, how likely is it that she is busy? (Very likely). Given that she is friendly, how likely is it that she has suddenly decided to ghost me? (Very unlikely).

Because I wasn't using the Asterisk, I didn't see the silence as "Missing Data." I saw it as "Confirming Data." I gave the silence a 100% "Weight," as if the lack of a text was a signed affidavit of my own unworthiness.

The math would have changed my feeling by forcing me to look at the *Base Rate*⁵. The base rate of people being busy on a Tuesday night is massive. The base rate of people radically changing their opinion of you in forty minutes is minuscule. By anchoring myself to the Base Rate, the silence doesn't become a verdict; it just becomes a "Stray Data Point." It loses its power to hurt.

I wish I could say that noticing this cured me of it. It didn't.

I still wait. I still imagine. I still revise the story as time passes. But now there's a second voice, quieter, that asks a different question: *What am I bringing into this moment?* Am I reacting to what's happening now, or to what happened before? This question has been useful beyond texting.

At work, when feedback is slow to arrive, I notice how quickly I start filling in the gaps. If I've had supportive managers in the past, I tend to assume goodwill. If I haven't, I brace myself. The same delay, interpreted differently depending on history.

In friendships, I notice how past closeness or distance affects how I read small changes. A friend who's always been steady gets more grace than one who has disappeared before. That's not necessarily wrong, but it's worth being aware of.

⁵ It is the next chapter

Even with myself, I do this. If I've struggled with motivation lately, a single unproductive afternoon feels confirming. If I've been feeling capable, the same afternoon barely registers. The present is never just the present. It's layered.

There's a temptation, when you realize this, to try to erase the past from your calculations. To approach each situation as if it were entirely new. But that's not realistic, either. Experience exists for a reason. Patterns do matter. The challenge, I think, is not to eliminate our priors, but to keep them flexible. To let them be informed, not rigid. To update them as new evidence accumulates, rather than freezing them in place. This is harder than it sounds. Old fears are efficient. They've been practiced. They step in quickly, offering explanations that feel familiar, even protective. Letting go of them can feel like abandoning a defense system.

I've noticed how easily I cling to interpretations that hurt me, simply because they're consistent with what I already believe. If I think I'm forgettable, I interpret silence as confirmation. If I think I'm competent, I interpret it as noise. Neither belief is fully accurate. But one of them tends to speak louder.

There's also a moral dimension to this, though it's subtle. How we interpret others' actions affects how we treat them. If I assume neglect, I withdraw. If I assume care, I stay open a little longer. I've wondered how many relationships are shaped less by what actually happens than by how we update our beliefs along the way.

Once, a friend canceled plans at the last minute. I felt the familiar twinge. But instead of jumping to the usual conclusions, I paused. I reminded myself of the broader context: their consistency, their honesty, their circumstances. I adjusted my expectations accordingly. The disappointment didn't vanish, but it softened. The story didn't spiral. This doesn't always work. Sometimes the evidence really does accumulate in one direction. Sometimes patterns emerge that require action. Updating beliefs doesn't mean ignoring reality. It means staying responsive to it. The trouble comes when we stop updating altogether. When we let old conclusions run on autopilot.

I think of this often when I catch myself rereading a message, searching for hidden meaning. Or when I feel a surge of certainty based on very little. That certainty is usually a sign that I've stopped questioning my assumptions. *Waiting, I've learned, is a mirror. It reflects not just what we're waiting for, but what we expect to find.*

That evening, after the message arrived and the tension dissipated, I put my phone down again. This time, it felt lighter. Just an object. Not a portal to judgment. I made dinner. I listened to the radio. I let the evening settle.

But the experience stayed with me, quietly. It joined a growing collection of moments that have made me curious about how my mind assigns meaning. How quickly I turn absence into explanation. How eagerly I let the past speak for the present. As I move through my days now, I

try to notice when I'm not just observing events, but interpreting them—layering them with memory, expectation, fear. I try to ask whether my internal odds are being updated fairly, or whether they're being dragged along by old data. It's imperfect work. Ongoing. Some days I catch myself early. Other days I realize only in hindsight how far I've traveled on very little information.

But even that realization helps. It reminds me that uncertainty doesn't require immediate resolution. That silence is not always a signal. That waiting, uncomfortable as it is, doesn't always mean something is wrong.

And it prepares me, in a way, for another habit of mind that's just as powerful and just as misleading—the way I link events together into stories, even when they don't belong together at all. Because once we start explaining the world, it's hard to stop.

Chapter 4: Base Rates

The First Meeting

I was meeting Sheela for the first time. The first time I meet someone new, I'm aware of how much work my mind is doing without asking me first. It gathers details quickly. Too quickly. A tone of voice. A way of standing. Shoes that look practical or impractical, depending on my mood. Within minutes—sometimes seconds—I feel the beginnings of a conclusion forming. I tell myself I'm just observing. But I know better.

This particular meeting took place in a small café, the kind with mismatched chairs and a chalkboard menu written in careful, friendly handwriting. I arrived early, which is my default setting. Early enough to choose a seat, early enough to wonder if I should have chosen a different one.

The person I was meeting walked in a few minutes later. She scanned the room, spotted me, smiled. Nothing remarkable. No red flags. No sparks either. Just a person, arriving. We exchanged pleasantries. Sat down. Ordered coffee. The conversation moved easily enough, but not effortlessly. There were pauses. Moments where one of us searched for the next thing to say. Nothing awkward exactly, but not seamless. As we talked, my mind began quietly sorting the experience into categories.

She was not tall. She was dark. She's very expressive and chatty. This might not go anywhere.

I wasn't unhappy. Just mildly conclusive. When the meeting ended, we said goodbye politely. I walked home replaying parts of the conversation, editing it in my head. By the time I reached my apartment, I felt I had a decent sense of who this person was. Later—weeks later, actually—I would realize how little information I'd been working with.

At the time, though, my confidence felt justified. First impressions often do. They arrive with a sense of clarity, even when they're built on very little. I've always trusted my instincts. Or at least, I've told myself I do. It feels adult to say that. Reassuring. As if intuition were a reliable instrument, finely calibrated. But intuition, I'm learning, is not neutral. It's trained. And it's trained on a very particular set of experiences.

When I meet someone, I'm not just meeting *them*. I'm meeting them in the context of everyone I've met before. People who reminded me of them. Situations that felt similar. Outcomes that followed. If someone is quiet, my mind searches its archive of quiet people. Some were thoughtful. Some were distant. Some were uninterested. The mind doesn't always distinguish carefully. It grabs the most vivid examples and holds them up as representative. This is efficient. It saves time. It also gets things wrong.

There's a concept I came across once that helped me name this habit. It's about *base rates*—the background frequencies of things. How common something actually is, before we add specific details. In everyday terms, it means this: *it helps to ask how often that thing happens in general before deciding what that something means*

Most people are a little nervous when meeting someone new. Most conversations take time to warm up. Most first meetings are unremarkable. But these base facts are quiet. They don't stand out. They're easy to ignore in favor of more vivid interpretations.

I think about this whenever I notice myself reacting strongly to a small signal. A delayed reply. A flat tone. A moment of distraction. These things feel meaningful, but they're also common. The café meeting was a good example. Nothing about it was unusual. Two people meeting for the first time, feeling each other out, not quite finding a rhythm yet. This describes the majority of first meetings I've ever had. And yet, my mind wanted to treat it as diagnostic.

A week later, we met again. Different setting. A walk this time, outside, moving instead of sitting. The conversation was better. Looser. We laughed. The pauses felt natural rather than strained. I remember feeling surprised. Not because anything extraordinary happened, but because it contradicted my initial assessment.

Oh, I thought. Maybe I was wrong.

This shouldn't have been a revelation. It should have been expected. People don't reveal much of themselves in one encounter. Context matters. Comfort matters. Time matters. But my first impression had felt so solid. I've seen this pattern play out in other areas of my life too. At work, someone joins a team and seems disorganized in the first meeting. I quietly label them as such. Weeks later, I learn they were covering for someone else, or new to the process, or having a bad day. My initial judgment, based on a single data point, dissolves. Or someone speaks confidently early on and earns a reputation for competence that persists even when evidence becomes mixed. First impressions stick, not because they're accurate, but because they arrive first. I'm not immune to this myself. I know how much effort it takes to revise an early conclusion. How reluctant the mind is to reopen a case it considers closed.

There's something comforting about quick judgments. They reduce uncertainty. They give us a sense of orientation. In a crowded social world, we're constantly scanning for signals about who is safe, who is interesting, who is likely to matter. But speed comes at a cost. When we overweight early information, we underweight everything that comes later. We stop collecting data. We stop noticing contradictions. I've started to wonder how many people I've misunderstood simply because I didn't give the base rates their due. How many times I assumed meaning where there was only common human behavior. Someone being quiet at a meeting is more likely to be nervous than hostile. Someone being distracted is more likely to be tired than uninterested. Someone being brief is more likely to be busy than dismissive. These explanations are less dramatic. Less personal. They don't flatter the ego. But they're often closer to the truth. There's a humility required to lean on base rates. It means accepting that most things are ordinary. That most

behaviors are not tailored to us specifically. This can feel disappointing at first. We like to believe we're central characters in other people's stories. That their actions are responses to us. Letting go of that idea can feel like shrinking. But I've found it's also a relief. When I remind myself that most silences are just silences, most flat moments are just flat moments, I carry less weight. I don't have to decode every interaction as if it were a puzzle with stakes. This doesn't mean ignoring patterns when they genuinely emerge. Over time, consistent behavior does become informative. Base rates don't replace observation; they ground it. The danger lies in skipping the grounding step.

I've been on the other side of this too. I've been misunderstood early and felt it linger. Labeled quiet when I was overwhelmed. Labeled confident when I was just trying not to show nerves. I could feel the first impression shaping how people interacted with me, narrowing the space I had to show up differently. It's an odd feeling, realizing how little control we have over the story's others tell about us—and how much control we imagine we have over the stories we tell about them.

These days, when I meet someone new, I try to leave more room than I used to. I try to treat the first meeting as what it is: an introduction, not a conclusion. This doesn't come naturally. The impulse to assess is strong. But I've learned to slow it down, to add a quiet asterisk to my early thoughts. This is provisional, I tell myself. This could change. Sometimes I even say it out loud, jokingly, to myself. It helps loosen the grip of certainty.

The person from the café eventually became the person I married to. She became a person who revealed themselves gradually, in pieces, across time and context. If I'd relied solely on that first meeting, I would have missed most of what mattered. This realization has made me more patient—not just with others, but with situations. When something doesn't make sense right away, I try not to rush to interpret it. I remind myself that early data is noisy. That context is incomplete. Life offers very few clean samples. Most of what we see at first is distorted by novelty, nerves, and chance.

Base rates don't eliminate uncertainty. They temper it. They whisper, *this is common. This happens a lot. Don't rush.* There's a kindness in that whisper. It asks us to widen the frame, to see individual moments as part of a larger distribution rather than isolated signals demanding explanation.

As I move through my days now—meeting people, starting things, forming opinions—I try to keep that larger frame in mind. I don't always succeed. I still jump to conclusions. I still mistake vivid impressions for truth. But more often than before, I pause. I ask myself what's actually likely here, given how the world usually works. I let the ordinary have its say. And in that pause, I've found a little more room for curiosity. For patience. For letting stories unfold instead of writing them too soon. Because the more I pay attention, the more I see how often my mind prefers a compelling narrative to a simple explanation. How eager it is to link details into meaning, even when they don't quite belong together.

That habit—the storytelling impulse—turns out to be one of the strongest forces shaping how I experience the world. And it’s one I’m only just beginning to understand.

Chapter 5: Conjunction Fallacy

The Story We Tell

There's a house a few doors down from mine with an overgrown lawn. Not wildly overgrown. Not the kind that draws official notices or neighborhood gossip. Just enough that you notice it if you walk past regularly. The grass grows a little taller than the rest. The edges are soft. The weeds are winning, but politely.

I noticed it one spring morning while taking out the trash. The air still had that early-season chill, and the lawn stood out because everything else was just starting to wake up. Most people had already mowed. This one hadn't.

At first, the observation was neutral. Just a fact. That lawn hasn't been cut yet. But facts, I've learned, rarely stay that way for long.

A few days later, the grass was taller. Still no mower. No sign of activity. That's when the story began to assemble itself, quietly, without my permission.

Maybe they're struggling, I thought. *Maybe they're overwhelmed. Maybe something's going on.*

I pictured a person inside the house—tired, distracted, burdened by something invisible. Illness. Job stress. A relationship unraveling. The lawn became a symbol, standing in for a life slightly out of control. I didn't realize I was doing this until much later. At the time, it felt like empathy.

I walked past that house almost every day. Each time, I added a small detail to the narrative. The curtains were drawn—clearly, privacy was important. The mailbox was full—busy, perhaps. The car hadn't moved—working from home, or maybe unemployed.

The story grew richer, more specific. And because it was specific, it felt true.

This is one of the mind's favorite tricks: the more detailed a story becomes, the more likely we think it is. A vague explanation feels flimsy. A layered one feels convincing. *They're probably just busy* is boring. *They're overwhelmed, dealing with something difficult, and letting small things slide* feels meaningful. Meaning, apparently, is persuasive.

There's a name for this tendency—the belief that a complex, coherent story is more likely than a simple one, even when logic says otherwise. But long before I knew the term, I knew the feeling. The quiet satisfaction of having figured something out. The lawn, in my mind, was no longer just grass. It was evidence.

Weeks passed. The lawn continued to grow. So did my confidence in the story. I told myself I wasn't judging. I was understanding. I was generous. I was reading between the lines.

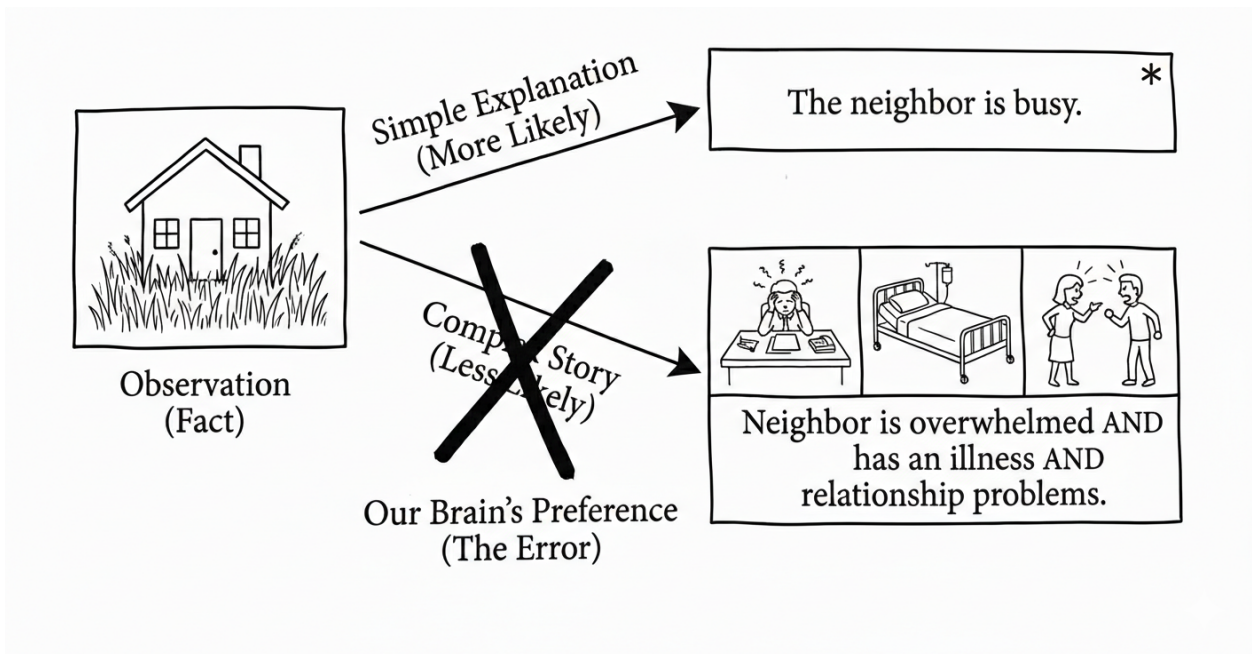
One afternoon, I saw the neighbor for the first time. They were outside, kneeling near the driveway, adjusting something on their bike. They looked calm. Focused. Not distressed. Not hurried. Just someone fixing a bike.

This did not fit the story.

I felt a small flicker of discomfort. Not enough to abandon the narrative entirely, but enough to revise it. *Maybe they're putting on a brave face*, I thought. *You never really know what people are dealing with.*

The story adapted. It always does.

A few days later, the lawn was mowed. Clean edges. Even lines. Completely unremarkable. The mystery ended without a reveal. I remember feeling faintly disappointed. Not because I wished the neighbor harm, but because the story dissolved so quietly. No explanation. No resolution. Just grass, cut late. That's when I realized how invested I'd become in a narrative that had never been necessary.



I do this more often than I'd like to admit. Someone doesn't reply right away, and I imagine a sequence of events that explains it. Someone seems distant, and I build a whole emotional backstory. A meeting goes awkwardly, and I decide it's because of a deeper tension I've uncovered.

These stories feel helpful. They make the world feel legible. They reduce ambiguity. But they also crowd out simpler explanations. The neighbor might have been traveling. They might not care much about lawns. Their mower might have been broken. All of these explanations are not only possible—they're common. They happen all the time. But they're unsatisfying. They don't make for a good story.

I've noticed this tendency especially when I'm uncertain or uncomfortable. The less information I have, the more eager I am to fill in the gaps. Silence invites interpretation. Ambiguity invites narrative.

Once, at work, a colleague seemed abrupt in a meeting. Short answers. Minimal eye contact. I spent the rest of the day replaying the interaction, constructing explanations. *Were they upset with me? Had I said something wrong? Was there underlying conflict?* Later, I learned they'd been dealing with a family emergency that morning. The meeting had nothing to do with me. My story collapsed instantly, replaced by a simpler, more accurate one. But until that moment, I'd been convinced of the more elaborate version.

There's something humbling about realizing how often we prefer complexity over likelihood. How easily we mistake coherence for truth. The irony is that we often pride ourselves on being "good readers of people." We trust our interpretations, especially when they feel emotionally nuanced. But nuance doesn't guarantee accuracy. In fact, it can obscure it.

I think part of this comes from how we learn to understand the world. Stories are how we make sense of things. They have characters, motives, arcs. They explain why things happen. They're how we teach children and entertain ourselves and remember the past. So, when something puzzles us, we instinctively reach for a story-shaped explanation. The trouble begins when we forget that not everything is a story.

Sometimes it's just a lawn.

Sometimes it's just a delay.

Sometimes two things are true independently, not because one caused the other or because they belong together in a larger narrative.

I see this most clearly when I look back at my own history. How many times have I interpreted a series of unrelated events as evidence of a pattern? A bad conversation followed by a bad mood followed by a bad decision, all woven together into a story about decline or failure. At the time, the story felt airtight. In hindsight, it feels forced.

We are very good at connecting dots. We are less good at asking whether the dots need to be connected at all.

I've noticed how this habit affects how we judge others, too. A person is not just late; they're late *and* inconsiderate *and* unreliable. A coworker is not just disorganized; they're disorganized *and* careless *and* unprofessional. Each added detail feels like it strengthens the case. In reality, it narrows our vision. There's a quiet cruelty in this, even when it's unintentional. We reduce people to stories that make sense to us, rather than letting them remain complex and sometimes contradictory.

I've been on the receiving end of this more than once. I can feel it when someone including people who "knew" me have decided who I am based on a handful of moments. They state my intentions before I have time to react. They "read" my mind before I have done anything. They interpret my actions through a fixed lens. They completely neglect the nuance.

It's not malicious. It's efficient. But efficiency isn't always kind.

One of the hardest things I've learned is to tolerate not knowing. To let a situation remain unresolved without rushing to explain it. This goes against every instinct I have.

When something doesn't make sense, my mind wants closure. It wants a reason. It wants a story with a beginning, middle, and end. Letting go of that urge feels like leaving a sentence unfinished.

But there's freedom in it, too.

When I notice myself building a narrative, I try now to pause and ask a simple question: *What's the simplest explanation that would still make sense?* Often, the answer is dull. But often, it's also accurate.

This doesn't mean abandoning empathy or curiosity. It means holding them lightly. It means recognizing that our stories say as much about us as they do about the world.

The lawn taught me that. Not dramatically. Just quietly. Now, when I walk past houses with uncut grass, I still notice. I still wonder. But I try not to conclude. I remind myself that most things have ordinary explanations, and that ordinary doesn't mean careless or broken.

It means human.

I still tell stories. I don't think that will ever stop. But I'm learning to tell them with a question mark instead of a period.

This might be what's happening, I think. Or it might not.

That small shift matters. Because once we believe a story completely, we stop seeing alternatives. We stop gathering information. We stop being surprised. And surprise, I'm realizing, is not something to avoid. It's often the first sign that we're paying attention again.

As I've become more aware of the stories I tell, I've also started noticing another pattern—how often I confuse meaningful sequences with meaningful effort. How easily I assume that outcomes are tied neatly to intention, even when chance is doing most of the work. That realization has been unsettling in a different way. Because if stories aren't always true, then control might not be either.

Chapter 6: False Positives

The Alarm Goes Off

The smoke alarm went off while I was making toast.

This is not an unusual sentence. It's almost a cliché of domestic life. Burnt toast, shrieking alarm, frantic waving of a dish towel. I've lived in enough apartments to know the routine by heart. Still, every time it happens, my body reacts as if something truly terrible is unfolding. The sound is immediate and violent. It doesn't build. It arrives at full volume, slicing through whatever you were thinking about a second earlier. My shoulders jump. My heart speeds up. For a moment, I forget where I am.

I stared at the toaster, which was producing a thin ribbon of smoke that didn't seem nearly dramatic enough to justify the noise. I yanked the plug out of the wall, as if that might help. The alarm continued its insistence.

I waved a towel. I opened a window. I stood beneath the alarm, staring up at it, irritated and slightly embarrassed, even though I was alone.

Eventually, it stopped.

The silence afterward felt almost heavy. My heart took a moment to catch up. I leaned against the counter and laughed, a little shakily, at how intense my reaction had been. It was just toast. But my body didn't know that at first. It only knew that something was wrong. Or at least, that something *might* be wrong.

This happens more often than we admit. Not just with smoke alarms, but with all kinds of internal warning systems. We react to signals that are meant to protect us. Signals that err on the side of caution. Signals that don't want to miss a real emergency, even if it means sounding the alarm when nothing serious is happening.

A smoke detector that only goes off when there's a real fire would be too late too often. So, it's tuned to be sensitive. It trades accuracy for safety. This makes sense. It's doing its job. The problem arises when we forget that false alarms are part of the design.

I've noticed that my emotional alarms work much the same way. A sharp tone in an email sets something off. A sigh from someone I care about triggers concern. A meeting invite with no explanation makes my stomach tighten. These reactions arrive quickly, before I've had time to assess the situation. They're loud. Insistent. Hard to ignore. And like the smoke alarm, they often turn out to be responding to burnt toast.

An email is brief because the person is busy. The sigh is about something else entirely. The meeting is routine. But by the time I realize this, my body has already reacted. The stress hormones are already circulating. The worry has already flared.

I've spent a lot of time feeling embarrassed about this. About how easily I react. How quickly I jump to concern or defensiveness or dread. I've told myself I'm too sensitive. Too anxious. Too prone to overthinking. What I'm starting to understand, though, is that this isn't a personal flaw so much as a calibration issue. My internal alarms are set to be sensitive because, at some point, that was useful. Earlier in my life, being alert helped me. Reading between the lines mattered. Anticipating shifts in mood or tone wasn't optional; it was adaptive. It kept things smoother. Safer. The trouble is that systems designed for one environment don't always adjust automatically when the environment changes.

The alarm keeps ringing at the same threshold, even when the stakes are lower. I see this clearly now when I notice how often my first reaction overshoots reality. Someone doesn't respond right away, and I feel a spike of worry. Someone sounds distant, and I brace myself. A plan changes, and I feel a flicker of panic. These reactions feel justified in the moment. The alarm is loud. Urgent. It demands attention.

But if I wait—if I open the window, wave the towel, give it a moment—the situation usually clarifies. The smoke dissipates. The danger recedes. The alarm was wrong, but not malicious. Just cautious.

I once worked with someone who reacted strongly to every potential issue. If a deadline shifted slightly, they were convinced it spelled disaster. If feedback was unclear, they assumed the worst. Watching them was exhausting, but also familiar. I recognized myself.

We talked about it once, casually, over coffee. They admitted they were always waiting for something to go wrong. That it felt safer to prepare for catastrophe than to be surprised by it. I understood that instinct deeply.

False positives feel better than missed signals, especially if you've lived through situations where missing a signal had consequences. The nervous system remembers those lessons long after the context has changed. But living in a constant state of alarm has its own cost. It drains energy. It narrows perspective. It makes ordinary moments feel charged when they don't need to be.

I've noticed how this plays out in relationships. *If you assume every tension is a sign of deeper trouble, you respond defensively. You pull back. You protect yourself from a threat that may not exist. Over time, this can create the very distance you were afraid of. I've done this. More than once. A small misunderstanding becomes a signal. A signal becomes a story. A story becomes behavior. And behavior shapes outcomes.* All because the alarm went off.

The hardest part is that these reactions feel automatic. They arrive before thought. Before logic. Before reassurance. Telling myself to “calm down” has never worked. Neither has scolding myself for reacting. What has helped—slowly—is learning to treat the alarm as information, not instruction.

The sound means: Something might be wrong. Not: Something is definitely wrong.

That distinction matters. When the smoke alarm goes off, I don’t ignore it. I investigate. I look for smoke. I check the stove. I open a window. I don’t assume the house is burning down, but I also don’t pretend nothing is happening. I’m trying to do the same internally.

When I feel that surge of worry or defensiveness or dread, I try to pause. To ask what triggered it. To gather more information before acting. Sometimes I even imagine the alarm sound in my head and smile a little. It helps create distance. Ah, I think. The alarm again. This doesn’t stop the feeling, but it changes my relationship to it. I become less reactive, more curious. I ask myself: *What’s the base rate here? How often does this signal indicate real danger?* Usually, the answer is: not often.

This doesn’t mean real danger never exists. Sometimes the alarm is right. Sometimes something really is wrong. Patterns emerge. Evidence accumulates. The point isn’t to ignore signals. It’s to verify them.

I’ve learned this the hard way, through a series of misunderstandings that didn’t need to escalate. Through emails reread too many times. Through conversations entered with armor instead of openness. Each time, I thought I was protecting myself. In reality, I was exhausting myself.

There’s a quiet bravery in letting the alarm ring without immediately obeying it. In sitting with the discomfort of uncertainty long enough to see what’s actually there. This is especially difficult in a culture that rewards immediacy. We’re encouraged to respond quickly, decisively. To trust our gut. To act before doubt creeps in. But guts, like smoke alarms, can be overly sensitive.

I’ve started to admire people who respond slowly. Not because they’re indifferent, but because they’re deliberate. They don’t assume every signal requires immediate action. They gather context. They wait. Waiting doesn’t come naturally to me. It feels risky. Like ignoring a warning sign. But I’m learning that not every warning is urgent. Not every noise is a fire.

One evening, months after the toast incident, the alarm went off again. This time, I didn’t panic. I sighed. I opened the window. I waved the towel. The alarm stopped more quickly than usual. I noticed something small then: my body settled faster too. It wasn’t that I’d become immune to the sound. It was that I trusted myself to handle it. I think that’s what we’re really after—not silence, but confidence. The confidence that we can respond appropriately once we know more. That we don’t have to decide everything at the first signal.

As I've become more aware of my false alarms, I've also started noticing something else: how often I mistake repeated signals for meaningful patterns, even when they're independent of one another. One alarm after another can feel like evidence. Like confirmation. Like proof that something bigger is happening. But sometimes, it's just toast. Again. And learning to tell the difference—that feels like the next quiet challenge waiting just ahead.

Chapter 7: Law of Large Numbers

The Quiet Work of Repetition

Most of my days do not stand out. They don't announce themselves with strong opinions or memorable scenes. They begin the same way, end the same way, and blur together when I try to recall them later. If I'm honest, this used to bother me. I worried that the lack of distinction meant something was wrong. That I was letting time slip by unnoticed.

Now I'm less sure.

The morning usually starts with the same small negotiations. How long to stay in bed. Whether the light outside means anything about my mood. Which mug to use. These decisions feel trivial, but they repeat often enough to feel structural, like beams holding up the day.

I make coffee. Sometimes it tastes better than other times, though I use the same beans and the same method. I've stopped trying to explain this. I drink it anyway. I check the weather even when I already know what it's doing. I put on shoes. I leave. Nothing about this is remarkable. And yet, this is where most of my life takes place.

For a long time, I paid almost no attention to these moments. I was too busy waiting for something else—the important parts, the defining experiences, the days I would someday remember clearly. But memory is selective in strange ways. It favors peaks and valleys. It forgets the steady ground in between. The trouble with that is that the steady ground is where habits live. And habits, quietly and persistently, shape outcomes. There's an idea I once encountered that stuck with me: *a single action doesn't tell you much, but repeated actions tell you almost everything. One choice can be an exception. Many choices form a pattern.*

This isn't a glamorous insight. It doesn't fit neatly on a poster. But it feels true. I think about this when I fold laundry. Folding laundry is not an activity that inspires reflection on its own. It's repetitive. Slightly tedious. Predictable. I stand there pairing socks, smoothing shirts, stacking things that will soon be unfolded again. Nothing is accomplished in a lasting way. The laundry will return. And yet, over time, something accumulates. Clean clothes. Order, briefly. A sense that I am taking care of my life in small, unspectacular ways. I used to resent how often these tasks returned, how little credit they seemed to earn. Now I see them differently. They are evidence. Proof of continuity. One load of laundry doesn't matter much. Hundreds of loads mean I've lived somewhere. That I've stayed.

The same is true of commuting. For years, I thought of it as lost time. Minutes dissolved between home and work, unaccounted for. But those minutes add up. They form routines. Familiar faces. A rhythm of movement through space. I know which stop smells faintly of coffee. Which stretch of road always backs up. Which seat gets the afternoon light. These details don't change my life dramatically, but they anchor it. When something goes wrong—a missed

connection, a delayed train—it feels larger precisely because it interrupts the pattern. We notice disruption more than continuity. But continuity is doing the real work.

I see this clearly when I look at people I admire. Not in moments of achievement, but in how they move through ordinary days. How they show up. How they repeat themselves. The friend who checks in regularly, not just during crises. The colleague who prepares consistently, not just when visibility is high. The neighbor who quietly tends their lawn, season after season. None of this makes headlines. But over time, it builds trust.

I think we underestimate how powerful averages are. We focus so much on outliers—the exceptional success, the catastrophic failure—that we forget how rarely those moments define us. *Who we are is mostly an average of what we do when nothing special is happening.* This realization has changed how I judge myself. I used to measure progress in spikes. A good week felt meaningful. A bad one felt alarming. Everything hinged on short stretches of time. Now I try—imperfectly—to widen the window. A single unproductive day doesn't undo a year of steady effort. A single act of kindness doesn't make someone kind, but many of them do. The math is simple, even if the emotions aren't. There's comfort in this. It means I don't have to be extraordinary today. I just have to be consistent enough, often enough. This doesn't mean drifting. It means trusting accumulation.

I've noticed this especially in relationships. Early on, we tend to look for signals—grand gestures, emotional clarity, dramatic moments that tell us where we stand. Over time, those moments become less frequent. What replaces them is pattern. Does she call when she says she will? Does she show up more often than not? Does she listen, even when distracted? These things don't sparkle. But they endure. I've been guilty of overlooking this. Of dismissing steady care because it didn't feel intense enough. Of mistaking consistency for complacency. But intensity burns fast. Consistency lasts. The same is true internally. How I talk to myself on average matters more than what I say during moments of crisis or triumph. Most days, the internal dialogue is quiet. Functional. Neutral. Occasionally critical. Occasionally kind. I used to think only the loud moments counted—the breakthroughs, the self-recriminations, the resolutions made at night and forgotten by morning. Now I'm paying more attention to the background noise. The tone that repeats. The assumptions that quietly accumulate. Am I generally patient with myself, or generally harsh? Do I recover quickly from small mistakes, or do I linger? Do I notice what goes right, or only what goes wrong? No single answer settles these questions. But over time, patterns emerge. This awareness has softened my urgency. I no longer feel compelled to extract meaning from every day. Some days are just entries in a long list. That's not failure. That's structure. There's something deeply human about repetition. Meals, sleep, work, rest. We circle the same needs again and again. Progress doesn't mean leaving them behind. It means learning how to meet them with a little more grace.

I think about this when I cook dinner. Most nights, it's nothing elaborate. Something familiar. Something that fits into the time available. I've cooked the same meals so many times that my hands move without instruction. Occasionally, I try something new. Sometimes it works.

Sometimes it doesn't. But what feeds me, literally and figuratively, is the repetition. I don't remember most of these meals. But they've kept me going. There's a quiet dignity in that.

The law of large numbers, as I understand it now, isn't about destiny or guarantee. It's about reassurance. It tells us that randomness evens out over time. That noise settles. That patterns reveal themselves if we're patient enough to look at enough data. In life, that patience is hard-earned. We want feedback quickly. We want to know if we're doing well. If we're improving. If our efforts matter. Often, the only honest answer is: not yet clear. This used to frustrate me. Now it comforts me. It means I don't have to draw conclusions too soon. I think back to times when I felt stuck, convinced that nothing was changing. In hindsight, change was happening quietly, beneath the threshold of notice. Skills were developing. Confidence was stabilizing. Relationships were deepening. None of it announced itself. It just accumulated.

There's also mercy in this idea. It means a bad day doesn't carry too much weight. It means mistakes can be absorbed. It means redemption doesn't require drama—just repetition in a different direction. I've seen this in myself when I've tried to change small habits. Not through sweeping resolutions, but through modest adjustments repeated often enough to matter. Going to bed a little earlier. Listening a little longer. Choosing restraint instead of reaction. None of these choices transformed me overnight. But over time, they shifted the average. And the average, I'm learning, is where life actually lives.

As I grow more comfortable with this, I've become less preoccupied with optimization. I don't need every day to be maximized. I need most days to be sustainable. Sustainability is not exciting. It doesn't trend. But it endures. There are still days that break the pattern. Illness. Crisis. Unexpected joy. These moments matter. They remind us that life is not flat. But they don't replace the long run. They interrupt it. When I think about the future now, I think less in terms of events and more in terms of direction. Am I generally moving toward something that feels livable? Am I building a life I can repeat? These are quieter questions. Less dramatic. But they feel more honest.

The strange thing is, once I stopped demanding that every day be meaningful, more of them became so. Not in a loud way. In a steady one. I notice small satisfactions more easily. A well-made cup of coffee. A familiar route. A task completed. These moments don't demand interpretation. They just exist. As I move forward, I'm trying to trust the math of accumulation. To believe that showing up, again and again, counts for more than I can see in any single moment. And I'm beginning to suspect that this trust will be tested—not by boredom or repetition, but by interruption. Because just as patterns form over time, they're constantly being nudged. Bumped. Redirected by chance encounters and unexpected events. And learning how to understand those disruptions—without losing faith in the long run—may be the hardest part yet.

Chapter 8: Independence

When Things Feel Connected but Aren't

There are days when everything seems to go wrong at once. Not in a dramatic way. No single event is catastrophic. It's just a sequence of small things, stacked close enough together that they begin to feel intentional. It starts with waking up later than planned. Not alarm-missed late, just late enough to feel rushed. I knock my elbow on the doorframe while pulling on a jacket. The coffee tastes off—burnt, maybe, or weak. I spill a little on the counter and wipe it up too quickly, leaving a faint sticky patch I'll notice later with annoyance.

Outside, the bus arrives early and leaves without me, or arrives late and makes me late. Either way, I stand there longer than I want to, watching traffic move in uneven bursts. Someone brushes past me without apologizing. Someone else sighs loudly, as if we're all personally responsible for the delay. By the time I get where I'm going, my mood has shifted. I'm sharper than usual. Less patient. Small inconveniences feel pointed. Then an email arrives that's shorter than expected. No greeting. No sign-off. Just the information, stripped of warmth.

Of course, I think. that figures.

This is the moment where my mind begins to tie things together. The late start. The bad coffee. The missed bus. The tone of the email. In my head, they form a chain. Evidence of a kind of day. The sort of day where nothing quite cooperates. I feel justified in my irritation. The pattern is clear. Except—it isn't.

What's actually happening is a series of unrelated events, each with its own causes, each indifferent to the others. The bus didn't arrive late because I spilled coffee. The email wasn't curt because I woke up rushed. The universe is not coordinating these things to test me. But it feels like it is.

I've always been susceptible to this feeling. The sense that once something goes wrong, the rest is likely to follow. As if events carry momentum, or moods invite consequences. I brace myself after the first inconvenience, expecting more. And because I'm braced, I notice them more readily when they arrive. This is how a day becomes "one of those days." It took me a long time to realize how much of this is interpretation rather than fact.

Independence, in the way I've come to understand it, is the idea that some events have nothing to do with each other, even if they occur close together. They don't conspire. They don't compound by nature. They simply coexist. But the human mind struggles with this. We are meaning-makers. We look for connection instinctively. We assume proximity implies relationship. When two things happen back-to-back, we search for a link. Sometimes that link is real. Cause and effect exist. Patterns emerge for good reason. But often, we overreach.

I think about how easily I attribute intention to sequences. If one meeting goes badly, I walk into the next one guarded. If one conversation feels tense, I carry that tension forward, interpreting neutral interactions through its lens. The events themselves are independent. My reaction is not.

Once, years ago, I had a string of small mishaps in a single afternoon. I dropped my phone and cracked the screen. I missed a deadline by a few minutes. I received a piece of feedback that stung more than it should have. By the end of the day, I was convinced I was spiraling. That something fundamental was off. That I needed to “get it together.” Looking back, none of those things were connected. The phone slipped because my hands were full. The deadline was missed because I misread the time. The feedback was fair, if imperfectly delivered. But at the time, they blended into a single narrative: I’m losing control. That narrative stayed with me longer than any of the individual events. It shaped how I spoke to myself for days afterward. This is the quiet danger of assuming connection where there is none. We turn coincidence into character judgment.

I’ve noticed this especially in how I think about luck. If something good happens early in the day, I feel buoyed. I move more confidently, assume cooperation. When something bad happens early, I do the opposite. I tread carefully, as if the ground has become unstable. The early event becomes a kind of forecast. But the day does not know how it began. It does not remember. It does not adjust its behavior accordingly. Only I do.

There’s a superstition embedded in this thinking, even when we don’t recognize it as such. The belief that momentum exists independently of our actions. That good days and bad days are categories, not collections. I still fall into this trap. I still say things like, “It’s just one thing after another,” even when I know, intellectually, that it isn’t. What’s helped is slowing down enough to separate the pieces. *This happened. Now this is happening. No arrow between them.* No implication. This sounds simple. It’s not.

When you’re already frustrated, neutrality feels dismissive. You want validation. You want to acknowledge that the day feels stacked against you. And maybe it does feel that way. Feelings don’t require logical consistency to be real. But interpretation does. I’ve learned to ask myself, gently, whether I’m responding to what’s in front of me, or to a story that’s already taken shape. Sometimes I even list things, mentally or on paper. It helps to see them laid out.

Missed bus.

Cold coffee.

Brief email.

Separate lines. No paragraph.

When I do this, the emotional weight shifts. The day stops being an accusation and becomes a series of minor inconveniences. Annoying, yes. But not indicting. This matters because how we interpret sequences affects how we behave next. If I believe the day is “going badly,” I’m more likely to snap. To withdraw. To make choices that reflect that belief. If I treat each moment as its

own thing, I recover faster. I reset more easily. This doesn't mean pretending everything is fine. It means not letting one thing speak for another. I've noticed how often we do this to other people too.

Someone makes a mistake, and suddenly everything they do is viewed through that lens. Each action feels connected, reinforcing a judgment that may not be fair. We say things like, "*That's just how they are,*" when what we mean is, "*I've linked a few unrelated moments into a story I now trust.*"

Independence asks us to resist that impulse. To allow people—and days—to be inconsistent without being incoherent. This is harder than it sounds. There's comfort in patterns, even negative ones. At least they explain things. At least they tell us what to expect.

Letting go of false connections means accepting uncertainty again. It means acknowledging that the next moment is not obligated to resemble the last. I've been practicing this in small ways. When something goes wrong, I try to pause before predicting what comes next. I remind myself that the future hasn't been consulted yet. Sometimes I even say it aloud, half-joking: "That was its own thing." It helps more than I'd like to admit.

The other afternoon, I had one of those days. A meeting ran long. Lunch was unsatisfying. I felt off, distracted. Then something unexpected happened. A friend called. Not for any reason. Just to check in. We talked briefly. Nothing profound. But the conversation lifted me. If I'd been committed to the story of the day, I might have missed it. I might have interpreted the call through the lens of irritation, or brushed it off. Instead, I noticed how easily the tone shifted. How little it took. The earlier events hadn't doomed the day. They'd just happened. This realization doesn't make life smoother, exactly. It makes it more open.

When events are independent, then recovery is always possible. No moment has to carry the burden of the ones before it. There's something hopeful in that.

I'm not always good at remembering it. Especially when I'm tired. Especially when I'm already frustrated. That's when the mind wants to collapse complexity into a single verdict. But even then, a part of me knows better now. A quieter part that says: This does not mean what you think it means. That voice doesn't erase the feeling, but it keeps it from hardening.

As I've grown more attentive to these mental shortcuts—the way I link events, assign momentum, build patterns too quickly—I've also started to notice another force at work in my life. Not the illusion of connection, but the reality of it. Because while many things are independent, not everything is. Sometimes paths really do cross. Sometimes one small, unplanned interaction genuinely alters what comes next. And learning to tell the difference between false patterns and real intersections—that feels like the next lesson waiting just ahead.

Chapter 9: Random Walks

Missed Connections and Accidental Turns

A few years ago, I was in Dijon, France. On a Saturday morning I set out with a very specific, very small goal: I wanted to find a particular used bookstore on the other side of the city. I had the address in my head and a general sense of north.

But a "random walk" began the moment I stepped off the Airbnb.

Three blocks in, I saw a street performer—a cellist playing something that sounded like a memory. I stopped to listen for five minutes. When I started walking again, I took the right-hand fork of the road because the sunlight hit the autumn leaves better on that side. Two blocks later, a sudden construction fence blocked my "intended" path, so I drifted one street over. Then, I saw a sign for a pop-up plant sale and spent ten minutes looking at ferns I had no intention of buying.

By the time an hour had passed, I realized I was nowhere near the bookstore. In fact, I was in a neighborhood I barely recognized.

I sat down at a small cafe table on the sidewalk, frustrated. I felt like I had "lost" the morning. I had set a trajectory and failed to maintain it. But as I sat there, I looked across the street and saw a small, community-run gallery. I wandered in and saw a painting that perfectly captured a feeling I'd been trying to put into words for months. That painting eventually became the spark for the book that you have in your hands right now.

We like to think of our lives as "Guided Walks"—intentional marches toward a career, a relationship, or a goal. But most of our days are Random Walks. We take a right turn because the coffee smells good; we stay five minutes late at the office because we're finishing a sentence; we strike up a conversation with a stranger because they're wearing a hat we like.

None of these steps are "the big one." But they are the steps that determine where we land.

The Quiet Asterisk in this chapter is the reminder that we are rarely "lost". We are simply on a path whose destination hasn't been revealed yet. The asterisk sits at the end of the sentence: *I am not where I planned to be* *. Because the missing data isn't the map—it's the realization that the "drift" is often where the most important things happen.

This Saturday morning drift is what mathematicians call a *Random Walk*. While it feels like a series of mistakes, it is actually a fundamental way that systems—from gas molecules to stock prices to human lives—explore the space around them. It is a path that consists of a succession of random steps. In physics, it's how a drop of ink moves through a glass of water. It doesn't move in a line; it drifts, bumping into molecules, taking a thousand tiny, zig-zagging turns until it colors the whole glass.

There are days when it feels like I am moving with purpose, and days when it feels like I am simply moving. The difference matters less than I once thought. For a long time, I believed progress was supposed to feel directional. Forward. Intentional. Like a line you could trace if someone asked how you got here. I assumed that if I was paying attention—choosing carefully, working hard, staying alert—I would move toward something recognizable. Instead, most of my life has felt like a series of small steps taken without knowing where the next one would land.

I turn left because the sidewalk is crowded.

I take a job because it's available, not because it's ideal.

I miss a call, forget to reply, arrive late, leave early.

Nothing dramatic. Just slight deviations. This, I've learned, is what a random walk feels like from the inside. Not chaos. Not destiny. Just motion shaped by chance encounters, timing, and proximity. In theory, a random walk has no memory. Each step depends only on where you are now, not how you got there. In practice, of course, we do remember. We carry disappointment, hope, embarrassment, longing. But even with memory, the path rarely feels planned.

I notice this most when I think about the people I almost knew. There's the friend I might have had if I'd stayed a little longer at that party. The mentor I didn't follow up with because I assumed they were too busy. The neighborhood girl I admired and smiled at for years but never spoke with, until one day she moved away. None of these were decisions. They were non-decisions. Slight pauses. Missed moments that didn't feel important enough to mark. And yet, when I look back, they form a quiet map of alternate routes.

It's tempting to romanticize these missed connections—to imagine the lives that could have unfolded if only one step had gone differently. But most of the time, the truth is less cinematic.

Nothing terrible happened. Nothing extraordinary was lost.

The path simply bent another way. This is something probability understands better than we do. We like to believe our lives follow arcs. Probability sees trajectories. Wandering ones. A random walk doesn't aim. It explores. It drifts until something nudges it elsewhere.

When I was younger, I found this idea unsettling. I wanted assurance that my choices mattered—that they were steering me somewhere meaningful. The thought that so much depended on chance felt like a diminishment. Now, it feels more honest. I think of my career, if I can call it that. It looks coherent in retrospect. A narrative emerges if I arrange the steps carefully enough. But living it didn't feel like that at all. It felt improvised. I took one opportunity because another fell through. I learned skills because someone needed help. I stayed in places longer than planned because leaving felt harder than staying. At no point did I step back and say, *this is the*

path. I just kept responding to what was near. That's another feature of random walks: *proximity matters more than intention*.

We don't choose from all possible futures. We choose from what's in reach. From the doors already ajar. From the conversations already started. This explains why advice is so often useless.

"Follow your passion," people say, as if passion were a fixed destination instead of something that grows when you linger. "Make a plan," they say, ignoring how often plans dissolve on contact with reality. Most of us aren't navigating open space. We're navigating crowded rooms. We bump into others' needs, moods, schedules, histories. Their random walks intersect with ours, altering both trajectories slightly.

A casual remark leads to a new idea.

A delay leads to an unexpected meeting.

A rejection sends you somewhere you wouldn't have considered otherwise.

From the inside, these moments feel arbitrary. From the outside—from later—they look consequential. This is where the long run quietly enters. Because while each step is uncertain, the accumulation isn't meaningless.

When I zoom out on my own life, I don't see a straight line. I see clusters. Periods where I lingered in similar places, emotionally and physically. Periods where I oscillated between options, unsure which one to commit to. Periods where movement felt stalled, followed by periods where everything seemed to change at once. At the time, these phases felt disconnected. Looking back, they rhyme. This doesn't mean everything happens for a reason. That idea has never sat right with me. It puts too much pressure on accidents and too much blame on outcomes.

What feels truer is this: *patterns emerge even when no one is designing them*.

A random walk, over time, reveals tendencies. You drift toward what you tolerate. You stay near what you don't actively leave. You become familiar with what surrounds you long enough.

These are not moral judgments. They're observations.

I used to be hard on myself for periods when I felt lost. When I couldn't articulate a goal or justify my choices with confidence. I thought something was wrong—that I was behind, unfocused, wasting time. Now I think I was just walking. Learning the terrain by moving through it.

Random walks look inefficient up close. They double back. They stall. They revisit the same spots. But they're surprisingly effective at exploration. They expose you to variation. They let you notice what pulls you forward and what quietly repels you.

I didn't know what kind of work I wanted until I'd done work I didn't.

I didn't know what kind of relationships sustained me until I'd stayed in ones that didn't.

I didn't know what mattered until I noticed what kept repeating.

None of this could have been optimized in advance. That realization softened something in me. It made missed connections less tragic. Accidental turns less alarming. Not every unopened door is a loss. Some are just directions you didn't take. There's another thing about random walks we rarely acknowledge: they're exhausting. Moving without clear markers of progress drains you in a particular way. You expend energy without receiving the reassurance of advancement. You're busy, but not validated. This is where comparison becomes dangerous.

When you look at someone else's path—especially when it's narrated cleanly—it's easy to assume they moved with intention while you wandered. That they had a map while you guessed. But most maps are drawn after the journey. I've talked to enough people I admire to know this. Their certainty is retrospective. Their clarity arrived late. They, too, missed calls. Stayed too long. Left too early. Made choices based on what was nearby rather than what was ideal. The difference isn't that they avoided randomness. It's that they stayed in motion long enough for something to take shape. The long run doesn't reward perfection. It rewards persistence. This doesn't mean you should never stop or choose deliberately. Pauses matter. Decisions matter. But they operate within a larger drift you don't fully control. Accepting this changes how you interpret setbacks. A missed opportunity stops being a verdict. It becomes one step among many. A rejection stops defining you. It redirects you slightly. When you're in the middle of a random walk, every turn feels significant. When you look back, many of them blur together. This is not dismissal. It's mercy.

I think of friendships that faded without conflict. We didn't fall out. We drifted apart. Different schedules. Different priorities. Slight misalignments that compounded over time. At first, I mourned these losses intensely. I assumed someone had failed. Me or them. Now I see them as parallel walks that stopped intersecting. That doesn't mean they didn't matter. It means they mattered then.

The long run holds room for that kind of tenderness. It allows relationships to be meaningful without being permanent. The same is true of versions of ourselves.

I was once someone who wanted different things. Who believed different stories about success, happiness, urgency. That person didn't disappear. They were absorbed.

Random walks don't erase past positions. They move away from them. This helps me forgive earlier selves for not knowing what I know now. They weren't ignorant. They were exploring. When I'm patient with this process, something shifts in how I move through current uncertainty.

I stop demanding immediate coherence. I stop narrating every decision as destiny or disaster. I let steps be steps. This doesn't make life passive. It makes it navigable. I still care about direction. I still make choices. But I hold them more lightly. I know now that even deliberate moves will be altered by chance. And that chance doesn't have to be an enemy.

Random walks are not aimless. They are adaptive. They respond to obstacles. They incorporate surprise. They make use of what's available. When I trust this, I feel less pressure to justify every turn. Less urgency to explain myself to an imaginary audience. I focus instead on staying attentive. Curious. Willing. The long run will do what it does.

One day, often without warning, you look back and notice that something has formed. A rhythm. A pattern. A life that makes sense enough. Not because it was planned. But because you kept walking. And maybe that's the quiet truth this chapter keeps circling:

Meaning doesn't arrive through control. It emerges through motion. You don't need to know where every step leads. You only need to stay in the walk long enough for the path to reveal itself—not as a straight line, but as a shape you can finally recognize as your own. And when you do, you realize something gentle and surprising:

The randomness didn't derail you. It carried you here.

Which is why, even now, the only real question is not *Where am I going?*

It's *Am I still moving?* If we accept that we are on a random walk, we can stop asking *Am I on the right path?* and start asking *What is interesting in the neighborhood I've drifted into?*

Chapter 10: Expected Value

What We Do Anyway

There's a particular kind of decision I make over and over again, even though it rarely makes sense on paper. I answer an email that probably won't lead anywhere. I apply for something I'm unlikely to get. I show up to a gathering when I already feel tired, unsure I'll enjoy myself. I offer help when I don't know if it will matter, or if it will even be noticed. If I were strict about odds, I'd stop doing these things. If I were honest about probabilities alone, I'd conserve my energy, narrow my efforts, wait for better guarantees. But I don't. And neither do most people I know. We live as if something besides likelihood is at work. I think about this most clearly when someone asks for help. It's rarely convenient. It often interrupts something else. There's no certainty the help will change the outcome in any meaningful way. Sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it barely registers. And yet, I usually say yes. Not every time. I have limits. But often enough that it's become part of who I am. If I pause and ask myself why, the answer is never, "Because this will definitely succeed." It's usually closer to, "Because it feels like the right thing to do," or, "Because I'd want someone to do the same for me," or simply, "Because not doing it would feel worse." The value isn't in the result alone. It's in the act. I used to feel slightly foolish about this. As if I were being inefficient with my care. As if adulthood required better optimization. But over time, I've come to see these choices differently. They're not irrational. They're just measured on a different scale.

Expected value, in the simplest sense, isn't only about how likely something is to work. It's about what's at stake if it does—and what it costs if you never try. Some things are worth doing even when they fail. Some actions carry meaning regardless of outcome. This realization didn't arrive all at once. It grew slowly, through repetition.

In mathematics, Expected Value is a simple calculation: You take the probability of an outcome and multiply it by the value of that outcome. Usually, we use this for money. If you have a 10% chance of winning \$100, the "Expected Value" of that bet is \$10. If the ticket costs \$5, it's a "positive EV" bet. You should take it every time, even if you lose the first nine times.

But in life, we often get the math wrong because we focus entirely on the Probability (which is low) and ignore the Value (which is infinite).

I think of the times I reached out to someone I hadn't spoken to in years. Most of those messages led nowhere. Polite replies. Brief updates. Then silence again. But once in a while, something opened. A real conversation. A renewed friendship. A sense of continuity I didn't know I needed. If I only counted successes, the effort wouldn't justify itself. But that's not the right accounting. The cost of sending a message was small. The potential upside—connection, repair, warmth—was large. Even when nothing came of it, I didn't regret trying. And when something did come of it, it mattered.

When I reached out to that friend I hadn't spoken to in years, the Probability of a life-changing reconnection was maybe 5%. On paper, that looks like a bad bet. But if the Value of that reconnection is "High" (a restored friendship, a sense of belonging), the Expected Value remains positive even if the odds are slim.

This is how I've started to understand many of my better decisions. Not as bets I expected to win, but as ones that were worth placing. The same is true of creative work. Most of what I write never goes anywhere. It doesn't find an audience. It doesn't get polished. It doesn't justify the time spent on it, if judged strictly by results. But writing changes me, even when no one reads it. It sharpens my attention. It gives shape to my thinking. It helps me notice what I would otherwise overlook. The value accumulates internally. I didn't understand this early on. I was outcome-focused. Publication. Recognition. Clear markers of success. Now, those things still matter—but they're not the whole story. I've learned to respect the quieter returns.

The same applies to showing up. Showing up to meetings where I feel out of place. Showing up to conversations I'd rather avoid. Showing up for people when I'm not sure I have the right words. Most of these moments don't produce anything dramatic. They don't resolve neatly. They don't get rewarded. But they add something subtle to the shape of a life. A reputation for reliability. A habit of engagement. A sense that I'm participating rather than waiting. That last part matters more than I used to think.

For a long time, I waited. I waited for confidence before acting. For clarity before choosing. For certainty before committing. I told myself this was prudence. Often, it was fear dressed up as logic. Waiting feels safe. It protects you from embarrassment, from rejection, from wasted effort. But it also carries a cost. A quiet one, easy to ignore. Opportunities pass. Muscles weaken. Courage atrophies. The longer you wait for guarantees, the smaller your world becomes.

This isn't something anyone told me directly. I noticed it in hindsight. In paths not taken because I wanted better odds. In relationships that faded because I hesitated too long. In chances I declined because the outcome wasn't assured. None of these decisions were wrong in isolation. But together, they formed a pattern. I was living defensively.

Expected value, as it turns out, isn't about optimism. It's about acknowledging that uncertainty is the price of entry. You don't get to choose certainty or engagement. *You choose engagement with uncertainty, or disengagement disguised as caution.*

I see this now in small moral dilemmas. Do I speak up when it might make things awkward? Do I offer kindness when it might not be returned? Do I try when the odds aren't in my favor? There's no formula that answers these questions cleanly. But there is a posture. A willingness to act without guarantees. A willingness to accept that some value is realized only in the trying.

I think of a friend who volunteers regularly. Not for recognition. Not because it fixes everything. But because, as they once said, *"It keeps me from becoming someone I don't want to be."* That sentence stayed with me. It reframed the question entirely. The action wasn't about success rates.

It was about identity. *Who do you become by choosing this?* That's a kind of expected value we don't talk about much. Every choice nudges us in a direction. Reinforces a habit. Confirms a self-concept. When I choose generosity, even imperfectly, I strengthen my capacity for it. When I choose withdrawal, I do the same. Neither choice is permanent. But repetition matters. Over time, these choices compound—not into certainty, but into character. I don't mean this in a moralizing way. There's no scoreboard. No final tally. Just a gradual shaping. I've come to believe that living well under uncertainty means accepting this shaping without demanding guarantees. It means doing some things simply because they align with how you want to move through the world. Helping, even when it doesn't solve everything. Trying, even when you might fail. Showing up, even when the room feels cold. Not because you expect a payoff, but because the alternative feels like shrinking. Probability, in this sense, becomes a form of humility. It reminds me that I don't control outcomes. That I can't predict what will matter later. That much of what feels decisive now will blur with time. This humility is oddly comforting. It releases me from the burden of perfect strategy. It allows me to act with care instead of calculation. I still think about odds. I still weigh risks. I still choose restraint sometimes. But I no longer wait for certainty before living. *I accept that uncertainty is not a flaw in the system. It is the system.*

Once I stopped fighting that, something loosened. I became less obsessed with being right. Less anxious about missing the optimal path. More willing to take part in what was already happening. This doesn't make life easier in any obvious way. But it makes it more inhabitable. I move through days with a little more patience. A little more irony. A little less urgency to interpret everything immediately. When something doesn't work out, I don't always ask what it meant. Sometimes I let it just be what it was. When something does work out, I enjoy it without assuming it's permanent.

This balance—between effort and release—feels like the quiet heart of the whole thing. Probability doesn't offer reassurance. It offers perspective. It tells me I'm not uniquely unlucky or uniquely blessed. That randomness touches everyone. That patterns emerge slowly, unevenly, imperfectly. And within that, I still get to choose how I act. That's the part that matters most. Not the forecast. Not the guarantee. But the decision to participate anyway.

To keep moving through the space—crowded, uncertain, occasionally kind—with care.

To accept that some actions are worth taking even when they fail. That some value lies not in winning, but in staying engaged.

To live, not as someone waiting for the odds to improve, but as someone willing to place small, thoughtful bets on decency, curiosity, and connection.

There is no final equation. No moment where uncertainty dissolves. There is only this: a life made of attempts. And that, I've come to believe, is enough. Not because it's guaranteed to succeed. But because it's how we remain human while the outcomes remain unknown.

Appendix – A Gentle Walk-Through Uncertainty

Probability: A Gentle Introduction

Probability has a reputation problem. For many people, the word brings up memories of school—fractions on a chalkboard, coin tosses, diagrams that felt disconnected from real life. For others, it sounds abstract or intimidating, something meant for mathematicians, gamblers, or weather forecasters. But probability isn't really about math. It's about uncertainty. More specifically, it's about how we describe uncertainty when we don't know exactly what will happen, but we know something about how things usually go.

Whether we realize it or not, we use probabilistic thinking constantly. We estimate risks, form expectations, revise beliefs, and make decisions without guarantees. Probability simply gives language and structure to what we already do intuitively. This appendix introduces the core ideas of probability in plain terms. No formulas are required. The goal is not mastery, but familiarity—a way to recognize these ideas when they quietly shape everyday decisions.

What Probability Is

At its most basic, probability is a measure of how likely something is to happen. It's usually expressed as a number between 0 and 1:

- 0 means impossible
- 1 means certain
- Everything else falls somewhere in between

A probability of 0.5 means something happens about half the time. A probability of 0.1 means it happens rarely, but not never.

What's important is what probability is actually describing. Probability does not predict a specific outcome. It describes tendencies across many similar situations. If the probability of rain tomorrow is 30%, that doesn't mean it will rain lightly, or briefly, or for exactly 30% of the day. It means that on days like tomorrow, rain happens about 30 times out of 100. Probability speaks in averages, not promises.

Probability vs. Certainty

One reason probability feels frustrating is that we often want certainty. We want to know what will happen, not what usually happens. But certainty is rare outside controlled systems. Most real-world situations involve incomplete information, changing conditions, and interactions between many variables.

Probability exists because certainty doesn't. Rather than eliminating uncertainty, probability helps us live with it more honestly.

Chance: How Uncertainty Feels

Before probability becomes numerical, it's emotional. *Chance is the human experience of uncertainty.*

It's the feeling you get before making a decision that matters. The hesitation before speaking. The quiet hope attached to a risky choice. Chance lives in intuition, memory, fear, and optimism. It's subjective. Two people can face the same situation and feel very different levels of risk. Chance is not wrong—but it is personal.

Probability, by contrast, is impersonal. It doesn't feel. It doesn't worry. It simply describes patterns. Confusing chance with probability is natural. Learning to distinguish them helps us understand why people disagree about risk even when they look at the same facts.

Odds: A Different Way to Say the Same Thing

Odds are another way of expressing probability, often using ratios. If something has a 25% chance of happening, the odds might be described as 1 to 3: one success for every three failures. Odds are common in gambling, sports, and negotiations. They sound more dramatic and decisive than percentages, even though they describe the same information. Saying "the odds are against us" feels different from saying "there's a 40% chance."

This difference is psychological, not mathematical. Understanding this helps explain why people can argue passionately about risk even when they agree on the numbers.

Randomness and Patterns

Randomness does not mean "anything can happen." It means that individual outcomes are unpredictable, even when overall patterns are stable. A fair coin toss is random. Each flip is unpredictable. But over many flips, patterns emerge: roughly half heads, half tails. Randomness operates at the level of individual events. Probability operates at the level of many events. Mistaking one for the other leads to confusion.

What Probability Is Not

Probability is not:

- A guarantee
- A moral judgment
- A measure of effort
- A promise about the future

It does not reward good intentions or punish mistakes. What it offers instead is perspective. It reminds us that outcomes are shaped by many forces, most of them invisible in the moment.

Why This Matters

Probability doesn't make life predictable. It makes it interpretable. It helps us hold expectations more lightly, judge ourselves and others less harshly, and accept uncertainty without paralysis. We already live probabilistically. Learning the language simply helps us notice it.

About the Author

Subu Sangameswar has spent his career at the intersection of technology, finance, and the human habit of storytelling. Trained in engineering during the early days of computing, he has navigated decades of rapid systemic change—learning firsthand that timing and chance often carry as much weight as skill.

In *The Quiet Asterisk*, Subu explores how life unfolds in the space between certainty and randomness, connecting the quiet logic of probability to everyday experience. He invites readers to notice that *“Not every event is a message. Not every pattern is intentional. Not every silence is significant. And yet—over time—something coherent forms anyway.”* The book reflects his fascination with the ordinary ways our choices, habits, and collisions shape a life under uncertainty.

Rather than offering formulas or guarantees, Subu encourages a steadiness of presence—a willingness to move through life thoughtfully, even without certainty. He lives in Fairfax County, Virginia, often walking local trails while thinking about probability, narrative, and the small asterisks that quietly connect the dots. More of his work can be found at www.quietasterisk.com