Unlived

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On Dreams, Delay, and the Lives We Carry

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There is a world elsewhere

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There is a world elsewhere

For my father, whose crooked tooth I inherited —
and whose unlived dreams I almost did too.

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In Front of the Mirror

My father's lower canine tooth was slightly crooked — angled forward, just a little. It was barely noticeable to anyone else, but I knew it well.

Time and again, right in the middle of a meal, he would go quiet. He'd bring his hand to his mouth and say, "Ouch... I bit my lip again." The inside of his lip had caught on that small crooked edge. He'd have to stop eating. It happened often enough that it became a fixture of our family life — something that was always there, something that never got fixed. As a child who adored his father, I always felt a pang watching it.

I was about fifteen or sixteen when it happened to me for the first time.

I was eating, and suddenly: "Ouch."

I ran my tongue over my lower teeth and understood immediately. My canine had shifted into the same position as my father's. The same angle. The same small forward tilt. Genetics.

I told myself: *I don't want to spend my whole life with this pain. I'll go get braces and fix it.*

That decision stayed in my mind.

And stayed.

And stayed.

Every time the inside of my lip got cut. Every time I caught myself mid-bite and winced. The same sentence came back: *I should get braces. I need to fix this tooth.*

* * *

I was around twenty-seven years old when it happened.

I was standing at the bathroom mirror, loading my toothbrush with toothpaste, glancing at my teeth. My eye caught the crooked canine. And just like always, the thought passed through my mind: *I really need to do something about this*.

I don't know exactly what happened next. Something shifted. It was as if something inside my head quietly gave way.

A calm voice said: *Wait. How long have you been telling yourself this? Ten years? More?*

I froze.

Not from fear. From a kind of quiet grief. From the feeling you get when you understand something you can no longer un-understand.

I had been telling myself that sentence for more than ten years. And in all that time, I hadn't booked a single appointment. I hadn't done a single minute of research. I hadn't taken one real step.

I had only ever said it.

And slowly I understood: saying it had taken the place of doing it. Every time I told myself *I'll fix it one day,* I felt a small wave of relief — as if the problem were already handled, as if I had already acted. And so I never needed to actually act.

Whether I finished brushing my teeth that morning, I can't remember. But I know my mind was somewhere else entirely.

One question had started turning inside my head:

If I have been "going to fix" this tooth for ten years and never did — what else have I been "going to do" for just as long?

* * *

The answer didn't come that day. Not that week, either. The question was like a small stone dropped into still water — the ripples moved slowly, quietly, reaching every corner of my life in the days and weeks that followed.

Every time I noticed something — heard something, remembered something — I'd catch myself asking: *Is this another tooth?*

Most of the time, the answer was yes.

I started paying attention to the people around me, to the dreams that circulate for years without ever becoming real. I started reading — about procrastination, self-deception, identity, the strange human need to keep imaginary versions of ourselves alive. The more I read, the more I saw that this wasn't just my problem.

We humans sometimes live for years with the *image* of doing something — without ever actually doing it.

This book is the result of that question. The result of years of thinking about why some things never move from our minds into our lives.

I hope, by the end, we'll find some answers.

Chapter 1: Who Are We Living With?

That morning at the mirror, after the moment that made my skin go cold, I'm not sure I even finished brushing my teeth. Maybe I did. I don't remember. What I remember is that my mind was already somewhere else.

A simple question had started turning inside my head:

If I've been "going to fix" this tooth for ten years and never did — what else have I been "going to do" for just as long?

The answer didn't come that day. Not that week either. The question was like a small stone dropped into still water — the ripples moved slowly, quietly, reaching every corner of my life in the days and weeks that followed.

Every time I noticed something — heard something, remembered something — I'd catch myself asking: *Is this another tooth?*

Most of the time, the answer was yes.

* * *

One day — a few weeks after that morning at the mirror — I sat down and wrote.

Not a formal plan. Not a goal list with stars and colored markers. Just a piece of paper and everything I'd been telling myself for years that I was "going to do."

Learn to paint. Make decorative pieces. See a dermatologist. Start exercising. Take a trip south — somewhere I'd been wanting to see for years. Call an old friend whose voice I hadn't heard in too long.

When I looked at the list, something inside me sank.

Some of these things had been waiting for three years. Some for five. Some, like the tooth, for more than ten.

But what unsettled me most wasn't the time. It was this: all those years, I had believed I was *engaged* with these things. That I was thinking about them. That I had a plan.

There was no plan. There was only the repetition of a sentence. Each time the subject arose, I said the sentence, felt a small comfort, and moved on.

That cycle — quiet, unremarkable — had been repeating for years. And I had never once noticed it.

* * *

Let's give this something a name.

That version of ourselves that lives only in our minds — thinner, braver, freer, healthier, more successful, the person we'll be *one day* — let's call it the *Imagined Self*.

The Imagined Self is not a vague feeling. It is a fully realized person. It paints. It exercises. It ends that relationship. It writes that book. It starts that business. It lives the life that is always just around the corner.

The trouble is: we live with the Imagined Self far more than we realize. Not with ourselves. With that other version — the one who is always almost here.

And this gap — between the mental version and the actual person — can grow so wide, so slowly, that we stop feeling it.

It becomes normal. The Imagined Self becomes so familiar that it no longer seems imaginary.

* * *

There is a particular pleasure in being someone who has not yet begun.

This is not an obvious observation, but I think it is a true one. The person who has always wanted to paint but hasn't yet picked up a brush is, in a very specific sense, still a painter. An untested one. A painter in potential. And potential has a quality that achievement can never quite recover: it is unblemished by failure, unshaped by the compromises that reality always demands.

The Imagined Self lives in this space of pure potential. It has not yet encountered its limitations. It has not yet produced the mediocre first draft, the abandoned canvas, the business plan that didn't survive contact with actual customers. It exists in a kind of permanent readiness — always on the verge of becoming remarkable.

This is what I have come to think of as the *addiction to potential*. It is subtler and more respectable-looking than most addictions, but it functions in a similar way: it offers a reliable source of comfort that, over time, becomes more important than the thing it was supposed to lead toward.

The comfort of potential is real. The cost of it is also real. And the cost is this: a life spent in the anteroom of your own existence, waiting for a moment that keeps not arriving.

* * *

Alongside the addiction to potential lives its close cousin: the *safety of incompletion*.

As long as something remains unfinished — unbegun, really — it cannot be judged. Cannot be measured against the original vision. Cannot disappoint.

I have a friend who has been writing a novel for eleven years. He speaks about it with genuine passion. The characters are vivid to him; he can describe scenes in detail, explain the thematic architecture, articulate what he wants the book to do to a reader. By all internal measures, the novel exists.

He has written approximately forty pages.

When I once, carefully, asked him what was stopping him, he thought for a long time before answering.

"I think," he said, "I'm afraid it won't be as good as it is in my head."

This is the safety of incompletion made visible. The novel in his head is exactly the novel he wants to write. It has not yet been contaminated by execution. The moment it moves fully onto the page, it will have to become something particular — and particular things have edges, limitations, failures of nerve that the imagined version never needs to have.

The incomplete thing is always, in some sense, still perfect.

* * *

In the 1980s, American psychologist Hazel Markus, working alongside her colleague Paula Nurius, introduced a concept that would become foundational in personality research: *Possible Selves*.

The idea was elegant. We don't live with only one version of ourselves. We carry a whole set of possible versions: the self we hope to become, the self we fear becoming, and the self we believe we will *eventually* be.

Markus argued that these images serve a motivational function. The picture of a "healthy self" or a "successful self" can orient behavior, focus energy, and guide decisions. In that sense, they are tools — compasses for the future.

And this is true. Up to a point.

Because subsequent research revealed something Markus likely didn't anticipate: these possible selves can play another role entirely. Instead of serving as engines of change, they can become *substitutes* for change. The image begins to do the psychological work that the action was supposed to do. And the action, having been replaced, gradually stops feeling necessary.

We believe we are planning. We are, in fact, rehearsing a feeling.

* * *

I have a friend — an old colleague, sharp, full of ideas — who has been saying for nearly twenty years that he wants to start his own business.

Twenty years.

Every time we sat down together, he'd describe it with the same familiar energy: he knew the market, he had the idea, he knew exactly what he'd do. His eyes lit up. His reasoning was sound. His plans were detailed — sometimes so detailed you'd think he was starting tomorrow.

He never started.

The last I heard, he was still at the same company. Still talking about the same business. The same *one day* still somewhere up ahead.

For years I thought the problem was fear. Or capital. Or waiting for the right moment.

Now I think it's something else entirely. The business he carries in his mind is, in every meaningful sense, *real to him*. It has texture and detail and emotional weight. The version of him that runs that business — independent, self-directed, building something from nothing — is a version he inhabits daily, in imagination.

And here is the thing about inhabiting something in imagination: it provides almost all of the psychological rewards of the real thing, at none of the cost. The pride is there. The identity is there. The sense of being a particular kind of person — ambitious, entrepreneurial, someone with a plan — is entirely intact.

Why risk all of that on the messy, uncertain, potentially humiliating reality of actually beginning?

* * *

I have another friend who has been saying for years that she needs to lose ten or twelve kilos.

When she first started saying it, there was mild discomfort — some knee pain, some lower back stiffness. A warning. The body speaking.

That was years ago. The warning is no longer mild.

She goes to the doctor now. Takes medication. Climbing stairs bothers her. The pain is not a distant signal — it is a daily companion, morning and night.

And she still says: *I really need to lose a bit of weight.*

What strikes me about her situation is not the failure to act — I understand that, I have my own versions of it — but the completeness of the separation between the sentence and the body that speaks it. She says the words while the body pays the price. The words have become entirely detached from the reality they describe. They float above it, a kind of incantation that no longer connects to anything.

This is the Imagined Self in its most extreme form: so vivid, so insistent, so real in its own terms, that it continues to function even as the body beneath it accumulates evidence of its unreality.

* * *

William James, the philosopher and psychologist, wrote more than a century ago:

> *The greatest revolution of our generation is the discovery that human beings, by changing the inner attitudes of their minds, can change the outer aspects of their lives.*
>
> *— William James*

What James pointed toward was real. But what he couldn't yet say — and what decades of behavioral science have since revealed — is that the mind is also capable of the reverse: of changing *only* the inner attitude, while leaving the outer life entirely untouched.

We settle for the feeling of change. We live with the Imagined Self and call it a plan. And the plan, rehearsed often enough, becomes indistinguishable from the life we were supposed to be living.

* * *

There is a question I have been sitting with ever since that morning at the mirror. I still return to it. Not as a source of guilt — as a compass.

Which of these things do I actually want?

Not which do I like the idea of having. Not which version of myself looks better in my mind. Not which sentence have I been repeating for years.

Actually want.

When I looked honestly at the list, the answer was much shorter than the list itself.

That gap — between what I thought I wanted and what I actually wanted — was the beginning of everything that follows in this book.