

# Coffee Talk: Two Sugars One Life The Check Engine Light

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The light came on during rush hour.

Not the metaphorical kind. The actual, literal, amber-glowing check engine light on my dashboard, right between “you’re late for pickup” and “there’s no good merge onto the highway.” My car, which had been running fine for months, decided 5:47 PM on a Wednesday was the ideal time to have an opinion.

I made it to the mechanic the next morning. He disappeared under the hood for twenty minutes, came back wiping his hands on a rag, and delivered the number like a doctor delivering bad news to a family he doesn’t particularly like.

Twelve hundred dollars.

Not \$1,199. Not “around a thousand.” Twelve. Hundred. Dollars.

*If you’ve ever had a number rearrange your entire nervous system, you know the next part.*

My brain did the math. Rent. Groceries. The credit card minimum that was already a negotiation with future me. School stuff for the kids. That prescription I’d been putting off refilling. I did the math in my head six times. Got six different answers. None of them were good.

Then my chest got tight. Not heart-attack tight. Spiral tight. The kind where your ribs decide they’re a size too small and your lungs forgot how breathing works. My hands went cold on the steering wheel. My brain, which had been doing math, switched to static.

I was sitting in a mechanic’s parking lot having a full biological event over a catalytic converter.

I wasn't at a 1. I was at a 5. Full EDFI (Emotional Dumpster Fire Index). Your body runs that scale whether you're tracking it or not. At a 1, you're mildly annoyed. At a 5, your prefrontal cortex has left the building and your reptile brain is running the show.

At Level 5, I wasn't solving a car problem. I wasn't solving anything. I was spiraling, and the spiral was doing math, and the math was doing damage.

*Your bank account isn't the problem. Your EDFI is.*

I've solved harder problems than a \$1,200 car repair. Navigated a divorce. Rebuilt a life. Figured out how to cook meals that don't qualify as war crimes. But not at Level 5. At Level 5, I can't find my keys. At Level 5, I once tried to unlock my front door with my debit card and got angry when it didn't work.

So I sat in that parking lot. Didn't call anyone. Didn't open the banking app. Didn't do the math a seventh time. I just sat there until my hands warmed up and my chest remembered its actual dimensions.

I couldn't fix the car right now. I could stop the spiral right now.

The repair took two weeks to sort out. Payment plan. Shuffled some things. It wasn't elegant. But by the time I was making those calls, I was at a 2. And at a 2, you can negotiate. You can think. You can look at a number without your body treating it like a predator.

The \$1,200 was a problem. The spiral was the emergency. Above Level 3, the priority isn't solving the problem — it's getting enough capacity back to solve it without setting everything else on fire.

Here's to recognizing the spiral before it does your math for you.

Cheers, Clayton

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*Coffee Talk 2.0: For everyone who's ever had a dollar amount rearrange their entire nervous system.*

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