

# Coffee Talk: Two Sugars One Life Six Months with the Brake

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Six months ago, I learned to stop.

Not the dramatic kind. Not some movie-moment epiphany where violins swell and the protagonist stares meaningfully into a rainy window. I learned to pause for thirteen seconds before ruining my own afternoon. Which doesn't sound like much until you calculate how many afternoons I'd ruined before that.

The Emergency Brake. Stop, Drop, Roll. Three steps that take thirteen seconds and have quietly rearranged the way I move through an average Tuesday.

This isn't a before-and-after photo. I'm not standing shirtless on a beach holding my old pants. I'm standing in a grocery store parking lot, not sending a text I would have regretted, and calling that progress.

Because it is.

*If you've ever measured progress not in breakthroughs but in disasters you didn't make worse, you already understand this.*

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## **Last Tuesday. 7:43 AM. Highway merge.**

Someone cut me off. Not aggressively, just obviously, the way people drift into your lane because their coffee is more interesting than physics. Gary (my right eye twitch, the body's least subtle warning system) flickered once. Six months ago, that flicker would've launched a fifteen-minute internal prosecution, complete with closing arguments, and I'd have arrived at work already at a 4, furious at a stranger who forgot I existed eleven miles ago.

Last Tuesday, I caught it. Thirteen seconds. Made my exit. Got to work at a 1. The guy in the Nissan still doesn't know I exist. Neither does my cortisol.

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**Three weeks ago. The conversation with my ex about scheduling.**

These used to be Level 5 events. The content was never explosive. The history between us was. Every sentence carried the weight of every other sentence we'd ever exchanged, and my nervous system couldn't tell the difference between "Can we swap weekends?" and "Everything you've ever done was wrong."

Three weeks ago, she asked about swapping a weekend. I felt the pull. That familiar gravity toward defending, explaining, over-clarifying. Gary started his thing. I recognized it.

Stop. Drop into the body. Roll with thirteen seconds of not responding.

When I replied, it was about the weekend. Just the weekend. No subtext. No prosecution. No excavating grievances from 2019 to win an argument nobody was having.

She said, "Sure, that works."

Four words. The whole exchange took ninety seconds. Six months ago, it would've taken three days and cost me two nights of sleep.

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**Six weeks ago. Work. The project that imploded.**

Client changed scope mid-stream. Budget stayed the same. Timeline got shorter. The email chain was a masterclass in corporate passive aggression, and I could feel myself climbing the EDFI ladder like it owed me a view from the top.

I hit a 3. I know what a 3 feels like now. That's what changes with this work. You don't just learn a technique. You learn your own signals. The way your breathing changes. The specific tension behind your sternum. The thought patterns that shift from problem-solving to blame-assigning.

At a 3, I can still choose. At a 5, I can't. That's the whole game — catching it at 3.

I closed my laptop. Walked to the break room. Thirteen seconds turned into about three minutes because the situation warranted it. Came back. Wrote a response that

was firm but not scorched-earth. Kept the client. Kept my dignity. Kept my evening.

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**And then there was the time it didn't work.**

Two months in, my kid said something at dinner. Something small. Something that, on a different night, would have rolled right off. But I was tired, and I'd been running at a 2 all day. Not high enough to notice, not low enough to be resilient. The comment landed wrong and I snapped. Not yelling. Just that sharp tone. The one that makes a twelve-year-old go quiet in a way that's worse than yelling.

I didn't catch it. Gary probably tried. I wasn't listening.

I apologized twenty minutes later. Explained that my reaction wasn't about what he said. That I was working on being better at this, and sometimes I still miss.

He said, "It's okay, Dad."

It wasn't, entirely. But the apology happened faster than it used to. The repair took twenty minutes, not two days. That's not perfection. It's progress.

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I still lose it sometimes. Just not as often. And not as long.

I can feel when I hit a 3 now. Used to not notice until 5. That shift — from reacting at 5 to catching at 3 — is the difference between a bad moment and a bad week.

Weeks three through five, I thought it stopped working. It hadn't. I'd just gotten better at catching spirals so early they looked like nothing. The tool was working. It just stopped being dramatic about it.

I'm still Sam. I'm just Sam with a brake.

*If your biggest transformation is that you pause for thirteen seconds more often than you used to, that counts. That's enough. That's the whole point.*

Six months of thirteen-second pauses. That's roughly forty-seven minutes of not reacting. Forty-seven minutes that saved relationships, kept jobs, preserved sleep, and prevented approximately two hundred texts I would have sent and immediately regretted.

If you bought the book and haven't finished it, keep going. The Brake gets better with practice. It becomes muscle memory. And the plateau around week four is real. Push through it.

If this resonates, tell someone. For the next person sitting in a parking lot at Level 5, doing math that doesn't add up, who needs to know there's a brake and it works.

Six months of survived-ish. Still here. Still practicing.

Here's to the thirteen seconds. To the parking lots and kitchen counters and phones placed face-down. And to still practicing, six months later.

Cheers, Clayton

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*Coffee Talk 2.0: For everyone whose biggest victory this week was the thirteen seconds they didn't react.*

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