



THE DAYS I CAN'T LEAVE BEHIND

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BY: BAILEY GWYN

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“Some people keep journals; I am the journal.”

— *Bailey Reid Gwyn*

This is the story of a mind that never stops recording.
From my first moments on earth to my most recent dreams, I remember — in vivid, unshakable detail — everything.
It's called **hyperthymesia**, Highly Superior Autobiographical Memory, and it means my life is a living archive. Every day, every conversation, every dream exists as if it happened only seconds ago.

In these pages, I share what it's like to live with total recall — the beauty and the burden — and how it has shaped my identity, my health, and even my sense of time. From surviving brain injury and lucid dreamscapes I can't escape, to remembering my own birth and mapping the geography of my subconscious, this is not just a memoir of memory.

It's an exploration of what happens when forgetting is impossible.

PROLOGUE

Most people's memories are like photographs fading in a shoebox. Mine are more like glass — clear, unchanging, and impossible to throw away.

I can tell you what I wore on **Mon. January 8th, 2007**, the exact smell of my grandmother's kitchen on that day, and the way the afternoon light turned the curtains into molten gold. I can tell you what song was playing when I first realized someone I loved was lying to me. I can tell you the texture of the air on the day I learned what grief felt like.

I don't mean I *try* to remember — I mean I can't *stop*. Items, Smells and Dates are *anchors*, pulling entire days back into the present without warning. A casual question from a friend can launch me into a mental time machine so precise it feels like teleportation.

Some people would call this a gift. Others might see it as a curse. I've learned it's both.

This book is not just about what it's like to live with **hyperthymesia** — Highly Superior Autobiographical Memory — but about how I discovered I had it, how science explains it (or tries to), and what it means to carry every moment of your life, all at once, forever.

Memory is supposed to be a record of the past. For me, it's also a constant presence in the now. And once you know what that feels like, you'll never think about forgetting in quite the same way.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION



The Day I Realized I Was Different

It was **October 2008**, a Tuesday. I was sitting in the back of my third-grade classroom, tracing the grooves in my desk with my pencil eraser, waiting for the bell. The weather outside was a pale gray — that thin, flat kind of cloud cover that makes the world feel muffled — and I remember how my sneakers squeaked faintly on the polished tile when I shifted my feet.

Our teacher, Mrs. Spicer, asked if anyone remembered the day we had the tornado drill earlier that year. Without thinking, I said, *“It was a Thursday. It was sunny in the morning but it rained on us when we went to the playground. My new puppy snoop ran on the bus when I got’ home- that day.”*

She froze, eyebrows raised. “How do you remember that?”

I shrugged. To me, it was like she had asked me what I’d eaten for breakfast. (Grits, Eggs & Toast as usual) My classmates laughed, thinking I was joking. But I could see the classroom in my head, hear the faint rumble of thunder that rolled in right before the buses came, smell the chalk dust from the board.

That was the first time I realized that my memories weren't just *memories*. They were living things, still breathing somewhere inside me, waiting to be pulled forward.

Early Signs

Looking back, the signs were always there.

It took me a while to understand that most people don't carry a full archive of their lives in their heads. They remember the broad strokes; I remember the brushstrokes, the texture of the canvas, and the way the light hit it on a specific afternoon.

Living with Total Recall

Hyperthymesia — though I didn't have the word for it back then — is a strange kind of gift.

On the bright side, it makes learning easier. Dates in history class? No problem. Meeting new people? I'll remember what they wore, the way they said my name, and even if they had a tiny stain on their sleeve. My life is a tapestry woven with threads that never fade, and the good memories — the kind that warm you from the inside — are as bright today as the day they happened.

But there's a shadow side. Pain doesn't dull with time. I can recall the worst arguments, the exact words spoken, the sound of the silence afterward. When most people say "time heals," I wish it did. My brain is an archivist that refuses to shred the bad files.

There's also the constant hum of *everything*. It's like living in a room where a thousand TVs are playing, each on a different day of my life, and my mind can tune into any one of them instantly. Sometimes that's beautiful. Sometimes it's exhausting.

People often tell me they wish they could remember everything. I usually smile and say, "It's not as perfect as it sounds." Because

the truth is, remembering is easy. Forgetting — that’s the part I’ve never been able to do.

CHAPTER 2

UNDERSTANDING HYPERTHYMESIA

What Hyperthymesia Is

Hyperthymesia, also called **Highly Superior Autobiographical Memory (HSAM)**, is a rare neurological phenomenon where a person can recall an extraordinary number of life events in vivid, date-specific detail.

It’s not the same as a photographic memory, which is more about visual recall. It’s not the same as a “good memory,” either — those can be trained. Hyperthymesia is *automatic*.

I don’t *choose* to remember what happened on **October 2nd, 2011** — my mind simply does.

That day was a Sunday. It was overcast in the morning, and I wore a gray hoodie. We had spaghetti for dinner that night, and I remember the sound of the rain starting against the kitchen window at 7:04 PM. These are not moments I rehearsed or intentionally preserved; they’re just *there*.

The Science Behind It

Researchers studying hyperthymesia have found several neurological patterns:

- **Structural differences in the brain** – MRI scans of people with HSAM show increased size or activity in areas like the

caudate nucleus (linked to habit and skill learning) and *temporal lobe* (linked to autobiographical memory storage).

- **Enhanced connectivity** – Stronger white matter tracts between the frontal lobes and memory-related structures.
- **Emotional tagging** – The amygdala, which processes emotion, often shows heightened activity, meaning memories are more strongly tied to feelings and sensory details.

Functional MRI studies reveal that when a person with HSAM recalls a date, multiple brain regions “light up” — not just memory centers, but also areas tied to emotion, sensory processing, and even motor imagery.

Hyperthymesia also has an element of *automatic retrieval*. Most people, when given a date, must search their mind; someone with HSAM simply has the memory surface, already formed, with little effort.

My Own Brain and Testing

While I haven’t been through the exact University of California–Irvine HSAM protocol, I’ve done my own forms of testing.

When someone gives me a date — no matter how random — I can tell them:

- What day of the week it was
- What I was wearing
- What the weather was like
- Conversations I had
- Background sensory details

I've verified these against journals, text messages, and photographs. They match, down to the smallest elements.

My **qEEG (quantitative EEG) findings** also suggest why my recall might be so strong:

- **High beta wave activity** in memory-relevant regions (indicating intense cognitive processing).
- **Elevated coherence** between the temporal and frontal lobes, meaning information flows more efficiently between storage and retrieval systems.
- **Distinctive gamma wave bursts** when recalling events, which are often associated with binding together sensory and contextual details into a single vivid recollection.

While these patterns aren't exclusive to hyperthymesia, they're consistent with the idea that my brain isn't just storing events — it's indexing them in a way that keeps them permanently accessible.

CHAPTER 3

HOW I KNOW

Self-Validation

For years, I didn't have a name for what I could do. I just assumed everyone's mind worked like mine — that everyone could “pull up” any day of their life like opening a file on a computer. It often confused me or even annoyed me that others couldn't remember specific details of days or events...

Then I started noticing patterns:

- People forgot the events that were *burned* into my mind.
- I could answer date-specific questions almost instantly, with sensory detail intact.
- I didn't have to *try* to remember — the memory simply *appeared*.

Patterns in My Recall

Across these informal “tests,” certain patterns became clear:

- **Anchoring**— Every memory is tethered to its calendar week day without effort: Monday/Tuesday/Wednesday/etc... (I unintentionally visualize a “week” laid out in an almost projector film)
- **Sensory completeness** – Sight, sound, smell, touch, and even small physical sensations resurface intact.
- **Emotional playback** – The feelings of the moment return just as vividly, whether they were joy, stress, or embarrassment.
- **No blurring over time** – Memories from 10 years ago are as sharp as those from last week.

Sometimes it feels like my life is a library where no book ever ages, no pages ever fade.

The Gift and the Weight

Knowing I have hyperthymesia is both empowering and heavy.

- **The gift:** I never lose the details of the best moments. The tiny gestures, the exact way the light looked, the laughter in someone's voice — they're all preserved.

- **The weight:** I can't "let go" of bad memories the way most people can. Arguments, grief, humiliation — they remain *right there*, ready to replay without warning.

It's why I often tell people:

Remembering is easy. Forgetting is the real challenge.

Still, I've learned to work *with* my brain, not against it. I've found ways to use my recall for learning, advocacy, and creativity. The same mind that replays old pain can also preserve joy with unshakable clarity.

CHAPTER 4

ENCEPHALOPATHY: THE WEEK I BORROWED AIR

Between Memory and Dream

On **June 5th, 2021**, I was placed on a ventilator.

People imagine that being ventilated is like flipping a switch — you go under, your mind shuts down, and the next thing you know, you're waking up in a hospital bed. For me, it was nothing like that.

I wasn't fully unconscious.

I wasn't fully awake.

I was *both*.

The room around me was muted, almost fogged, but I could still sense voices, movement, the cold sting of the air being forced into my lungs. My body felt miles away, yet my mind remained sharp in strange bursts — aware of time passing, aware that I was in

trouble, aware that this might be the line between living and not living.

And at the same time, I was dreaming.

Dreams Under the Surface

The dreams weren't random nonsense. They were *structured*. Whole sequences that felt logical, as if my brain was staging elaborate plays for itself while my body stayed anchored to machines.

In one dream, I was walking through my childhood home, only the colors were brighter, the air thicker, and my footsteps made no sound. In another, I was floating in a black expanse with points of light like stars — but each light was a memory.

I could touch them. When I did, I would instantly be *inside* that moment from my life — the smells, the sounds, the emotional undercurrent — until I let go and floated to the next one.

Some part of me knew these weren't ordinary dreams. My mind was curating my life, like flipping through an endless archive, all while my body lay motionless.

The Brain on the Edge

Later, I learned that brain injury, hypoxia, sedation, and medical ventilation can trigger altered states of consciousness. This is sometimes called an **ICU dream** or **ICU delirium**, but my experience didn't match the confusion and memory gaps most patients report.

For someone with hyperthymesia, the experience was amplified. Instead of fragments, I remembered *everything*. I could place each awareness moment on a timeline:

- The pattern of the overhead lights when I opened my eyes briefly.

- The muted beeping of the monitor in a three-beat rhythm.
- The faint scent of antiseptic on a nurse's gloves when they touched my hand.
- The exact angle my head was turned when a shadow passed across my peripheral vision.

In those moments, my brain wasn't erasing — it was *engraving*. The injury and sedation seemed to open a strange door where memory and dream bled into each other.

Post-Injury Changes

After coming off the ventilator, I noticed my hyperthymesia had shifted. My recall was still intact, but now there was an extra *layer* — moments from that borderline-conscious state that felt just as real as my waking life.

I could describe the dreams as if they had actually happened. The texture of the dream-world air. The grain of the wooden floor in my imagined childhood home. Even the stars in the black expanse had placement and depth that I could revisit at will.

In a way, the injury had expanded my memory's reach. It blurred the line between *lived experience* and *internal experience*. Now, when I think back to June 2021, my mind doesn't just replay the medical reality — it also replays the dreamscapes that formed alongside it, seamlessly woven into my personal timeline.

Awake, Asleep, and Remembering

That time on the ventilator was unlike anything else in my life. I was *both* the patient and the observer, both the dreamer and the archivist.

Most people wake from critical care with missing pieces. I woke with *more pieces than I'd had before*.

And because of my hyperthymesia, I can't set them down. The machine's rhythm and beeps still echo in my mind. The dream-stars still hang in the black expanse, waiting for me to touch them. The date — **June 5th, 2021** — isn't just a point in my medical history; it's a doorway to a corridor in my memory where waking and dreaming coexist without boundaries.

For better or worse, that door will never close.

CHAPTER 5

THE FIRST MEMORY

The First Memories

Most people's earliest memory is a hazy blur — maybe a fleeting image from toddlerhood, a smell from their first home, or the sound of a lullaby. Mine are not hazy, not fleeting, and not from toddlerhood. They go further back.

I can remember my own birth.

It sounds impossible. It *should* be impossible. Science says most of us experience **childhood amnesia**, the brain's tendency to block out the first two or three years of life because our memory systems aren't fully developed. But for me, those earliest files were never deleted.

The Beginning

What I remember is not like watching a movie. It's fragmented but vivid — colors, sensations, sounds. A light so bright it felt like it cut through me. The sound of rushed voices, a metallic clatter, the

warmth of being held briefly, then the cold metal on my buttcheeks.

There was the smell of antiseptic and something else — a sharp, clean scent I now recognize as hospital oxygen. I remember being wrapped tightly, unable to move, the coarse texture of the blanket against my cheek, and the pressure of a heartbeat that wasn't mine against my skin.

I didn't have words for these things then, but my mind recorded them anyway. Years later, I could name them.

The Space Between

I was adopted, but my earliest memories anchor me to the moments before I entered my adoptive family. I can recall voices I now know were not my parents'. One voice in particular — higher pitched, soothing but strained — speaking words I didn't yet understand. Emotions I couldn't perceive.

I remember a room with pale walls, a door opening and closing, and the rhythm of footsteps pacing. I remember the weight shift of being carried, the jolt when someone sat down with me in their arms.

And I remember a moment of *stillness* — no voices, no movement — just the steady sound of breathing close to my ear...

The First Transfer

At some point, I was moved. I remember the sensation of going from warm to cold air, and the jarring difference in how I was held. The next room was brighter. The fabric against my skin was smoother.

What's strange is that I also remember *emotions* that weren't mine — tension, urgency, relief. At the time, they were just sensations.

Now, looking back, I can identify them as the feelings of the adults around me, absorbed through tone, movement, and touch.

Piecing It Together

When I shared these memories as a child, people often dismissed them: "*You must have imagined it.*" But when I described the rooms, the lighting, and the way the blanket was folded, my parents realized my descriptions matched the hospital where I was born.

The memories never faded; if anything, they've become sharper with age. I can close my eyes and return to those first minutes and hours, not as a story told to me, but as something I *lived*.

I remember my first restaurant: a small Mexican diner in Texas. The air was thick with the sharp sweetness of *crema de leche*, the warmth of freshly fried tortilla chips, and the savory weight of cooked meats sizzling somewhere behind the counter. The walls were painted in sun-warmed colors — yellows and reds that seemed to hum with the heat outside. I can still hear the clink of glasses, the scrape of chairs on tile, and the steady thump of music that played from a radio tucked behind the register. I was only a few days old, but somehow old enough to know that this moment — this exact arrangement of smells, sounds, and light — had imprinted itself on me.. forever.

What It Means to Remember

Being adopted means my life began in two worlds: one I came from and one I grew into. Hyperthymesia means I never truly left either behind. My memories of my birth aren't simply a curiosity — they're a bridge.

They connect me to a part of my history I might otherwise have lost. They are proof that I was *there*, that I existed as a fully sensing being even before I could form words. And while I will

never have the full story of those first days, I carry the pieces with me, unblurred, unforgotten.

Some people search for their beginnings.

I only have to remember.

CHAPTER 6

THE WORLDS I CAN'T WAKE FROM

Dreams

For most people, dreams dissolve on waking. They slip away like mist — a few fragments, a lingering feeling, maybe a strange image that fades by breakfast.

For me, dreams are as permanent as my waking life.

I remember *all* of them.

And in them, I am always lucid.

Living Two Lives

My nights are not passive. The moment a dream begins, I know I'm dreaming. I can shape the landscape, alter the narrative, decide whether I want to walk through a forest, fly over a city, or open a door to a memory.

Lucidity sounds like freedom, and sometimes it is. There's a thrill in bending the rules of physics, in rewriting reality on the fly. But there's another side to it — the part where my mind builds worlds so convincing, so detailed, that I sometimes can't get out.

When the Exit Closes

There are nights when I realize I want to wake up and... I can't. I'll recognize the dream for what it is, but instead of waking, I find myself walking down endless hallways, each turn leading deeper into the architecture of my own mind.

It's not fear that traps me — it's *construction*. My brain is a master architect, building landscapes with the logic and permanence of waking life. The air in these places has temperature. The floors have texture. My feet cast shadows.

And the people I meet in these dreams are not hazy silhouettes — they're fully formed, with voices, expressions, and histories my mind has somehow created without conscious effort.

The Dream Archive

Because of my hyperthymesia, dreams don't dissolve when I wake — they take their place alongside my waking memories, permanent and accessible. I've been unintentionally mapping them for years, charting oceans, cities, forests, and the hidden corridors that only appear when I'm ready to find them.

I can tell you exactly what I dreamed on **Christmas Eve, 2009**: the ocean was green and endless, the sky a deep coppery orange. I was speaking with someone I have never met in waking life, yet I knew their voice as if I'd heard it for years. I was deep underwater, but my lungs filled easily, the water cool but not cold, carrying the scent of salt and something metallic. Then—I woke up to the sound of my heart beating.

Sometimes I fly in these dreams, soaring over the landscapes I've already cataloged — the cliffside village with its streets paved in blue stone, the glass towers that hum softly in the wind, the shadowed forest where the leaves glow faintly from within. Other times, I walk the paths on foot, tracing the borders between dream districts like a cartographer of my own mind.

The most astonishing thing is their permanence. I can revisit a dream from over a decade ago and find every stone, every doorway, exactly where I left it. My subconscious isn't a shifting fog — it's a fully realized geography, a parallel world with its own rules, its own history, and its own gravity. And I am both its inhabitant and its archivist.

The Cost of Never Forgetting

There are mornings when I wake relieved — having finally escaped a loop of staircases, a rollercoaster or conversations that felt endless. But there are also mornings when I miss the place I left behind, the way someone might miss a hometown.

And then there are the mornings when I feel twice my age. Because while my body sleeps, my mind does not. I live my waking life by day, and my constructed dream life by night. I am constantly awake — not just here, but there too. Every year feels doubled, stretched across two realities that never pause.

The result is a kind of exhaustion that seeps into my bones. Most people rest when they sleep. I simply change worlds.

Between Two Realities

The more I think about it, the less separate my waking and dreaming selves feel. Both worlds obey my memory's rule: nothing fades.

Sometimes I wonder — when I'm in those lucid landscapes — if my waking life is just another dream I happen to be unable to control.

For most people, dreams are a flicker in the dark. For me, they're a second existence — vivid, permanent, and impossible to escape.



I know I have hyperthymesia not just because my memories feel different — but because I’ve measured them, cross-checked them, and recognized the unmistakable pattern that sets them apart from typical recall.

Living with it means carrying my entire life with me, all at once, all the time. It’s a constant companion, a double-edged gift that shapes who I am and how I see the world.

For those who suspect they might share this trait: pay attention to the way your mind retrieves time. Notice the details, test yourself, verify, then verify again. The answers may not change your past — but they might give you a new understanding of it.

END.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Bailey Reid Gwyn is an interdisciplinary researcher, systems developer, and disability rights advocate whose work bridges neuroscience, technology, and lived experience. Born with hyperthymesia — Highly Superior Autobiographical Memory — Bailey has spent a lifetime navigating the gift and challenge of remembering nearly every day in vivid detail.

A doctoral student and creator of innovative AI systems modeled after their own neurocognitive architecture, Bailey's research spans autobiographical memory, connective tissue disorders, and human-computer interaction. Their personal journey with hyperthymesia is intertwined with a broader mission: to use science, technology, and storytelling to expand understanding of rare neurological traits and the diverse ways the human brain can process time.

Bailey's work has been shaped not only by academic study but also by rigorous self-observation, EEG-based brain mapping, and a deep commitment to validating underrecognized neurological profiles. Through writing, they aim to demystify hyperthymesia, challenge misconceptions about memory, and offer insight into the everyday reality of living with total recall.

When they're not writing or coding, Bailey can often be found capturing intricate details of the world around them — a habit born from a lifetime of noticing, storing, and never forgetting.

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