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Left Neglected

Written by Lisa Genova

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Left Neglected

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For Chris and Ethan

PROLOGUE

I think some small part of me knew I was living an unsustainable life. Every now and then, it would whisper, *Sarah, please slow down. You don't need all this. You can't continue like this.* But the rest of me, powerful, smart, and determined to achieve, achieve, achieve, wasn't hearing a word of it. If, once in a while these kinds of thoughts did manage to wiggle into my consciousness, I shushed them, scolded them, and sent them to their room. Quiet, little voice, can't you see I have a million things to do?

Even my dreams began tapping me on the shoulder, trying to grab my attention. *Do you even know what you're doing? Let me show you.* But each dream was elusive upon waking, and like a slimy fish captured in my bare hands, it slipped out and swam away before I could get a good look at it. Strange that

I can remember them all now. In the nights just before the accident, I think my dreams were trying to wake me up. With all that has happened, I honestly believe that they were guidance sent from a spiritual source. Messages from God. And I ignored them. I guess I needed something less fleeting and more concrete.

Like a traumatic smack to the head.

CHAPTER 1

"Survivors, ready?"

Jeff, the distractingly handsome host of the reality television game show, smiles, stretching out the wait, knowing he's making us crazy.

"Go!"

I am running through rain forest. Bugs are colliding with my face as I race. I'm a human windshield. The bugs are grossing me out.

Ignore them. Hurry.

Sharp branches are smacking and slicing my face, wrists, and ankles, cutting me. I'm bleeding. It stings.

Ignore it. Hurry.

A branch snags my favorite, most expensive silk blouse and rips it from shoulder to elbow.

Great, I can't wear this to my morning meeting. Fix it later. Hurry. Hurry.

I reach the beach and see the planks of driftwood. I'm supposed to make a raft. But I don't see any tools. I swat around in the sand with my hands. I can't find any tools. Then I remember the map that Jeff showed us for a second before lighting it on fire. He grinned as it burned. Easy for him to be so happy with his belly full of food and his April-fresh clothes. I haven't eaten or showered in days.

"Mom, I need help," Charlie whines at my waist. He's not supposed to be here.

"Not now, Charlie, I have to find a red flag and a set of tools."

"Mom, Mom, Mom!" he insists. He pulls down on my ripped sleeve and tears it clean through the cuff.

Great, now it's definitely ruined. And I don't think I'm going to have time to change before work.

I spot a red blur above the flat beach about a hundred yards away. I run toward it, and Charlie follows, begging desperately, "Mom, Mom, Mom!"

I look down and see shiny pieces of green and brown everywhere. Glass. Not sea glass. New glass, jagged and sharp. Shattered bottles cover the beach.

"Charlie, stop! Don't follow me!"

I'm doing a good job avoiding the glass while I run, but then I hear Charlie losing it and Jeff laughing, and I misstep. A piece of green glass carves deep into the arc of my left foot. It kills and is bleeding a lot.

Ignore it. Hurry.

I reach the red flag. Gnats are swarming in and out of my nostrils, mouth, and ears, making me spit and gag. Not the kind of protein I've been craving. I cover my face with the palms of my

hands, hold my breath, and pace out twelve steps west of the red flag.

I dig with my hands amid a frenzy of gnats, find the box of tools, and hobble back to the planks of driftwood. Charlie is there, squatting, building a castle out of broken glass.

"Charlie, stop that. You'll cut yourself."

But he doesn't listen and continues.

Ignore him. Hurry.

I'm about halfway through assembling the raft when I hear the wolves howling.

Louder. Louder.

Hurry!

The half raft isn't strong enough to hold both of us. Charlie screams as I pick him up, ripping him from his glass castle. He kicks and punches me as I wrestle him onto the half raft.

"When you get to the other side, go get help."

"Mommy, don't leave me!"

"It's not safe here. You have to go!"

I push the half raft out onto the water, and the strong current grabs it. Just as Charlie floats out of sight, the wolves start tearing through my trousers and my favorite shirt, ripping my skin apart, eating me alive. Jeff is smiling as I'm dying, and I think, Why did I ever want to play this stupid game?

My human alarm clock, my nine-month-old son, Linus, wakes me with a bleating "Baaabaaa!" over the monitor before I die.

FRIDAY

The actual alarm clock reads 5:06, about an hour before the time I set it for. Resigned to getting up now, I click the alarm mode to Off. I honestly can't remember the last time I woke to the sound of *bomp*, *bomp*, *bomp*, instead of to the stirrings of one of my three kids. And the snooze feature is an even more distant memory. Mornings of bargaining for brief but luxurious extensions in bed. *Just nine more minutes, and I won't shave my legs. Nine more minutes, I'll skip breakfast. Nine more minutes, morning sex.* I haven't touched that button in a long, long time. Well, Charlie is seven, so it has to be about seven years. It seems like forever. I only bother to set the alarm clock every night now because I know, I just know, that the one time I don't, the one time I decide to rely on my little cherubs to wake me, it'll be the morning I have some critical deadline or a flight I can't miss, and they'll all sleep in for the very first time.

I stand and look down at Bob, his eyes shut, face slack, mouth open, splayed on his back.

"Possum," I say.

"I'm awake," he says, his eyes still shut. "He's asking for you."

"He's saying 'baba,' not 'Mama.'"

"You want me to get him?"

"I'm up."

I pad barefoot on the cold hardwood floor down the hallway to Linus's bedroom. I open the door to see him standing

at the bars of his crib, sucking his nukie, ratty blanket in one hand, beloved and even rattier Bunny in the other. His whole face smiles when he sees me, which makes me smile, and he starts banging on the rail. He looks like an adorable baby prison inmate, all packed and ready on his last day in jail, awaiting his release.

I pick him up and carry him over to the changing table, where his good mood collapses into a betrayed wail. He arches his back and twists onto his side, fighting with everything he's got against what happens five to six times a day, every day. I'll never understand why he so vehemently hates getting his diaper changed.

"Linus, stop it."

I have to use an unsettling amount of force to pin him down and muscle him into a new diaper and clothes. I try a few belly blasts and singing "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" to snap him out of it, but he remains my uncooperative adversary throughout the entire process. The changing table sits next to the only window in his room, which is sometimes useful for distractions. *See the birdie!* But it is still dark out, and even the birds aren't up yet. It's still nighttime, for God's sake.

Linus doesn't sleep through the night. Last night, I rocked him back to sleep after he woke screaming at one, and Bob went in a little after three. At nine months, Linus isn't talking yet, only baba-mama-dada-ing. So we can't interview him to find out what the problem is, and we can't reason with him or bribe him. Every night it's a guessing game that Bob and I don't feel like playing, and we never win.

Do you think he's teething? Should we give him Tylenol? We can't just drug him every night. Maybe he has an ear infection. I saw him tugging at his ear earlier. He always tugs at his ear. Did he lose his nukie? Maybe he had a nightmare. Maybe it's separation. Should we bring him into bed with us? We don't really want to put that on the menu, do we? What did we do with the other two? I can't remember.

Every now and then, motivated by desperate exhaustion, we'll resolve to ignore him. *Tonight we're going to let him cry it out.* But little Linus has remarkable stamina and lungs that won't quit. Once he sets his mind to doing something, he commits 100 percent, which is a trait I think will serve him well in life, so I'm not fully convinced we should beat it out of him. Typically, he'll cry for more than an hour, during which time Bob and I will lie awake, not so much ignoring the crying as we are listening to it, focusing on it, searching for subtle changes in the pitch or rhythm that might indicate the end is near, finding no such thing.

One of the other two, usually Lucy, will eventually knock on the door and come in.

"Linus is crying."

"We know, sweetie."

"Can I have a drink of milk?"

Now I'm up with Lucy fetching milk, and Bob is up settling Linus. Plan aborted. Baby wins. Score: Harvard MBA-trained parents, both highly skilled in negotiation and leadership: 0. Nine-month-old child with no formal education or experience on the planet: too many times for my weary brain to count.

Once dressed and picked up off the dreaded changing

table, Linus is instantly righted. No hard feelings, no grudges, just living in the moment. I give my little Buddha a kiss and a squeeze and carry him downstairs. Charlie and Lucy are already up. I can hear Lucy moving around in her bedroom, and Charlie is lying in one of the beanbag chairs in the living room watching *SpongeBob*.

"Charlie, it's too early for TV. Shut it off."

But he's completely entranced and doesn't hear me. At least, I hope he doesn't hear me and isn't deliberately blowing me off.

Lucy comes out of her bedroom dressed like a lunatic.

"How do you like my fashion, Mom?"

She's wearing a pink and white polka-dot vest layered over an orange long-sleeve shirt, velvet leopard print leggings under a sheer pink ballerina tutu, Ugg boots, and six clips secured randomly in her hair, all different colors.

"You look fabulous, honey."

"I'm hungry."

"Come with me."

We walk into the kitchen, and Lucy climbs up onto one of the bar stools at the kitchen island counter. I pour two bowls of Lucky Charms, one for Lucy and one for Charlie, and a bottle of Similac for Linus.

Yes, my children are Peanuts characters. Charlie, seven, and Lucy, five, were given their names without thought or reference to the comic strip. Charlie was named after Bob's father, and we both just liked the name Lucy. Then, when I was unexpectedly expecting again, years after we'd donated

or eBayed every piece of baby equipment, years after we'd celebrated the end of diapers and strollers and Barney, we had to come up with yet another name and were stumped.

"I'd go with Schroeder," a work colleague offered.

"No, definitely Linus. Or Woodstock," said another.

It was only then that I realized the pattern we'd started with our first two kids. And I liked the name Linus.

I feed Linus his bottle as I watch Lucy eat all of the colored marshmallows, "the charm," first.

"Charlie, come! Your cereal's getting soggy!"

Lucy eats two more spoonfuls of charm.

"Charlie!"

"Okay, okay."

Charlie drags himself onto the bar stool next to Lucy and looks down at his bowl as if it's the worst homework assignment ever.

"I'm tired," he says.

"Then why are you up? Go back to bed."

"Okay," he says and walks back upstairs to his bedroom.

Lucy drinks the milk from her bowl, wipes her mouth with her sleeve, hops down, and takes off without a word. In a hurry to be free like his sister, Linus drains his bottle and burps without any assistance. I release him onto the floor, which is cluttered with toys and crushed pieces of Goldfish crackers. I grab a ball and toss it into the living room.

"Go get it!"

Thrilled to be in on a game, he crawls after it like a playful puppy.

Alone for at least a moment, I eat Charlie's untouched, soggy cereal because someone should, then I clear all the dishes to the sink, wipe down the counter, put on a pot of coffee, pack lunch boxes and snacks for Charlie and Lucy, and pack the diaper bag for Linus. I sign a permission slip for Lucy to go to Plimoth Plantation. Next to the question, "Will you be able to chaperone?" I check "No." In Charlie's backpack, I find a note from his teacher:

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Nickerson,

Report cards went out last week, and I'm hoping that you've had some time now to look it over. I'd like to schedule a time to talk with both of you in person about Charlie. Please give me a call at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,
Ms. Gavin

Charlie's report card is not what every parent dreams of for her child, especially when that parent always, always received perfect report cards herself. Bob and I knew there would be issues, room for improvement with things like reading and paying attention. Last year prepared us a little. But in kindergarten, Charlie's below-average marks in a few categories were brushed off by both his teacher and Bob. *He's a boy! He'll be used to sitting still and to the long day by the time he's in first grade. I see it every year. Don't worry.*

Well, he's in first grade now, and I'm worried. He scored either an "N" for "Needs improvement" or a "3" for "Below

expectations" in *most* of the categories. Even Bob's face blanched when he read down the column of 3's and N's. Whatever is going on with Charlie, a sweeping generalization about his gender isn't going to cover it this time. What's wrong with him?

The Lucky Charms are making me feel ill. I shouldn't have eaten all that sugar. I open my laptop on the counter next to the coffeemaker and check email while standing and waiting for the caffeine my addicted brain needs. I have sixty-four new emails. I was up until midnight last night clearing my inbox, so these all came in the last five hours. Several are from offices on the West Coast, sent late last night. At least two dozen are from offices in Asia and Europe, already well into today's workday. A couple of emails marked "urgent" are from a young and panicky analyst in the Boston office.

I become absorbed in reading and replying for too long without interruption. My ears tune in and hear nothing. Where are they?

"Lucy? Linus?"

Only the beanbags are watching *SpongeBob* in the living room. I bomb up the stairs and into Lucy's room. They're both there, which means that Lucy forgot to latch the gate at the bottom of the stairs, and Linus crawled all the way up by himself. Thank God he didn't try to climb back down because his preferred method right now is headfirst. But before I can thank God for keeping him in one piece, before I knock on the wood floor for even thinking of what could've happened, and before I can thoroughly chastise Lucy for not

latching the gate, all of my senses heighten and narrow in on Linus. He's sitting on the floor, not investigating anything, with his mouth suspiciously shut. Lucy is a few feet away on the floor making bead jewelry. There are beads all over the floor.

"Linus!"

I grab the back of his head with my left hand and swipe inside his mouth with my right index finger. He resists, whipping his head side to side and clamping his mouth shut harder.

"Linus, open! What do you have in there?"

I feel it. I waggle my finger and scoop out a bubblegum-pink plastic bead, about the size of a cranberry. Violated and robbed and completely unaware that his life was in danger, Linus howls. Bob is now standing in the doorway, showered, dressed, and concerned.

"What happened?" he asks.

"He was just about to choke on this."

I display the murderous bead in the palm of my hand.

"Nah, too small. He's okay."

Still, there are plenty of bigger beads strewn on the floor around Lucy, plus some coins, hair elastics, a Super Ball. Lucy's room is a death trap. What if he'd decided to suck on a quarter? What if one of the larger orange beads had looked particularly tasty to him? What if I'd gotten here too late? What if Linus were lying on the floor, not breathing, lips blue?

If Bob could read my mind, which he probably could, he'd tell me not to go there. He'd tell me to stop imagining the

worst and to relax. Everyone's fine. All kids put things in their mouths that they shouldn't. They eat paint chips and crayons and swallow dirt and pebbles and all kinds of things we don't even know about. They even climb stairs unattended. Kids are tough, he'd say. They survive.

But I know differently. I don't have to imagine the worst to go there. I can remember it. Sometimes kids survive. And sometimes they don't.

Being the highly superstitious, God-fearing, slightly obsessive-compulsive, type A perfectionist that I am, with the bead in my fist, I knock on the wooden bedpost, thank God for keeping him safe, and blame his sister.

"Lucy, this room is a disaster. You need to pick up all of these beads."

"But I'm making a necklace," she whines.

"Here, I'll help you, Goose," says Bob, now on his knees and gathering beads. "Why don't you pick out one of your already-made necklaces for today? Then you can come downstairs with me and Linus."

"Charlie hasn't dressed or eaten yet," I say, agreeing to the routine, passing the parenting baton over to Bob.

After a quick shower, I stand naked in front of the full-length mirror in the bedroom and assess myself as I slather Lubriderm over my arms and legs.

N, Needs improvement.

I'm still about fifteen pounds over my pre-Linus weight, which was, if I have to be honest, ten pounds over my pre-

Charlie weight. I grab a handful of the loose and puckered bread dough that used to be my taut belly and trace the rust-colored line that runs unfaded from a few inches above my belly button down to my pubic hair. I continue down to the pads of flesh cushioning my hip bones, which migrated sideways to make room for Linus, my biggest baby, leaving me with wider hips and a drawer full of pants that won't button.

The gym I belong to could more accurately be called my favorite charity. I never go. I really should cancel my membership instead of essentially donating a hundred dollars to them every month. There's also the gym equipment in the basement, positioned like statues, collecting dust: the elliptical machine, the Bowflex, and the rower Bob bought me for Christmas when I was eight months pregnant (was he insane?). I pass these hulking pieces of equipment every time I do the laundry, which with three kids, is often. I always walk by them at a quick clip, without looking at them, as if we've had some sort of emotionally charged fight, and I'm giving them the cold shoulder. It works. They never bother me.

I rub the remaining Lubriderm into my hands.

Don't be too hard on yourself, I think, knowing that is my tendency.

Linus is only nine months old. The phrase "nine months up, nine months down" from *The Girlfriends' Guide to Getting Your Groove Back* pops into my head. The author assumes I have time for things like manicures and shopping and trunk shows and that I have made my groove a priority. It's not that

I don't want my groove back. It's on my list. It's just unfortunately way at the bottom where I can barely see it.

Before I get dressed, I pause for one last appraisal. My fair skin is covered with freckles, courtesy of my Scottish mother. When I was a girl, I used to connect the dots with a pen to create constellations and tattoos. My favorite used to be the perfect five-point star my freckles outline on my left thigh. But that was back in the '80s, before I knew about sunscreen, back when I and all of my friends toted bottles of baby oil with us to the beach, quite literally sautéing ourselves in the sun. Now every doctor and the media are all saying that my freckles are age spots and signs of sun damage.

I hide most of the damage with a white camisole and my black Elie Tahari power suit. In all the right ways, I feel like a man in this suit. Perfect for the kind of day I'm facing. I towel dry my hair and work an emulsified gob of Shine-and-Hold into it. Auburn and thick and wavy to my shoulders, there is nothing masculine about my hair. I may be fat and freckled and dressed like a man, but I love my pretty hair.

After a perfunctory application of foundation, blush, eyeliner, and mascara, I head downstairs and reenter the fray. Lucy is now planted in one of the beanbag chairs singing along with Dora the Explorer, and Linus is penned in the Pack 'n Play next to her, sucking on the head of a plastic school bus driver. In the kitchen, Bob sits alone at the table, drinking coffee from his Harvard mug and reading the *Wall Street Journal*.

"Where's Charlie?" I ask.

"Getting dressed."

"Did he eat?"

"Cereal and juice."

How does he do it? Bob in Charge of All Three Kids is an entirely different show than Sarah in Charge of All Three Kids. With Bob, they're happily willing to be independent little taskmasters, content to leave him in peace until he comes to them with an offer of a new activity. With me, I have all the magnetism of a favorite rock star without the bodyguards. They're *on* me. A typical example: Linus is under my feet, whining, begging to be picked up, while Lucy hollers, "Mom, I need help!" from another room, while Charlie asks me forty-seven hundred relentless questions about what happens to trash.

I grab my coffee mug and sit opposite Bob for our morning meeting. I take a sip. It's cold. Whatever.

"Did you see the note from Charlie's teacher?" I ask.

"No, what?"

"His teacher wants to talk to us about his report card."

"Good, I want to know what's going on."

He reaches into his messenger bag and pulls out his iPhone.

"You think she can meet with us before school?" he asks.

I grab my laptop off the counter and sit back down.

"I could do early on Wednesday and Friday, possibly Thursday if I move something," I say.

"I can do Thursday. You have her email?"

"Yup."

I shoot an email to Ms. Gavin.

"You going to his game today?" he asks.

"No, are you?"

"I probably won't be back in time, remember?"

"Oh, yeah. I can't, my day's packed."

"Okay. I just wish one of us could be there to see him."

"Me, too, honey."

I believe he's being entirely sincere, but I can't help taking his words "I just wish one of us" and translating them in my brain into "I think you." And while the gears of my internal language interpreter are greased, it transforms "could" to "should." The majority of women in Welmont with children Charlie's age never miss a soccer game and don't earn special good mother status for being there. This is simply what good mothers do. These same mothers herald it an exceptional event if any of the dads leave the office early to catch a game. The fathers cheering on the sidelines are upheld as great dads. Fathers who miss the games are working. Mothers who miss the games, like me, are bad mothers.

A standard dose of maternal guilt sinks to the bottom of the cold coffee and Lucky Charms soup in my stomach. Not exactly the Breakfast of Champions.

"Abby can stay and watch him," I say, reassuring myself.

Abby is our nanny. She started working for us when Charlie was twelve weeks old, when my maternity leave ended. We were beyond lucky to get her when we did. Abby was twenty-two then, right out of college with a degree in psychology, and lived just ten minutes away in Newton.

She's smart, conscientious, has tons of energy, and loves our kids.

Before Charlie and Lucy were old enough for preschool, Abby watched them from 7:30 in the morning until 6:30 at night, Monday through Friday. She changed their diapers, rocked them to sleep, read them stories, wiped their tears, taught them games and songs, bathed and fed them. She grocery shopped and cleaned the house. She became an essential member of our family. I can't imagine our life without her. In fact, if I had to choose between keeping Bob and keeping Abby, there have been times when it would've been difficult to pick Bob.

This past spring, Abby told us the unthinkable. She would be leaving us to attend Boston College for her master's in childhood education. We were stunned and panicked. We couldn't lose her. So we negotiated a deal. With Charlie and Lucy already in school for seven hours a day, we were willing to put Linus in day care in September for the same hours. That would mean we'd need her only from 3:00 to 6:30, and we'd pay for part of her tuition.

Sure, we could've combed through Craigslist and found someone who would probably be good and would definitely be cheaper. Or we could've hired someone through a find-a-nanny agency. But Abby already knows our kids. She knows their routines, their moods, their favorite things. She knows how to handle Charlie's inquisitions, Lucy's tantrums, and she knows to never, never forget to bring Bunny wherever Linus goes. And she already loves them. How much is too

much to pay for knowing without any doubt that your kids are well loved when you can't be there?

Charlie gallops into the kitchen, out of breath.

"Where are my Pokémon cards?"

"Charlie, you're still in your pajamas. Forget about Pokémon. Go get dressed," I say.

"But I need my Pokémon cards."

"Pants, shirt, shoes, and shut off your light," I say.

Charlie throws his head back in frustration but surrenders and barrels back upstairs to his room.

"Any house stuff?" Bob asks.

"Will you call the garage door guy this time?"

"Yup, he's on my list."

Our automatic door opener is one of the newer models, and it has a seeing-eye sensor that prevents it from closing if it observes something under the door, like a small child. It's a great safety feature in theory, but it only seems to drive us crazy. One of the kids, and we suspect Charlie, keeps knocking into the eye on the right side so it's not level with and can't see the left side. And when it gets cross-eyed, it won't work at all.

When we were kids, my brother Nate and I used to play Indiana Jones with our automatic garage door. One of us would hit the button on the remote, and then we would see who had the guts to wait the longest before running and rolling under the closing door. No safety features in those days. That garage door opener operated completely blind. It would've taken all the fun out of the game if the risk of

getting crushed to death, or at least painfully squished, had been removed. Nate was great at it, diving and rolling at the last possible second. God, I still miss him.

Charlie tears into the kitchen wearing a tee-shirt, shorts, and no shoes.

"Mom, what if the earth runs out of gravity?"

"What did I tell you to put on?"

No answer.

"It's November, you need pants and a long-sleeve shirt and shoes," I say.

I check my watch. 7:15. He's still standing there, I think waiting for an answer about gravity.

"Go!"

"Come on, kiddo, let's find something better," says Bob, and they walk off together.

I wrangle the other two kids into hats and coats, send out a few more emails, buckle Linus into his bucket car seat, listen to my work voicemail, pack my own bag, leave a note for Abby about the soccer game, down the rest of the cold coffee, and finally meet Bob and a suitably dressed Charlie at the front door.

"Ready?" asks Bob, facing me.

We both cock our fists back into position.

"Ready."

Today is Friday. Bob drops the kids at school and day care on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and I take them on Mondays and Wednesdays. Fridays are up for grabs. Unless one of us makes an indisputable case for needing to get to work before

school starts, we shoot for it. Scissors cut paper. Paper covers rock. Rock smashes scissors. We both take the shoot very seriously. Winning is huge. Driving straight to work with no kids in the car is heaven.

"One, two, threeeee, shoot!"

Bob hammers his closed fist on top of my peace sign and grins, victorious. He wins significantly more times than he loses.

"Lucky bastard."

"It's all skill, babe. Have a great day," he says.

"You, too."

We kiss good-bye. It's our typical morning good-bye kiss. A quick peck. A well-intentioned habit. I look down and notice Lucy's round, blue eyes paying close attention. I flash to studying my own parents kissing when I was little. They kissed each other hello and good-bye and good night like I would have kissed one of my aunts, and it terribly disappointed me. There was no drama to it at all. I promised myself that when I got married someday, I would have kisses that meant something. Kisses that would make me weak in the knees. Kisses that would embarrass the kids. Kisses like Han Solo kissing Princess Leia. I never saw my father kiss my mother like that. What was the point of it? I never got it.

Now I get it. We aren't living in some George Lucas blockbuster adventure. Our morning kiss good-bye isn't romantic, and it certainly isn't sexual. It's a routine kiss, but I'm glad we do it. It does mean something. It's enough. And it's all we have time for.