

ManOS: Rebuild the Man Beneath the Mask

Sample Chapter — *The Lie of the Line* — by Lee Powell



“The psychological rule says that when an inner situation is not made conscious, it happens outside, as fate.” — Carl Jung¹

The first stroke wasn’t me. It looked straight enough, clean enough, what anyone would expect. But it was a lie. I drew it because I thought that’s what the world wanted—the version of me that looked right on paper, that passed inspection. Then I drew another line, the real one. Crooked, imperfect, alive. The truth surfaced: the first line lies. It always has.

The room hummed with the sound of pens scratching, shoes scuffing tile. Chalk squeaked a white scar across the board. Mr. Bunting turned with the slow rhythm of a man who had taught the same sentence for twenty years.

I sat in the back row, thumb against tongue. Warm film. A small shelter. I thought I was invisible.

Then the laughter cracked. Not the kind you join—the kind that hunts. I froze, thumb half-out, shining. He saw me. Chalk still in his hand. A mouth twisted into a sneer honed for sport.

“Powell. Fourteen and still sucking your thumb? God help you.”

The class detonated. Desks shook. Arms slapped in rhythm. Eyes bright with cruelty. Heat rose up my neck. Salt. Shame. The muscles in my cheeks roped tight, thumb hidden under a book like an illicit comfort.

I quit that day—not from strength, but from ridicule. The urge didn’t die. It only burrowed deeper. I learned a rule: don’t get caught.

Years later, the thumb had new disguises. Nicotine was the shadow that never left. Quitting cigarettes was easy—once I swapped them for gum, and the gum for lozenges. The lozenge was perfect: invisible. You could sit in a meeting, tongue pressed against your gum, and no one would ever know. It looked like composure, but it was dependency dressed up neat.

My oral addiction was weaponized for years — thirty-five of them — and eventually, the truth landed. A tiny white lozenge was still running my life.

The drinking came later, toward the end. Not all through the marriage, not the whole story. It started when I was trying to get out—of the companies, the weight, the version of life I’d built around denial. The pattern was there all along, waiting: the bottle first became an answer. When the house was full, I skulled it straight in the tool shed, hidden like contraband. When it was empty, the bottle sat cold in the fridge, poured into thick crystal glasses. We were already living separate lives long before the separation was official.

At night, bare feet on tile, a dim light over the sink throwing long shadows, I poured again. First: warmth. Second: edges softened. Third: the day blurred just enough to tolerate. It wasn’t celebration. It wasn’t company. Just numbness. I told myself I wasn’t a drunk. No blackouts. No missed work. No slur. But the reflection didn’t lie.

Marriage was no refuge. I stayed, telling myself it was for the boys, the business, stability. Truth was simpler: I didn’t yet know how to leave with integrity. Every flaw reflected back. Every weakness exposed.

Later in this book, I’ll tell you about the day the man at the bottle shop knew my order before I even spoke. That story deserves its own space, because it was the moment it hit me I wasn’t hiding anything at all.

Once, a psychic reading was relayed to me through the person I was married to at the time. The woman had said she saw a man plastered in Post-it notes, each stamped in block letters: **FAILURE**. Her closing words were simple: you’re at a crossroads—stay, or go. The image stuck. It was brutal and accurate—a mirror of years spent trying to earn approval through performance.

That was the scar tissue: the ultimate proof that people-pleasing doesn’t work. What starts as survival curdles into something darker. You silence yourself to keep the peace, and what follows is predictable: depression in the body, resentment under the skin, relationship satisfaction rotting from the inside out. Authenticity erodes. Hostility builds. Until finally it leaks sideways—sarcasm, muttered expletives, slammed doors, withdrawal. *Okay then, I guess it’ll be me*

¹Jung, C. G. (1951). *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*. Collected Works, Vol. 9, Part II, §126. Princeton University Press.

again—add it to the fucken list. All the words I was too scared to say to her face came out crooked everywhere else.²³

Gaslighting eats at a human's scaffolding. One night, the truth surfaced — admitted, spoken aloud — and by morning it was gone. Denied. Rewritten. Like it never happened. If not for the cameras, I might have thought I imagined it. The recordings were my anchor, proof the words existed outside my skull.

That's the cruelty of gaslighting: you almost go mad in the end. You second-guess yourself until you start erasing yourself. You stop trusting your own eyes, your own memory, your own gut. You're forever scanning for external proof because the inner compass has been shattered. It's terrifying when your guidance system no longer feels like your own.

That night something cracked open — a darkness finally naming itself. What came through was raw, bewildered — almost disbelieving that truth could still be met with presence. For a twisted moment it was beautiful, like truth had finally broken surface. And then it shut. Denied. Buried. I thank God for that recording. Without it, I could have lost my mind.

Some nights I mapped out an exit. Not drama. Logic. A quiet unmaking she would finally feel. Maybe she'd regret it. Maybe she'd see. But the darker thought came too: it would have crowned her. The tragic widow with assets, sympathy, and narrative. My death as her victory lap. Even my fantasy betrayed me.

My son and I made a pact to quit together. For me it was nicotine. For him, something else. I broke it. The shame of that cut deeper than anything she ever said.

I tried everything. Packs flushed. Gum binned. Lozenges drowned. I even threw smokes onto the roof to prove a point—only to climb back later, desperate, drying out soggy tobacco like a starving animal. My palms stung on the rough roof, my mouth as dry and bitter as the habit I couldn't kill. A strong body, disciplined work, successful business... and still begging a soaked cigarette. Addiction makes liars of us all.

I lied most to myself. Even business turned against me. Fourteen years building—code and deals, handshakes I mistook for brotherhood. Contracts I signed too fast, eager to escape corporate politics. I didn't want to pay a lawyer, let a friend skim them, told myself it was fine. People-pleaser logic. It cost me. When the valuation landed, it slapped me clean: a fraction of the worth, clauses I'd glossed over, language too soft to enforce. They held the cards; I'd signed them into their hands.

Thumb. Lozenges. Vodka. Contracts. Different masks. Same ghost. I wanted to be soothed, seen, secured—by anything outside me. The world sells wholeness from the outside in. But presence is an inside job. No pill, no paper, no praise could deliver it. I didn't need erasure. I needed integration. The boy with his thumb deserved protection, not contempt. The man with his lozenge needed a steadier anchor than sugar and shame. The father who broke the pact needed accountability and repair. The builder who signed the weak clause needed a spine, not a scapegoat.

Addiction never showed a monster; it showed a man using the wrong tools to numb real pain. When I finally saw that—really saw it—I packed a tent and left for winter in Tasmania. Cradle Mountain. The kind of wilderness that doesn't care who you were before it swallowed you. Seven days alone, thirty kilos on my back—about sixty-six pounds—food drops mapped, EPIRB and sat phone in case I vanished. No towns, no stores, no signals. Just snow, wind, and a silence that could kill you if you disrespected it. Serene. Merciless. Holy.

I told myself it was for clarity, though truthfully I was also hoping to get laid. It had been... sometime. But the mountain wasn't interested in my hunger; it fed me something different. Each climb stripped off another mask, each night in the freezing dark made me smaller, truer. The wilderness taught boundaries sharper than any therapist—if you don't listen, you die; if you do, you learn how to live.

When I came back, I painted. Not for art or success but to feel time loosen its grip. Color became meditation, the brush confession. Layer by layer I distilled the mess until it made a shape I could face—not perfect, just true. I didn't erase the old lines; I left their echoes visible, not relevant anymore but real, and then I drew a new line: aligned, cohesive, inside-out.

Presence. The first crooked line carried the man I thought I had to be—borrowed, misaligned. I left it visible, then

²Jack, D. C., & Dill, D. (1992). "The Silencing the Self Scale: Schemas of Intimacy Associated With Depression in Women." *Psychology of Women Quarterly*.

³Impett, E. A., et al. (2012). "Sacrificing for Approach and Avoidance Goals: A Daily Diary Study of Married Couples." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

drew the truer line. Past, present, and future layered in one frame, fracture and flame sharing the same space. Different masks, same ghost. But ghosts can be faced, and when faced, they change.



Figure 1: Presence, 2025 — Acrylic, oil, and gold on canvas, 150 × 150 cm (59 × 59 in) — Lee Powell (Kenya).

There were mornings I could barely lift myself from bed. My chest felt weighted, my body hollowed out, grief and exhaustion pressing down at once. What saved me wasn't strategy or some grand act of willpower; it was smaller, slower: painting, and the long, stumbling walks through the bush. I wasn't trying to become an artist. Truth is, I still don't think of myself as one. I was trying to be human—to work out my mess, to face the pain I'd endured and the pain I'd caused.

If you've ever sat in that place, you know it: the weight of mistakes, the wreckage of choices, the shame that whispers you should have been better. For me, painting began as guilt. After decades running companies I'd built from nothing, after thirty years in a marriage that drained me, slowing down felt like a crime. I told myself I should be producing, grinding, achieving—yet there I was, standing before a canvas with colors in my hands. It felt almost wrong. But when I mixed paint, something shifted. The swirl of pigment calmed me. The act itself became meditation, like poetry—distilling a whole world into a few precise words.

That's the secret I learned: when you distill, you understand. Every canvas became a vessel for grief, disbelief, and the slow, strange ache of healing. Each brushstroke unearthed pieces of myself I'd hidden or buried until the canvas stopped being paint and started becoming a map of my own soul. I'd built my life on words. I created Scrivener for Windows, software used by writers across the world. I knew the rules of story—characters need flaws, wounds drive conflict, structure carries tension—but the rules dulled the pulse. Writing had turned into an aesthetic.

So with painting I swore an oath: no rules, no tutorials, no efficient techniques. Just raw exploration. It was clumsy, slow, alive. And strangely, the paintings with the most crooked proportions, the least polish, were the ones people gravitated toward. Maybe because imperfection is where the truth leaks through.

Then came the canvas that changed everything. I'd planned an abstract called Presence—past, now, future mapped over golden-ratio points. I drew the “now” line by eye and missed the ratio completely. My first impulse was to sand it back and start again. Then the penny dropped: the line wasn't wrong; it was honest. It carried every program I'd absorbed—well-meant teachers, family rules, survival code. That misaligned line is how most men live. You don't erase

it; you let it fade into the background while you draw a deliberate one—aligned to who you are, not who you perform. From then on, I kept the echo visible and laid a slower, steadier stroke through the ratio.

I didn't sand back the old one. I let it remain—a visible echo, a trace of who I'd been, and the man I was becoming. That's the lesson: we're already whole. The world keeps selling wholeness from the outside in—money, sex, approval, power—but alignment only ever comes from the inside out.

Looking back, I wouldn't wish the pain on anyone. But I can see its strange beauty now. It carved depth into me. It taught me to hold both joy and sorrow, to honor the fracture as much as the flame. Even the losses, the cracks in my own code—they shaped me. And in shaping me, they left me with more to give.

This is why I paint. Not to perfect, not to be an artist, but to be whole. To carry both fracture and fire. To remember that nothing is wasted, everything belongs. That crooked line was never a mistake—it was a truth revealed in color. And sometimes, when I catch myself reaching for that old comfort—tongue searching for a lozenge that isn't there—I remember: the boy with his thumb wasn't wrong. He was just looking for shelter in the only way he knew how.

Practices & Drills

Reflection Prompt — Your Crooked Line

Write about one moment you've always carried as a mistake. Ask yourself: what if it wasn't a mistake at all, but simply what happened? What did it reveal about who you thought you had to be?

Exercise — Echo Lines

On paper or canvas, draw a quick, imperfect line—your “crooked line.” Leave it visible. Then draw a second, slower, deliberate line—your “true line.” Step back and notice how both coexist: the echo of what was, and the clarity of what now is.

Drill — One True Word

Next time your child or partner asks how you are, trade “fine” for one real word: tired, hopeful, anxious, grateful. Watch what happens when honesty opens the door.

Gratitude Reframe — Beauty in the Pain

List three painful experiences from your life. For each, name one unexpected gift it gave you—strength, compassion, or clarity. The aim is not to glorify pain but to see how grief becomes compost for growth.

Takeaway

It's not “What do I want from life?” but “What does life want from me?” We don't create our path; we're summoned to it—by gifts, circumstances, and wounds turned to wisdom. Collapse is not the end—it's the doorway. Presence is power. Imperfections often become the truths others connect to most.

Reflection Question

What crooked line in your own life have you been trying to erase—when perhaps it was never a mistake at all?
