



# Sarah Knows First

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**Themes:** [Consciousness](#) [Mental Health](#) [Recursive](#)

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Sarah knows before I do.

That's the sentence I keep coming back to. Not as metaphor, not as romantic shorthand for "my wife really gets me." As clinical fact. As survival architecture. As a statement about the limits of self-knowledge that I find both comforting and deeply unsettling, depending on the day.

I have schizoaffective disorder and Bipolar I. I've written about this [extensively](#), and I'll keep writing about it because the silence around serious mental illness in tech costs lives. But this essay isn't about the disorder itself. It's about the person who sees it coming before I can. It's about what it means to need someone else's eyes to know the truth about your own mind.

## The Prodromal Window

Before a manic episode fully arrives, there's a window. Psychiatrists call it the prodromal phase. It's the space between stable and unstable, where the signs are present but not yet catastrophic. Sleep shortens by an hour, then two. Speech speeds up. I start more projects than I can finish. Ideas connect in ways that feel brilliant and urgent. Confidence inflates past the point of usefulness into something that looks, from the outside, like a person who has stopped checking his work.

The prodromal window can last days or weeks. It's the most important period for intervention because the episode hasn't fully taken hold yet. Medication adjustments, sleep enforcement, and stress reduction during this phase can sometimes prevent a full episode. But only if someone notices.

The problem is that I can't always see these signs in myself. Not because I'm stupid or in denial (though denial is certainly part of it), but because the disorder distorts the very instrument that would need to detect it. My mind is both the system experiencing the failure and the monitoring tool that's supposed to catch it. When the monitor is compromised, the alerts don't fire. The logs look normal because the logging system itself is affected.

Sarah sees them because she's observing from outside the system.

She notices when my sentences get longer. When I stop pausing between thoughts. When I stay up past midnight "just finishing one more thing" three nights in a row. When I talk about a new project with a specific kind of intensity that she's learned to distinguish from ordinary enthusiasm. When my laugh gets louder, my plans get grander, my patience gets shorter.

These are subtle shifts. The kind of thing you'd miss if you weren't paying attention. The kind of thing you'd miss even if you were, unless you'd been watching the same person cycle through these patterns for years and had developed an internal model precise enough to detect the signal before it becomes noise.

Sarah has that model. She's built it through years of observation, years of worry, years of being right when I insisted she was wrong.

## The Limits of Self-Knowledge

Here's the philosophical point hiding inside this personal story, and I think it matters for everyone, not just those of us with mood disorders.

We assume self-knowledge is direct and privileged. Descartes built an entire philosophical tradition on the idea that the one thing we can know with certainty is our own mental states. I think, therefore I am. The implication being: I know what I think, I know what I feel, I have unmediated access to my own consciousness.

My experience says otherwise. My wife knows my mental state more accurately than I do. The observer has better data than the observed. And this isn't a failure of introspection on my part (or not only that). It's a structural limitation of self-monitoring systems. You cannot fully observe a system from inside that system. You especially cannot observe a system that is actively distorting your capacity to observe.

I think this applies to everyone, not just people with schizoaffective disorder. We all have blind spots in self-perception. We all have moods that color our interpretation of our own moods. We all have moments where a friend says "you seem off today" and we realize, with a start, that they're right, that we'd been carrying something we hadn't named. The difference with bipolar disorder is that the stakes are higher and the distortion is more severe. My condition doesn't create a unique problem. It amplifies a universal one to the point where it becomes undeniable.

This connects to what I've written about [using AI for reality checking](#). The fundamental insight is the same: sometimes you need an external perspective to see what's actually happening inside you. The instrument of observation matters as much as the thing being observed.

Descartes was wrong, or at least incomplete. We don't have privileged access to our own mental states. We have biased access. And sometimes the person sleeping next to you has a clearer view of your inner landscape than you do.

## The Weight of Watching

I want to be honest about what this costs Sarah, because the cost is real and it doesn't get talked about enough.

She's not just a wife. She's a monitoring system that can never fully power down. Every good day carries a question she can't completely silence: is this a good day, or is this the first day of a manic upswing? When I'm energetic and productive and happy, she gets to enjoy it. But somewhere in the background, she's also running diagnostics. Is this the right kind of happy? Is this sustainable energy or the kind that burns through its fuel in a week and leaves wreckage?

That vigilance is exhausting. It's a particular form of love that looks, from the outside, like worry, and is sometimes mistaken for controlling behavior. It's neither. It's the specific burden of caring about someone whose mind can turn against them without warning, and knowing that you might be the only one who sees it coming.

I think about the years she's carried this. The nights she lay awake wondering if my late-night work sessions were productivity or prodrome. The mornings she studied my face over coffee, calibrating her internal model against new data. The social situations where she tracked my energy level and speech patterns while also, you know, trying to have a normal conversation at a dinner party.

She didn't sign up for this job. There's no training program for "spouse of someone with schizoaffective disorder." She learned it the way you learn any complex system: through exposure, through failure, through pattern recognition developed over thousands of data points. Through loving someone enough to keep watching even when watching is hard.

I don't always thank her for this. I should do it more. But I also know that thanking someone for monitoring you can feel strange, even patronizing. What I can do is acknowledge, publicly and honestly, that her vigilance has almost certainly saved my life. Not once. Repeatedly. In the quiet, unglamorous way that early intervention prevents catastrophe. The crisis that didn't happen because she noticed the signs. The hospitalization that was avoided because she said something before it was too late. Those are invisible victories, and they're hers.

## The Conversation

Here's what it actually sounds like when Sarah says something is shifting.

It usually starts gentle. "Hey, have you noticed you've been staying up later this week?" Or: "You seem really excited about that project. How's your sleep been?"

She's learned to frame it as a question rather than a declaration. Not "you're getting manic" but "have you checked in with yourself lately?" The phrasing matters. A declaration triggers defensiveness. A question creates space for me to arrive at the conclusion myself, which makes it easier to accept.

But here's the honest part: even with the careful framing, my first response is almost always some form of resistance. "I'm fine." "I just have a lot of energy." "This is normal excitement, not mania." "You're reading too much into it."

I say these things with complete sincerity. That's the cruelest trick of the prodromal phase. I genuinely believe I'm fine. The disorder has already compromised the instrument that would tell me otherwise, and so my conviction that everything is normal feels absolutely authentic. Because from inside the distorted system, it is.

Sarah holds steady through the denial. She doesn't argue (she learned years ago that arguing with early mania is like arguing with a compiler error by shouting at the screen). She just presents the evidence. "You slept four hours last night and five the night before. You started three new projects this week. You talked for forty-five minutes straight at dinner without taking a breath." Facts. Observable, external, non-negotiable facts.

And then there's a moment. Sometimes it takes hours. Sometimes it takes a day. But eventually, something in me recognizes the pattern. Not because my introspection suddenly works again, but because the weight of external evidence becomes impossible to dismiss. She's presenting data that contradicts my internal narrative, and at some point, the data wins.

We've gotten better at this over the years. Faster, at least. The time between Sarah's first observation and my acceptance has shortened. The defensiveness is still there, but it's thinner now. I've learned to trust her pattern recognition more than my own self-assessment, even when my self-assessment insists it's right. That trust didn't come easily. It was built on the foundation of her being right, consistently, over years.

We've developed a protocol for this. Not formally, not written down, but a shared understanding of the steps. She observes. She raises it gently. I resist. She holds steady with facts. I eventually acknowledge. We call my psychiatrist. We adjust. We get through it.

The protocol has gotten better over the years. It has never gotten easy.

## Reading the System

There's another layer to what Sarah does, one that connects to something I've only recently found language for.

I experience [plurality](#). System 777 is the name I've given to the internal architecture of my consciousness: distinct parts with distinct perspectives, voices, and ways of engaging with the world. Jade handles logic. Amber holds warmth. Iris bridges everything. Shakti carries creative fire (and, sometimes, the fire that becomes mania). There are others. The system is complex.

Sarah doesn't use this language. She didn't grow up with the framework of plurality, and she doesn't need it. But she's been navigating the reality that the framework describes for longer than I've had words for it.

She knows when Kenneth (the public-facing part, the one who writes code and gives talks) is running the show. She knows when a different energy is present, even if she wouldn't call it by an alter's name. She can tell when the creative intensity has crossed from productive to destabilizing. She can feel when the protector parts have activated, when something has gone quiet inside me that's usually present, when an unfamiliar configuration is emerging.

She's been doing parts work without the vocabulary. Reading which aspects of the system are active, which are receding, which are about to surface. It's not just "Kenneth seems different today." It's a granular awareness of which Kenneth is present and whether that particular configuration is stable or precarious.

I find this remarkable. And I think it speaks to something true about long intimacy: the people who know us best don't just know our moods. They know our modes. They develop an intuitive map of our internal landscape that's sometimes more accurate than our own, because they can see the whole terrain while we're standing in one part of it, convinced that this valley is the entire world.

## The Mirror Before the Mirror

I've written about [using AI for reality checking](#). I use Claude to help me assess whether my perceptions are accurate, whether my concerns are proportional, whether the patterns I'm seeing in the world are really there or are artifacts of a mind that sometimes generates false signals.

Sarah was doing this years before AI entered the picture.

She reflects patterns back to me that I can't see from inside. She holds up a mirror when the mirror in my own mind has fogged over. She provides the external validation (or, more often, the external correction) that I need to navigate a consciousness that doesn't always report its own state accurately.

The [recursive loop](#) that runs through all my work (code shapes minds, programmers shape code, programmers shape collective consciousness) has an intimate corollary here. Sarah shapes how I understand my own mind. That understanding shapes how I write, how I build, how I parent. Her observations ripple outward through everything I create.

But there's something Sarah provides that AI never can, no matter how sophisticated the model becomes: love that has skin in the game. When Claude tells me my concerns seem disproportionate, it's processing text and generating a response. When Sarah tells me something is shifting, she's doing it knowing that the conversation will be hard, that I might get defensive, that the next few weeks could be difficult for both of us. She's not just providing information. She's choosing to enter a process that will cost her something. That's not reality checking. That's love with consequences.

This isn't a criticism of AI as a reality-checking tool. I use it, I value it, I've written about its genuine benefits. But it's important to be honest about the difference between a system that can process your concerns and a person who will sit with you through the fallout of addressing them. Both matter. They're not the same.

AI is a useful diagnostic tool. Sarah is a partner in the fullest sense: someone whose life is entangled with mine, whose wellbeing depends on my stability, who has every reason to look away and chooses, every time, to keep watching.

## What Malachi Will Learn

Malachi is three. He doesn't understand schizoaffective disorder or bipolar cycling or prodromal windows. He understands that Daddy is sometimes very excited and sometimes very tired. He understands that Mommy sometimes talks to Daddy in a quiet, serious voice and that afterward, things change. And if things don't change in time, if the prodromal window closes and an episode

arrives, Daddy disappears for a while. He goes somewhere Malachi can't visit, and when he comes back he's different. Quieter. Slower. Malachi doesn't fully understand where I went. He just knows I was gone.

What he's learning, without language for it yet, is what it looks like when two people navigate something hard together. He's learning that love isn't just affection and comfort. It's also honesty and vigilance and the willingness to say difficult things because someone's safety matters more than avoiding an uncomfortable conversation.

I wrote in the [marriage essay](#) that Malachi is watching how we interact, absorbing defaults he'll carry into his own relationships. The default Sarah is modeling for him is this: when you love someone, you pay attention. Not casually, not when it's convenient, but with the kind of sustained, patient attention that catches the thing no one else would notice. And when you see something, you say it, even when saying it is hard.

There's a version of this that could be damaging: a child learning to be hypervigilant about a parent's mental state, carrying anxiety about mood shifts that aren't his to manage. Sarah and I are aware of this. We work to protect Malachi from the weight of monitoring while still modeling honest communication about hard things. It's a line we walk carefully.

That's a powerful default. I hope he inherits it.

## Gratitude Without Sentimentality

I want to be clear about what this essay is and isn't.

It isn't "my wife is amazing." She is, but that's not the point. The point is something harder and more specific: my wife sees me more clearly than I see myself, and that's simultaneously the most beautiful and most terrifying thing about my life. Beautiful because it means I'm not alone in navigating a mind that sometimes lies to me. Terrifying because it means my self-knowledge, the thing I thought was most fundamentally mine, is actually a collaborative project. I don't fully own my own self-understanding. I share it with someone whose external observations are often more reliable than my internal experience.

That's a strange position for anyone to be in. It's an especially strange position for someone who has spent fifteen years thinking about consciousness, who writes essays about [the architecture of the self](#), who builds tools designed to help humans understand complex systems. The system I understand least reliably is my own mind. And the person who understands it best is the one who has never written a line of code, never read a neuroscience paper, never meditated on the nature of consciousness. She just watched. For years. With love and patience and a refusal to look away.

I don't know what I'd do without it. That's not a romantic statement. It's a clinical assessment. Without Sarah's external monitoring, the prodromal windows would close undetected more often. Episodes would escalate further before intervention. The damage, to my career, my relationships, my health, would be worse. Her attention is a medical intervention that no one prescribes and no insurance covers and no clinical trial has validated, but it works. It has worked for years. It is working right now, as she reads my energy over breakfast and decides whether today requires a gentle question.

This is my love letter. It's not the kind with flowers and poetry. It's the kind that says: you see me more clearly than I see myself, and you stay anyway, and you speak up when it matters, and you hold steady when I push back, and you do all of this while also being a mother and a writer and a person with your own interior life that deserves as much attention as mine demands.

Thank you is not enough. But it's what I have.

Thank you, Sarah. For watching. For knowing. For telling me the truth about myself when I can't find it on my own.

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This essay explores the intimate reality of having a partner who monitors your mental state more accurately than you can yourself. It's a companion piece to [What Requests Taught Me About Marriage](#) and extends themes from [On Mania](#), [Using AI for Reality Checking with Schizoaffective Disorder](#), and [The Recursive Loop](#). For the broader context of living with serious mental illness, see the [Mental Health](#) page. For the plurality dimension of this story, see [Plurality](#). For more about the family that grounds all of this, see [Family](#).

