

Kerry Madden-Lunsford

THE FAMILY PLAN

My son, who is thirty-six, has had forty-five phone numbers or thereabouts. My husband doesn't name/save his numbers, but I save each one. His siblings' numbers have stayed reliably, blessedly the same all these years from when we first got them cell phones. I honestly don't know why I save all his numbers. Somehow, I think that giving each new phone a name will be proof that our boy is trying to join the world again, but by the world, I mean—our world.

See, he's getting better. He wants a phone. He got a phone. Next, it will be a job. Oh wait, he should get sober first. He should go back into rehab. Show he's serious. But hey, a phone is a good start. Maybe, we've turned a corner.

He's had forty-five phone numbers since 2013 when we took him off the Family Plan after the intervention that didn't take. I've got all his phone numbers stored on my phone under different incarnations of his name. I name them hoping one will finally stick.

Joan Didion wrote, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live," but my husband and I tell each other stories so our son will live. We want to him to live. We want him to turn that corner, but we've turned so many corners ourselves we always go right back where we started.

Last night he called from an unknown number. We always answer unknown numbers in case it might be him. It was him and the accompanying sweet relief—he's still alive—he's still here. Our son also calls my husband more than he calls me because my husband is a softie and says yes more than I do.

"Hey, it's me, Pops."

"Hey son, how are you? How's it going? It's great to hear your voice."

“Yeah, yeah, Dad, you too! Hey Pops, can you get me an Uber to a concert over on Lincoln for me and my friend right now.”

“Where are you? Where do you want to go exactly?”

“Let’s see, where are we? What’s the address here?”

I’m sitting next to my husband, but I don’t say anything. I’m glad to hear our boy’s voice. The disappointment of his asking for a favor stings a little but nothing like it used to in the olden days when we only traded in hope. This is typical—our son wants an Uber, or he wants money to buy a phone, which we will only send to the company selling the phone. It’s usually a storefront in downtown LA that has a deal. New Phone. New Watch. Jewelry. We never send money directly to him, because our boy hasn’t had a bank account in years. The phones he gets are called “Obama Phones” and they don’t hold much memory for things like photographs or VENMO.

Sending money is also enabling, and we were both experts at that. To our son’s requests, my husband often says yes, and sometimes, I say yes. Sometimes, we are a united front, and we say, “NO! NOT THIS TIME, MISTER!” like that will teach him a lesson. But the time for learning lessons is long gone, and we all know it.

So last night, because we are tired and because it is such a relief to hear his voice, we both say yes, and then we can we hear talking in the background. Words and more words. Clearly, the friend our son has invited to some random concert isn’t interested in these random parents in Alabama ordering some random Uber for them.

“Hold on, Pops. Be right back.”

We’ve paused the Netflix comedy that is John Mullaney’s new show, the comedian who famously got sober. Our son has remained fixedly and unceremoniously unsober. He has something called anosognosia, which is a condition where your brain can’t recognize one or more health conditions you have. In other words, I am pretty sure he thinks we’re the crazy ones.

NAMI—The National Alliance for Mental Illness told us about “Anosognosia” when we called the hotline one day after he smeared himself in peanut oil and turmeric. I had to practice learning all six syllables. We also hired a therapist through NAMI who tried to help from afar. He was one of many. I have created a whole chronology of our boy’s life, trying to find the clues. It has been delivered to therapists, judges, counselors, doctors, and parole officers by email, regular mail, and by hand.

Anosognosia is a neurological condition that prevents people from recognizing or accurately perceiving their own health conditions or problems. It's also known as "denial of deficit" or "lack of insight".

Anosognosia can affect a person's awareness of deficits in judgment, emotions, memory, executive function, language skills, and motor ability.

Anosognosia is a common symptom of mental illnesses like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. It's also associated with dementia and structural brain lesions. Anosognosia is the most common reason why people with severe mental illness don't seek or maintain treatment.

*The term **anosognosia** comes from Greek words meaning "to not know a disease"*

When our boy was in high school, we called it “senioritis.” We also called it “shitty behavior.” I got poetic one Christmas crying in the closet and called him “The Thief of Joy.” Then things got real, and we diagnosed the “shitty behavior” as “alcoholism” and “addiction.” Sometimes, it was still just “asshole.” You’re supposed to be drug-free for a year to get a real diagnosis. That’s what a drug counselor told us in 2013. He also said, “Heroin kills you fast, and meth kills you slow.”

Over a decade later, another drug counselor from a treatment unit suggested over the phone it was schizoaffective disorder, but he couldn’t divulge more because our son was, by then, a man in his thirties newly released from six months

in LA County Men's Jail and then almost immediately he was put on a 5250-psych hold in a local hospital, which meant he got to stay a week. I begged the psych unit and the judge to commit him, but they didn't listen. I dropped off thick files to the court reporter to give to the judge. It had all the evidence that I thought surely the judge would understand. She did not.

The judge said, "Someone is raising their hand in my courtroom! I don't allow that."

Or as in the old folk song—*Git along little dogie.*

Or as in the old fairy tale—*Off with her head!*

It's too much, isn't it? I think it's too much. When it's too much I go to the movies, or I read a good book or write something, or I put Post-it notes to my son in the old cookie jar.

Or I hold his bear, Teddy.

Or I just take a walk and look at trees.

This is a story I never wanted to be mine. Will our son ever get sober? I don't dwell on those questions like I used to in the olden days.

Our son gets back on the line. "Hold up, Pops! Call you back. Keep ordering the Uber." But our son doesn't call back, and my husband cancels the Uber, and we start watching John Mullaney again, another Saturday night. I take my husband's phone, and I see that my son is "active" on Instagram because of the green light on his profile. So, I send him five or six pictures of his nephew who looks like him and who just celebrated his third birthday in Chicago. My son has never met his nephew. I remember standing long ago on a street corner with him, saying, "Your sister is pregnant. She's going to have a baby. You're going to be an uncle, the best uncle." His face lit up with joy and confusion, and I thought that might be a game changer.

It wasn't.

Still, I send these pictures and say, "Your nephew is three years old! We love you." He will think the pictures are from my husband, or he won't think that. I don't know what he will think, but I send him pictures regularly to remind him that he is missed, tethered, and loved.

Anyway, we've bought him phones. We've given him our old phones. We want to wipe him clean the way we've wiped the phones clean. His old numbers sometimes pop up on text chains.

MESSENGER CHAT

ME: *You okay? Did you mean to call? Love you love you.*

SON: *I love u I am in silverlake waiting on an imaginary bus*

ME: *Do you need a ride? Just let us know where you are if you need a ride.*

SON: *Ok. I am by the silverlake blvd exit on the 101*

Another time when we are visiting our old home of Los Angeles, our son calls me to say, "I'm over here on Central, selling four-leaf clover bracelets." He calls on his latest phone. "This is my new number."

"Do you make the bracelets?" I imagine the clover bracelets of childhood on days of sunshine in the South or Midwest, teaching my younger siblings to split the stems with a thumbnail to poke the flower-headed stems through to make bracelets or necklace chains. Then I think of how easy it is for my husband to spot four-leaf clovers, and how I can never find them. Our three kids inherited his gift of finding four-leaf clovers too.

"No, this lady makes them and gives them to me to sell."

"Oh, that's great."

"Yeah, now is my busy time, Mom."

"Okay, we can talk later."

"No, I can talk now."

I try to think of what to say. "So, you give her a cut of the proceeds, or she gives you a cut?" Why am I asking this question? It's none of my business.

"No, she just makes them and gives them to me to sell. She said I needed to sell them. It would be good for me to do."

"Oh. That's great."

"What?"

“Nothing. It's great. I'm glad you're working.”

“Of course, I'm working. You don't know my life.”

“That's right I don't.”

“I'm just kidding. You're so serious. Geez, Mama.”

“I'm sorry. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

The conversation ends. I still can't picture the bracelets or the lady who makes them. Are they clover chains? I get distracted as I always do in our conversations, trying to land on an image, trying to keep it light and bright. He is always twenty steps ahead of me. Clover bracelets? Is this what he's talking about? I wish I could thank this woman who makes bracelets for our son to peddle on the streets of LA. Who is she? What do the bracelets look like? What does he sell them for? Where does he sell them? Oh yes, on Central Ave. Where on Central? Why does it matter? Another message.

MESSENGER CHAT

ME: Do you know where you're going to be on Saturday?

SON: Yes, I have to be aware of constant planning for whole teams assembled to counter every good plan I have started. On Saturday morning, I will most likely be on Central Ave. If you cruise up Central from the Central Market u you should find me between there and 45th Street. Mostly on 25th. Lol. Or 14th. Or King.

A few days later, his father and I will meet him, and we'll spend the day together. It's mid-January 2024. We have made it to 2024 with him. Nothing short of a miracle. That day, we will drive him back to a street off Central Ave where he is staying with a man named Peanut. I will have forgotten about the four-leaf clover bracelets by then because we've been together six hours, and I'm tired, and we must get to a play in the Valley to see our friend, Tina, perform.

We are trying to do too much, but it's how I operate sometimes. Sometimes, I'm afraid to slow down. Sometimes, I must keep moving or else. Sometimes . . .

We accomplished a lot that day we were together. Breakfast. Walk. Lunch. Walk. Filipino bakery in Silver Lake, our old neighborhood. Purple Cake. It has a name. What is the name? "Ube." It's a lovely royal purple and used for special occasions. But the baker is not a kind man or maybe he's just afraid of us. He doesn't smile or make any conversation as he wraps up the cake even though our son keeps talking and chatting to him. I don't want to be there. I don't want this purple cake. I'm sure it's good, but I don't want it.

Still, it's a special occasion getting to see our boy since he lives in LA, and we now live in Birmingham after thirty-five years on the West Coast. We had moved to LA pregnant with our son and wound up raising three kids in Los Angeles. Now two are in Chicago, so our son is alone on the West Coast. We'd kept two households going for fifteen years, my husband holding out for his California public employee pension, as I traveled back and forth for summers and holidays from Alabama for my teaching job. As the addiction took hold, we hoped having a homebase in LA would give our son a chance to land and heal. He landed occasionally but not for long and never to heal.

We pay for the bright purple Ube cake and decide to give the cake to Peanut to thank him for housing our son, but the cake box keeps popping open, which is mildly enraging. Can't something work right? As we walk through the streets of our old neighborhood, our son steps over a man sleeping on the sidewalk and says, "Last man standing, right?"

The guy sits up and they talk for twenty minutes. Our son sees all the people that I typically walk by. I take pictures of him and try to capture the day. He then befriends another man, a man with one eye from Atlanta, and then our son insists we give this gentleman a ride to the place that offers resources to the unhoused. Our boy won't get in the car unless we give his

newfound friend a ride. It's only a few blocks away, but the man gets in and sits in the backseat smoking a joint, asking us, "How far is it?"

I assure him it's not far as we drive along Griffith Park Boulevard near Marshall High School, the old carpool route. We've been encouraging our son to get services at a church nearby, a lifeline, a connection, a something. When we arrive, I watch our son and the one-eyed man from Atlanta together walk toward the tables. I hear our boy tell the man, "This church is where they have Al-Anon meetings. They call people 'qualifiers.' I'm their 'qualifier.'" He points to us. "It's somebody who makes a family crazy with drinking and drugging. Total bullshit. Al-Anon tears families apart, brainwashing them."

Then he asks the guy, "Who's your qualifier?"

"Don't got one."

Our son says, "Me neither."

In the yard of the church, I take a breath and allow myself to realize I am standing in Silver Lake, our former neighborhood. I can look at the sky and imagine one of our homes is still waiting for us. From 1989 to 2023, we rented four different homes in Silver Lake and Echo Park. We could never afford to buy a home, but we lived in a neighborhood we loved with dear friends, and this is our first visit back home to check on our boy because we miss him. How can Silver Lake and Echo Park no longer be our home? It's the place I go to in dreams, and I can give you directions anywhere you need to go. The wintry California sun can crack your heart open if you let it and make you remember, but I'm indifferent, standing there, waiting, and watching him make his way through the crowd of folks offering different services.

The one-eyed man disappears, and I don't see him again.

At one point, I approach our son to see how it's going, and a volunteer with bright pink hair eyeballs me as if to ask, "What are you doing here?"

I explain, "This is my son." I want her to see he has people.

"Your son?" She scowls. "He looks a lot older than you!"

I shrug. “He’s had a harder life.” What else is there to say? I walk away from her and wait for him. I need to back off. Then our son spends over an hour in the bathroom. I get so tired. We get folding chairs and wait. So much of our lives with him, ever since this journey began, is waiting. Waiting at the Benefits Office. Waiting in ER rooms. Waiting in Goodwill for him to pick something. There is this meddlesome voice inside me that says, “It could be the last time, so shut up already.”

It’s the reality of having an adult child on the streets. The voice inside me is mean, making me think about all the missed clues of his childhood where I could have righted this ship years ago. Sometimes, I tell it to shut up. Sometimes, I pour myself a glass of wine to drown it out. Sometimes . . .

After a few hours, we leave the church in that is helping the unhoused, and I stop to insist we take a selfie. Then I drive slowly toward Central Ave in rush hour traffic because that is where our son wants to go. I encourage him to keep accepting the help offered at the church. He says he likes the people, and he’ll go back. I hope he does. Now he wants us to drive him to Peanut’s place on Central. That’s right, we are taking the bright purple Ube cake to Peanut to thank him and drop off our boy.

My husband sits in the passenger seat. He usually drives, and he tells me to get over to the right lane before I’m too deep into downtown, but I hate changing lanes of packed traffic when I’m distracted, so I say, “Soon. If I mess up, it’ll redirect me.”

I think back to the ancient GPS that shouted at me “Recalculating” whenever I made a wrong turn. The GPS spoke in a such disappointed tone that it made my then-eight-year-old child collapse with laughter. That child would beg me to make a wrong turn so the lady would snarl “Recalculating” at us again.

Recalculating.

There are so many things that need recalculating. Sunset Boulevard into Cesar Chavez Boulevard is crowded, the

red sun sinking fast into the winter sky of California. I was teaching ESL to adults in East LA when Cesar Chavez died, and in honor of him, the city changed part of Sunset Boulevard to Cesar Chavez. I remember so many things.

By the time we reach our destination, it's dusk on Central Ave near Peanut's place, and our son says, "Wait, I have Christmas presents for you. I'll drop this stuff at Peanut's, and I'll get your presents." He jumps out of the car and gathers things from the backseat and trunk. I get out and help him.

"We can't forget the cake for Peanut!" I try again to shut the cakebox that keeps popping open as I follow my son who walks fast.

My husband naps in the passenger seat. Napping is essential in the chaos. In addition to the cake, I also carry some of the groceries he got from the food bank at the church like oatmeal, apples, and dried cherries. A man in a yard calls out something sharp to our boy as we pass by him. He doesn't look happy, and I feel uneasy. Our son ignores him, and this is not like him. He talks to everyone but not this man. He keeps going.

"Here," I say. "Give Peanut the cake and wish him a happy new year." But I don't wait around to meet Peanut even though I know I should if only to say thank you.

I watch from down the street as my son knocks on Peanut's door and goes inside. I look at the address above Peanut's apartment to memorize it and go back to the car. My husband is alone in the car, and I need to get back to him. I walk back past the man who said something sharp, and he begins to follow me, but then he passes me, which is a relief. I get back into the car and lock it. I hate being afraid on this street, which is a whole lot better than many of the streets where we've dropped off our boy before. This street has houses and families, not just vans, campers, and tents beneath bypasses and bridges. I can't remember Peanut's address even though I just memorized it.

I don't like that our son depends on the generosity of a man named Peanut. It's not a sustainable situation. But I'm also relieved, because California winters get cold on the streets at night, and I'm grateful to Peanut.

On the way to Peanut's, our boy had explained how he came to stay with him. Peanut was his playground supervisor at Hillcrest School, our son's school in first grade for a short time and Peanut's first job out of high school. Our son remembered Peanut because of his prominent teeth, even though he only attended this school for a week or two, and yet somehow, he remembered this man, who also remembered him as a little boy. He said Peanut also remembered my husband's long brown braids. My husband used to raffle off his braids every few years at school arts festivals. Kids who drew the winning ticket got to cut off his braids, and those braids became part of our kids' art projects. Now his hair is short and gray. How?

Recalculating.

Decades ago, my husband taught at Hillcrest, an elementary school nicknamed "Hellcrest." The principal held notoriously short Monday morning assemblies by offering these words, "I don't have anything to say. Go on back to class now."

She was described as "ethically challenged" in an article about bad principals in the district. This was an especially bleak LAUSD tenure for my husband who had allowed himself to be displaced from his first school as a teacher in South Central when his ancient car was stripped of its new tires after breaking down in the school parking lot on a Friday and by Monday, no more tires. The car sat on cinderblocks.

Recalculating.

It wasn't worth fixing a 1972 Toyota Corolla from Marvin's Used Cars in Tullahoma, Tennessee, so we gave up the car. We naively thought by his displacing himself in South Central, he would get sent to a school closer to our neighborhood in Silver Lake as he requested.

Recalculating.

But LAUSD sent him to a school even farther away in Baldwin Hills. For a year, he took three city buses to Hillcrest, and then our friends sold us their used car at the same time our son was old enough for first grade.

Recalculating.

This school had a music magnet, so we decided to let our son try Hillcrest since he would attend the school with his father. We were counting our pennies then, trying to stay afloat. Maybe the school could work. It did not.

Recalculating.

At an assembly at Hillcrest School toward the end of the second week, the principal told the students not to bring guns in their backpacks. My son came home from school and said, “No guns in our backpacks.” We sent our son back to Montessori in Eagle Rock that went to third grade. His little sister was there in the preschool, but we could not afford two tuitions, so I bartered to teach a weekly drama and creative writing class for the older students, so my kids could go two-for-one. The Montessori director agreed. She was so generous to do this. She didn't have to do it.

Do these memories flood my mind waiting for our son? Yes, because Peanut used to work at Hillcrest, aka Hellcrest, and I try to connect the dots of where things went so wrong, and yet, he and Flannery remembered each other, and now Peanut was allowing him shelter.

Recalculating.

I hope Peanut likes the bright purple Ube cake. I hope my son is respectful to Peanut. I wonder how long it will be before Peanut kicks him out.

After a long twenty minutes of waiting and waiting, our son gets back into the car and says, "Here are your Christmas presents."

They are the four-leaf clover bracelets. I'd forgotten all about them. Tiny four-leaf clovers pressed into clear plastic shapes of hearts on woven green nylon string, not clover bracelets at all. They are beautiful. I cry at the generosity of this gift, but only a little. I have a friend who cries hysterically, head tossing from side-to-side howling, keening, teeth-gnashing, the complete waterworks. It's hard to watch. I cry easily too, but my heart hardens at spectacular displays of grief, and I feel mean and small inside admitting to this.

I put on my bracelet. My husband puts on his bracelet. He wears a clover-shaped one, and I wear a heart-shaped one. I will give my mother the cross-shaped one. One sibling in Chicago will get a diamond shape and one sibling in Chicago will get the other heart-shaped one. I think of how they probably won't cry when I give them their bracelets from their brother, but what do I know? But from experience, his siblings don't cry over him much. They love him, but sometimes it feels like there are no tears left.

"They are so beautiful, honey," I tell him.

"Thanks, Mama."

"Everybody is going to love them."

"Thanks. Hey, can you guys drive me to meet Herbie?"

"You're not staying with Peanut?" Foolishly, I want him tucked in safe for the night, which is ridiculous I know.

"Na. Herbie plays the piano on Wednesday nights on 5th Street. I'll get back to Peanut's later. I want to go to Herbie. He's 91. He doesn't like me telling people he's 91. He said, 'Quit telling people that.' Where are you going again?"

"To Tina's play."

"Why wasn't I invited?"

I don't answer, and he doesn't push it. My husband, a bit more rested from his nap, takes the wheel, and we drive to meet Herbie. When we arrive, our son jumps out and says,

“Happy Friday” to the woman security guard out front.

She glares at him and says, “It’s not Friday.”

“What day is it?” He appears baffled.

“Wednesday. And you ought to know what day it is.”

I silently agree with her - but I introduce myself as the mom when he says, “These are my parents. Hey, is Herbie here?”

“I sent him home. He showed up too early. I told him not to show up so early. He’ll be back later.”

I see a grand piano in the empty lobby of the King Edward. I wish I could hear Herbie play, but it’s getting late, and we need to say goodbye. We’ll never make it to Tina’s play if we don’t go. Tina was our neighbor for years and is a wonderful actor. I tell our boy we must go, and we make plans to gather again soon in a few days.

I hug him hard, and he hugs me back.

“Stay safe, okay, and warm. Go back to Peanut’s.”

“I will.”

We punch in the address of the theatre and stop to buy flowers for Tina on the way. Our son used to babysit Tina’s kid. Our son used to be an actor in indie theatres in the Valley and other places too. I try not to leap into the past or the future of the used-to-be or could-have-been as we make our way out of downtown.

Recalculating.

Watch the traffic lights.

Find the moon in the sky.

Notice Griffith Park and Travel Town.

Wait, don’t think of Travel Town and don’t remember the time our boy, age ten, jumped off the little train as it was moving,

and it terrified the gentle conductor who yelled at him and then at me.

*Hey you! Hey you, kid. What do you think you're doing?
Watch your son, lady!*

My son had been sitting behind me. I was holding our youngest, a baby, a few seats in front of him so I couldn't see what he was about to do and stop him. It had been a warm day of California sunshine, and I was taking all three kids to ride the Travel Town Train with a friend from out of town. I can't even remember what friend, but I was showing this friend an LA landmark that traveled past sweet old western settings of deer, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, a stagecoach, a faux mining town, bunny rabbits, gnomes, and cacti. It was meditative to ride this train, to pause in the chaos of the city and parenting and become a passenger on this open-air train without a roof, and then the train screeched to a stop.

*A kid jumped off! A kid jumped off!
Hey you! Hey you, kid. What do you think you're doing?
Watch your son, lady!*

I looked. It was my kid, looking triumphant and sheepish. I wanted to kill him. I wanted to snatch back the moment. I made him apologize to the conductor. "You scared him! You scared everyone. Why? Go tell him you're sorry now. Now. I'm so mad at you." I'm holding my baby, and our middle child is shaking her head in disgust at her brother, mimicking me.

Recalculating.

I want to knock the memory out of my mind. I want to find the moon. I want to jump off something too.

Recalculating.

Sometimes, I'm afraid to slow down. Sometimes, I must keep moving or else. Sometimes . . .

We find the freeway out of downtown, and my husband joins the traffic heading north like fish swimming upstream toward Tina's play. After the play, we will stay at a different friend's house in Silver Lake because we no longer live in Los Angeles. I find the moon in the sky and tell myself it's enough. Soon, I will add another new number to the growing list and name it.

NAMING THE PHONE NUMBERS

1. *Son-the original phone number.*
2. *Son-Flip Phone 7-14-Desert Rehab*
3. *Son-Borrowed Phone*
4. *Son-Dec*
5. *Son-Friend*
6. *Son-New phone*
7. *Son-Newnewphone 12/16*
8. *Son-Summer 2017*
9. *Son-for now*
10. *Son-Phone Spring 2018*
11. *Son-August 2019*
12. *Son-October 2019*
13. *Son-New December 2019 phone*
14. *Son-Quarantine 2020*
15. *Son-2020 Phone*
16. *Son-Fall 2020*
17. *Son-Nov 2020*
18. *Son-Now*
19. *Son-Jan 2021*

NELLE

20. *Son-New#3*
21. *Son-2021*
22. *Son-3/22*
23. *Son-friend 4/2022*
24. *Son-New June 2022*
26. *Son-July 2022*
27. *Son-Millionth Phone Summer*
28. *Son-May 2023*
29. *Son-June 2023*
30. *Son-July 2023*
31. *Son-Now Scott*
32. *Son- (whatever number)*
33. *Son-October 2023*
34. *Son-(Andrew's Phone) December 2023*
35. *Son-Spring 2024*
36. *Son-June 2024*
37. *Son-Instagram Messenger*
38. *Son-On His Birthday*
39. *Son-Time Traveler*
40. *Son Calling Sister-10/1*
41. *Maybe Son Maybe*
42. *Son London License Text*
43. *Son Keyboard*
44. *Son December 2024*
45. *IG Number 2025*
46. *Son Spring 2025*