

Unintended Dispatch

by Eustacia Adams

Shannon sits in a small office in a nearly defunct strip mall staring up at a large TV screen. An advertisement plays for the spiritual retreat she's attending, and Shannon watches as she waits for the receptionist. On the screen, white letters materialize over a sky blue background:

Who will forgive you when you can't forgive yourself?

(generic music swells over greenscreen footage of a sunrise. A well-heeled man with a maniacal glint in his eye walks into frame from off-screen)

I'm Dr. Grant Lansky, a certified holistic healer, and it's my duty to forgive you.

(cut to footage of happy people riding bikes, eating ice cream, playing catch in a park)

(voice-over) At the Zephyrus Institute, we believe that no human should carry emotional baggage alone. Our founder, Dave Sherman, devoted his life to helping others and it's because of him that we're here today.

Shannon glances at a gold bust currently collecting dust in a corner of the waiting room. The bottom placard reads "Dave 'the Shaman' Sherman — The Zephyrus Institute."

(back to Dr. Lansky's voice-over)

Life is precious, that we all agree. And the loss of life is tragic. But what happens when life is ended accidentally?

(white letters roll over a blue background, stopping in the middle of the screen)

Unintended Dispatch: What is it? What does it mean?

Other therapists had their own names for it: death by mishap, inadvertent fatal impact, unintended loss of life. These were all very polite ways of describing what happens when one person, mistakenly and without malice, kills another.

The Institute was the latest in a long line of therapeutic measures aimed at healing Shannon's emotional wounds. First there was

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conventional therapy and medication, then EMDR (which made her dizzy). Shannon also tried equine-assisted therapy, ketamine drips, transcendental meditation, paradoxical intervention, rebirthing, and many other offbeat approaches to her pain.

Nothing worked. When she encountered the Zephyrus Institute, and Dr. Grant Lansky, in an ad online, she figured it was worth a shot.

Shannon eventually boarded a shuttle with four other attendees: Lou-Ann, David, Meredith, and Earl, each of whom had been touched by Unintended Dispatch. Dr. Lansky and his assistant were already at the campground for the two-day retreat, which was intended to be a healing journey.

No one on the shuttle spoke except the driver. He kept trying to engage them in conversation, “gorgeous weather for some camping, would you look at that beautiful sky,” etc. but no one would bite. Earl, who was near the front of the van, would occasionally smile and nod.

Lou-Ann was seated near Shannon in the back, chomping on piece after piece of nicotine gum. She leaned towards Shannon.

“Imagine if he knew he's carting a bunch of killers to a drug orgy,” Lou-Ann joked, but Shannon just looked at her. Lou-Ann's smile faded, and she settled back into her seat.

The shuttle carried them through a public campground that had seen better days. Some campers drank beer and eyed the fancy shuttle suspiciously. Others walked dogs and tended to smoking grills, while kids ran around screaming and laughing.

The shuttle traveled a mile or two down a gravel road before reaching an isolated campsite. Shannon could see three large tents erected in the middle of a clearing. As the shuttle pulled up, Dr. Lansky emerged from one of the tents, waving with one hand and holding a cup of steaming coffee in the other.

“Just enjoying my morning cuppa!” Grant said, speaking with a subtle British accent, as the group exited the shuttle one by one.

Shannon felt there was something slick about him; his hair was just a little too coiffed, his smile a little too white to be trustworthy. She also noticed Lou-Ann giving him side long glances as he went over the retreat agenda.

Dr. Lansky planned group therapy for day one, while day two was reserved for his special treatment.

“During my extended study in the Orinoquia,” he explained, “I oversaw many ayahuasca rituals. You know, native cultures have been using the plant therapeutically for eons.” The others nodded along, with only Meredith appearing genuinely interested.

Dr. Lansky claimed the Zephyrus Institute was the first to use the drug for the treatment of trauma caused by Unintended Dispatch. He also lamented the founder, his uncle “the Shaman,” who Dr. Lansky said had perished while sourcing new therapeutic herbs in Papua New Guinea.

After a quick lunch, the group convened in a grassy area near the campsite. Each had their own chair, which were arranged in a circle around a large stone (Dr. Lansky referred to it as “the rock of ages”). They were joined by Dr. Lansky's assistant, Anne-Marie, who busied herself setting up camera equipment. Earl frowned at the camera.

“You're recording us, Dr. Lansky?” he asked. Dr. Lansky held up his hand in a soothing gesture.

“It's simply for my records, Earl. I like to use video footage to take notes after sessions. And please, call me Grant.”

Earl seemed to take the explanation in stride, and everyone went to their respective seats. Grant invited the others to introduce themselves. Anne-Marie trained the camera on each person as they spoke:

*Hi, I'm Lou-Ann. I work in a grocery store. I'm 54, Divorced...
I'm Earl, 62. (looking into the camera nervously) I was a
bricklayer by trade, now retired...*

*Hey guys, I'm David. Mid-30s, married, got two little ones at
home...two tours in Afghanistan, one in Iraq...*

*Hello, my name is Meredith. I'm a wife and homemaker. (smiling)
Turning 46 years young this May...*

Shannon wordlessly refused her turn when it came time. Once everyone was finished, Grant addressed the group.

"I love getting to know you all, and I'm so very chuffed that you're here. However, I noticed that no one mentioned their personal Unintended Dispatch. I'd like to discuss that now."

No one spoke. David stared down at his shoes, while Earl looked up at the wide canopy of trees above them. Lou-Ann sighed, raised her hand.

"I'll start." Grant nodded, Lou-Ann continued. "When I was 26 I smothered my sleeping baby in bed. That's it."

Meredith sat up a little straighter in her camp chair, adjusting the collar of her white linen shirt. "Last year I ran over a cyclist on my way home from the mall."

Earl cleared his throat. "I shot and killed a home intruder. When my kids were young, about 15 years ago now."

David looked to Earl, as though searching for strength, and the older man nodded encouragingly.

David exhaled. "During my last tour in Iraq...there was a miscalculation, some miscommunication between myself and my spotter. I killed a civilian woman by mistake. And her child."

Shannon remained silent. Grant nodded and placed a hand on her knee.

"You take all the time in the world you need, love," he told her, but she couldn't make the words come out. Grant ended the session and dismissed the group. Shannon remained in her chair and stared into the tree line, feeling very much like an interloper.

SkullSkull

outline
Later that night, Grant and Anne-Marie took one tent, while the rest of the group were left sharing the two others. Meredith retired early, citing hay fever, while Earl, David, Lou-Ann, and Shannon stayed up.

As David worked to build, Lou-Ann and Earl engaged in light conversation, while Shannon continued her vow of silence. No one spoke of their Unintended Dispatch. Earl passed around pictures he kept in wallet, one of his wife and one of his two kids, twin boys now in adulthood.

"Your sons are so handsome," Lou-Ann remarked as she passed the picture to Shannon. They appeared to be a happy and good looking family, with Earl in the middle of his sons, his arms clasped around their shoulders as he laughed.

"They take after their old man," Earl joked as Shannon handed the picture back to him.

"My boyfriend has a daughter about their age. So much on the ball, so unlike me at that age," Lou-Ann said.

"Ain't that the truth," Earl replied. "It took Debbie getting pregnant for me to get my act together."

A wounded expression briefly crosses Lou-Ann's face. Other than Shannon, no one seems to notice. David stops adding brush to the fire and takes out his phone.

"Here's little Diego and Gabriella," he says, passing the phone to Earl. "Diego's four and Gabriella's two, and they are a handful."

"They're so fun at that age, though," Earl replies, beaming. He tries to show the phone to Lou-Ann, but Shannon quickly takes it instead, smiling at the screen.

"They're really cute," Shannon says, speaking for the first time since the trip began. David smiles back warmly.

"Thank you," he says. Lou-Ann gets up from her camp chair and heads towards the cooler packed with bottled water and soda.

"Anyone want a drink?" she calls over her shoulder, keeping her back to the others.

SkullSkull

outline

Most of the second day was spent preparing for the ayahuasca trip. After leading the group in an early morning meditation session, during which Shannon's mind buzzed with thoughts, Grant sat them down in the grass and explained what to expect.

“Ayahuasca,” Grant began, “that primordial ballet with the unknown. A spirit sojourn, a pursuit, through glorious droplets of liquid gold. There's real knowledge there, in the nether realms, provided you know where and how to procure them.”

Shannon glanced over at Lou-Ann. She was wearing an expression that roughly translated to “is this guy for real?” Grant went on about the “the rebellious gut, the expelling of spiritual bile, the come down.”

Grant explained that he had a special area in mind for the trip, an overlook with a view of the valley. To reach the area, the group would be embarking on a hike. Anne-Marie was coming along to record the session for Grant's notes.

The first little bit of the hike was tranquil as the group trudged through the idyllic wilderness. An hour in and people were becoming restless. Meredith stopped in the middle of the trail and raised her hand. Her neat white tennis shoes were splattered with dirt and grime.

“Grant? Can I ask how much longer it will be?”

Grant turned around and gave Meredith a brilliant, artificial smile. “Just an hour or so more, we're almost there.”

“An hour?” Meredith whined. Earl offered his hand to support Meredith as she struggled to pull her shoes out of the muck.

They reached the overlook about two hours later. Except for Grant and David, who was still quite fit from his time in the military, the entire group was exhausted. Lou-Ann threw herself into the grass, while Earl hunkered down into a seated position.

Meredith looked down at her shoes and nudged Shannon, who was sitting beside her. “These are Veronica Beard Rivieras,” Meredith complained, but Shannon remained quiet.

Skull

outline

There was some difficulty with setting up Grant's makeshift altar upon reaching the overlook. Neither he nor Anne-Marie could make the thing stable on the rocky, uneven ground. Earl came over and

rigged something using his multi-tool and a bit of cardboard. The altar remained wobbly, however.

Anne-Marie brought out a black cooler bag containing the ayahuasca tea. She looked at Grant and shrugged when she realized she didn't have anywhere to pour each cup. Exhibiting a bit of frustration, Grant smiled through gritted teeth and mouthed "do it here," gesturing to the altar.

"What?" Anne-Marie asked, and Grant stepped forward and snatched the bag from her hands. He unzipped it and pulled out a thermos (the tea) and five cups, one for each person and Grant. One cup was larger than the others. Grant held it up to Anne-Marie.

"I broke one and couldn't find a replacement," she admitted. Shannon saw pure, unadulterated rage cross over Grant's face, but he quickly smiled to cover it up.

"Such is nature, such is life," he said to the group. "Of course, we make do."

Grant started to divvy out the tea into each cup. He got to the last one, the one that was much bigger, and began filling it with abandon. Anne-Marie stepped forward, placed a hand on his arm.

"Those other cups are measured doses," she whispered, "don't fill that one up all the way—"

Grant shot her with a disbelieving look but continued to smile. "Ah, the student is becoming the teacher, I see," he said, filling up the larger cup to the top. Anne-Marie just shrugged and walked back to her camera equipment.

Once the cups were filled and the sun began to set, Grant disappeared into the brush to don his "ceremonial garb." When he returned he was all decked out in a purple robe, like you might find in a Halloween store.

Shannon saw Lou-Ann struggling to hold back her laughter, which triggered ripples of laughter in Shannon. When Grant donned his matching wizard hat, the two women could barely contain themselves.

Grant was oblivious, as he was in full on shaman mode. He started the ritual by raising his arms over his head in a V-shape.

“We call on the goddess Nirrti,” he shouted into the sky. “We call her to protect these travelers and protect them well!”

Grant fumbled as he pulled a large glass amulet with a winding vine in the center out of his purple velvet robe. He kissed it, then motioned Anne-Marie forward. She stayed where she was, shaking her head. He hiss-whispered something at her, and she flounced over, barely touching the amulet with her lips before flouncing back to the camera.

Grant gestured for each member to step forward to receive their ayahuasca dose. Shannon went first, just to get it over with. The tea tasted like prune juice that had been rolling around in the bottom of a hot dumpster, and she struggled to gulp it down.

When her turn came, Meredith outright refused to drink the tea upon smelling it. She pushed the cup towards Grant.

“Is there a pill or something I can take?” she asked. Grant shook his head and pushed the cup back at Meredith.

“Is a brief instance of unpleasantness not worth the gift of enlightenment?”

Grant took his dose, from the big cup, last. He gulped the tea down quickly, but not without obvious issues. Shannon was sure she saw him silently retch a few times, quickly turning away from the group, before turning back again and offering a labored smile. His eyes were watering.

About 40 minutes later the darkened woods were alive with the sounds of wet, aggressive heaving. Every member of the group had their head stuck in a bucket, vomiting out their very souls. Grant was kind enough to engrave each bucket with their names.

“Just what I’ve always wanted,” Lou-Ann said between heaves, “my own personal puke bucket.”

Airplane
Airplane
outline

Good evening, this is your captain speaking, thank you for joining us on Zephyrus Air. Cruising altitude is 30,000 feet and we’ve got nothing but clear blue skies ahead. Our estimated time of arrival in

the Nether Realm is ∞ and at this time you're free to move around the cabin.

Gymnast:

Floor

routine
outline
“When I was 21,” Meredith said to no one in particular, dancing around the fire all by herself, “I went to a strip club with my friends, as a lark. And the young lady invited me on stage, and I showed my breasts to all those men!”

She does a little spin, raising her arms in the air.

“It was the most alive I ever felt!”

Handshake

outline

David and Earl sat near the fire, clutching each other. They alternated between crying and laughing.

“I love you, man,” Earl said tearily, “You remind me of my sons.”

“I love *you*, man” David replied, “I'd be proud to be one of your sons.”

“You can be my son, OK,” Earl said, wiping his eyes. David nodded his head.

“Son. Son. Son son, son. Son, son, son,” he chanted rhythmically.

“Son,” Earl repeated. In the background, Meredith leapt over a bush, swinging her shirt over her head like she's in a sports stadium.

Woman

with

baby

outline
LouAnn sat on the ground, far away from the others, furiously digging with a metal camp cup, her face a mask of determination as dirt flew around her.

Moustache

outline

Grant's trip turned bad with a single sentence: “Your beard looks like it lost a bet.” He snaps his eyes open, swings his head around.

Who said that?

“Your beard looks like it lost a bet.”

Grant jumps to his feet and looks to his left and right. He didn't even have a beard, but this disembodied voice was teasing at something Grant always suspected: *My beard is not as good as other men's. My beard is insufficient.*

"Your beard looks like it lost a bet."

"Who's saying that?" Grant cried out, his voice lost in the din of the others, who are all fully immersed in their own hallucinatory revelations.

"Your beard looks like it lost a bet."

Grant took off in a sprint back down the trail leading up the overlook. Only Anne-Marie, who was standing behind the camera, noticed.

"Grant?" she called after him, but he disappeared into the trees. He was running for his life, his very existence in peril.

"Your beard looks like it lost a bet." Over and over and over, the sentence played in his head as he stumbled down the rocky trail.

"Your beard looks like it lost a bet."

Grant wailed like a wounded animal and ripped off his robe. The sound echoed through the trees and back to Anne-Marie.

"Oh shit," she said from behind the camera.

Tiger
outline

Shannon was sprawled on her back staring up at the stars, her body melting into the ground. They were moving faster than normal. They swirled around until they made an outline of a sleek feline skull, its eyes filled with blinding white light. The animal snarled, revealing glittering fangs.

Shannon's breath caught in her throat, staring up at the molting stars in fear. The fangs parted and blinding white light poured from the animal's mouth, accompanied by a deep-throated roar only Shannon could hear. Tears fell from her eyes and rolled down her face, dampening the ground beneath her head.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Shannon whispered, her soul in tatters as she stared up at the creature she was sure was sent to punish her.

The stars molted again, this time spinning into oblivion. They seemed to fall right out of the sky and twinkle down to where Shannon lay in the grass.

"Oh no," Meredith shouted, scrambling for her shirt. "It's raining!"

~~Airplane~~
~~outline~~
Ladies and gentlemen,
~~Skull~~

~~outline~~
What started as a small sprinkling of rain turned into a deluge almost instantly. Anne-Marie struggled to protect the camera equipment with her jacket, while the others sought refuge under a group of trees. Lou-Ann remained where she was, still digging. Grant had yet to emerge.

Shannon nudged Earl, finding her voice for the first time during the retreat. "What should we do?" She gestured to Lou-Ann, who was in a full-on frenzy at this point.

"You go talk to her, me and David will go look for Lansky," Earl yelled over the pounding rain. Meredith grabbed his shirt.

"You can't just leave us here!"

"We're just gonna find Lansky," David assured her, "then we'll all go back down together."

Shannon made her way to Lou-Ann, who was grunting and breathing heavy as she dug. She managed to make a decent sized hole in the ground in a short period of time. Shannon gently tapped her shoulder, and Lou-Ann swung around with the metal cup held high.

"Let's get out of the rain, OK?" Shannon asked gently. Lou-Ann shook her head and kept digging.

"I have to dig."

"Why?"

"I lost something."

"What did you lose?"

Lou-Ann tossed the metal cup into the hole and began filling it with the dirt she just removed. Shannon grabbed her arm.

"Hey, hey, if you come with me I'll help you look for it, OK?"

David and Earl emerged from the bushes. "We can't find him!" David yelled over the din, "And Anne-Marie is gone, so's her camera."

Meredith was cowering under a tree in a feeble attempt to avoid the rain. "You mean they just left us here?"

Skull Skull

outline
outline
In the morning, the exhausted group made their way back to the campsite. For a long time, no one spoke.

Earl was at the front, while Lou-Ann lingered behind everyone else on the trail. After what seemed like hours, Lou-Ann picked up the pace and walk briskly alongside Shannon before stopping right in front of her.

"You never told us your Unintended Dispatch," Lou-Ann said. The others, a few steps ahead, stopped and turned back to where they stood eye to eye.

"What does it matter now?" Shannon asked. Earl nodded in the distance.

"I agree, let's just get back to camp so we can get the hell out of here."

Meredith shook her head and made her way to where Shannon and Lou-Ann were standing.

"I want to know as well," Meredith said, half her makeup smeared across her face, like she was caught in a wind tunnel. "For all we know she's out here writing some kind of expose. Or maybe she's in cahoots with that charlatan Grant!"

David was quiet, but the seeds of doubt were planted. Feeling under attack, Shannon started walking away from Lou-Ann and Meredith, but Lou-Ann grabbed her arm and pulled her back.

"We all told our stories, it's your turn."

"I don't want to," Shannon said, ripping her arm out of Lou-Ann's grasp. Lou-Ann got in front of her again.

"You have to."

Shannon breathed out hard, anxiety coursing through her body. Everyone was staring at her.

"I ran over my cat," Shannon said. "I was late for work and I forgot to put her inside before I left."

"You paid \$4,200 for an ayahuasca retreat over a cat?" Earl asked, unable to mask his incredulousness. Something inside Shannon broke.

"Yeah Earl, I spent \$4,200 for an ayahuasca retreat because of a cat. Not only am I a cat killer, I'm a stupid idiot." Shannon looked at Lou-Ann. "Are you happy now?"

Lou-Ann was quiet. Earl tried to make amends, but Shannon brushed past him on the trail.

"That was wrong of me," Earl said sincerely. "Pets are a part of the family, I truly believe that—"

"Shut the fuck up!" Shannon raged at him. "Jesus Christ, you people have families and friends and people who care about you, and I don't have shit. I had a cat that I fucking killed because I was so worried about getting to my shitty job on time. And now I have nothing, OK?"

Shannon looked directly at Lou-Ann, who had tears in her eyes. "Nothing!" Shannon screamed at the top of her lungs.

Skull Skull

outline

Back at the campsite, Anne-Marie was busy breaking down the tents and other equipment. Her eyes grew wide when she saw Earl plodding up to her in dirty, disheveled clothes, his face alive with anger.

"You and that quack doctor just left us up there!" he screamed at Anne-Marie, who backed away.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I had to come down, Grant was freaking out!"

"Where is he?" Earl asked, and Anne-Marie gestured to the only tent still standing. Earl went to the tent and aggressively unzipped

it, while the others followed. Grant was inside the tent, red-eyed, sobbing, clutching his sleeping bag to his chest.

"I should slap you," Meredith said, leaning into the tent. "You could have gotten us all killed."

"I only did ayahuasca once before," Grant explained, in a state of absolute mental disrepair. "I took too much this time!"

Earl looked back at the group, then turned his attention to Grant. "What was all that about the Orinoquia? The primeval ballet or whatever the hell you said?"

"I made it up," Grant cried, "I grew up in Ohio! I never left the states."

"So this was all some kind of cash grab?" David asked aggressively, causing Grant to cower further into the tent. "Just a scam preying on vulnerable people, huh?"

"You should be ashamed of yourself," Meredith added.

"No, no!" Grant wailed. "My uncle made me, I didn't want to!"

"Your dead uncle?" Earl asked. Grant shook his head tearfully.

"He's not dead, he's in jail," he sobbed. "He told me to take over for him. I'm sorry, please don't hit me."

SkullSkull

outlineoutline

Soon after the shuttle arrived to take the group back to the Zephyrus Institute. This shuttle driver had enough sense to avoid niceties, as the group looked like they just emerged from a battlefield.

Back in the parking lot, there was vague discussion about filing suit against Grant Lansky and the Zephyrus Institute. Numbers were exchanged, and David and Earl promised to take a fishing trip the following summer.

Lou-Ann and Shannon were the last ones left. They lingered in the parking lot, near Shannon's car. Lou-Ann reached into her bag and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. She offered one to Shannon, who declined.

"Can I drop you somewhere?" Shannon asked, but Lou-Ann shook her head.

“Nah, I have a ride coming.”

Lou-Ann took slow deliberate drags from her cigarette and looked at Shannon from the corner of her eye.

“Sorry about what I said in the woods.”

“Sorry I crashed your murder party because of a cat.”

Lou-Ann smiled, stopping short of full laughter. Behind them a large moving van beeped as it backed up to the entrance of the Zephyrus Institute.

“Did this help you at all?” Lou-Ann asked Shannon. Shannon shrugged.

“I don't know. Did it help you?”

“No. It was kind of fun though. In a masochistic way.”

Movers hopped out of the van and approached the entrance of the Institute. The receptionist unlocked the door to gestured for the men to come inside.

“What was her name?” Lou-Ann asked. Shannon stared straight ahead.

“Little Bear.”

“What did she look like?”

An image of Little Bear briefly flashed in Shannon's mind. Her eyes welled up. “She looked like a miniature panther.”

Lou-Ann patted Shannon's back as she cried. She smoked and silently cried to herself. “You loved her,” she told Shannon. “That's all that matters.”

Cat
outline

