

The Sound of an Ordinary Life

ALIS CERRAHYAN

PREFACE

Isn't it pretty interesting to watch the artistry of this solid yet invisible thread with mental and emotional properties shape itself into existence, weaving its way around each newborn's presence from the time their umbilical cord gets cut at birth? Though hearing that first cry for life is music to most parents' ears, the same melody is deemed annoying when the kid reaches the age of mouthiness, most of which is an assertion that he or she no longer wants to be treated like a baby. In other words, it's time for the parents to land the helicopter.

The plan, from the very beginning, is to teach those precious little beings how to develop good judgment while learning to take initiative on things that they, themselves, care about. However, not many parents show willingness to welcome levels of progressive

selflessness with open arms at first. They might even find themselves saying something like, “Children don’t come with instruction manuals,” which is their way of admitting they are starting to feel out of their element. They don’t quite like “the letting go” part of rearing a child, which is somewhat uncomfortable and less appropriate for their own agenda.

Though such an innocent sigh of defeat sounds a notch better than its older version: “Children are to be seen and not heard,” it still exposes the parents’ labored determination for dominance and control. In short, both comments display the narrowness of perspective, which interprets as, “Children were easier to handle as possessions; therefore they ought not to be treated as independent human beings.” Wrong! Every child is designed to be a self-sustaining intellectual thinker, regardless of his or her gender, race, and socio-economic circumstances.

Let's think about that for a moment. Most adults have had years to mature and get ready for parenthood, whereas babies don't have the faintest idea what type of identity, history, and baggage of stains they might've inherited at conception. If they had the slightest inkling about the unresolved confusion of previous generations, I'd venture to guess that many of those young individuals would've wanted to sunder that invisible harness with a blade as soon as they could. And a great majority of them end up doing just that -well, sooner or later; just so they can pursue a life that's more suitable in depth as well as in purpose for their hidden gifts.

As a matter of fact, one of the most remarkable successes in this world is the ability to birth one's own identity, even if that means being the black sheep of the family for a while. When one is willing and ready to take full responsibility for their own actions, they've already determined that learning to navigate through instincts and carving a more personal and a non-negotiable path

for themselves is the high road to inner peace. Anything outside it has and will continue to lead them to a tangled-up maze of generational curse, which is none other than a repetitious cycle of unresolved absurdities, hardly decent enough for a productive and a happy life.

Mark Twain, the father of American literature, said it this way, “The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.” I only wish more adults took the time to identify what each child’s innate gifts and abilities are before forcing them to pursue the things that they, themselves, see fit for their youngster.

CHAPTER 1

The vast emptiness we call the universe is mostly uncharted territory to human beings; Earth being the only planet capable of sustaining all living forms as we know it. In comparison with a 96% or more of blank space out there, it's obvious that the conditions of all existing matter is an unusual and miraculous operation of enzymes and proteins, all interconnecting through a level of consciousness we call "life."

What makes life even more interesting is the fact that not only are humans capable of imagining the details of other people's experiences on which they are being briefed, but they are also able to sense how the narrator might've felt during, or is still feeling over that one particular encounter. Not to mention the fact that, aside from those who might be stricken with a certain mental

illness, a great majority of people instinctively want those experiences to be good, because humankind somehow values “good” to be a desirable nuance for all things.

Life is a masterfully organized event with many awe-inspiring triumphs. Noticing a gorgeous sunrise against the colorful landscape of a breathtaking sky happens to be one. Enjoying the breeze against one’s cheek while walking on a dew-kissed grass is another. Or smelling a freshly brewed cup of coffee, without which many of us can’t even fathom starting a day. Though these experiences make us feel alive and well momentarily by appealing to our physical senses, life is also an experience of letting go because it is limited with an irreversible succession of periods we call “time.” That’s when many of us turn to memories, trying to give life to things that no longer exist.

The following pages disclose the echoes of wisdom I was able to identify throughout my personal journey. At some point in the future, I’ll be departing from my earthly

milestones -those interconnected junctions of “good enoughs” and a few “rather regrettables;” and I’ll be joining a superseding journey of intangibles. True, I’ll also be leaving behind many quests for which I didn’t think I qualified. However, I think it’s fair to say I ran after everything that gave me hope and inspired me to be a better person, challenging myself with novel ideas and hidden creativities in order to find my inner worth.

Leaving no stones unturned, I even studied the human psyche and its intricacies, just so I understood life from every angle. Nevertheless, I still feel this strange haze of restlessness, as if I might’ve failed to activate some cloak of secrecy between my reason for being and my history of accomplishments. It’s this mysterious murk of disconnect and unbelonging that continues to impede the intimate transparency, preventing me from unearthing something of great value. Even though I see this as a threat to my inner state of peace and quiet, I can’t

possibly locate, define, and address an invisible opponent. I must figure out a way.

Though my attitude was all about remaining an active participant of this world, to learn and to evolve with each experience in the hope of hauling smaller heaps of regret, the strategy itself ended up being a great big disappointment. It almost always left me feeling suspended like a banner, displaying a larger cacography of questions than answers. That might be fine and dandy for someone who is sharing the noble commitment of raising children with a responsible partner in life, someone with whom they can weather their difficult experiences. However, a single parent, such as myself, doesn't have the luxury of failing often. And if they happen to do so, such as myself, pretending you are not as hurt as it looks is your only means to conceal the levels of inner humiliation, until, of course, you make time to sit back and reflect.

So, as each kid flew the coop, equipped to follow a path of their own liking, I decided to stop by and spend some quality time with my true self before too long. It's been six decades since I even looked back, much less considered a visit to my seven-year-old self -that submissive tiny being who went to bed every night with way too many unresolved issues.

I'm not planning on having one of those holographic quick peeps, just so I can pluck a memory or two without being noticed. I really want to linger this time and get to know her in depth. Since I no longer reside at the bottom of an emotional gravity well, I believe there is a better chance for us to merge, integrate, and embrace every significant value that's made us "one."

"Why do you have to ask so many questions?" is what she was used to hearing all the time. Not only did she never receive a proper explanation on the subject at hand, but her very question inevitably became Mother's next joke to pass around to friends and to family

members, as this little shadow of a presence watched everyone laugh out loud at her expense. Yet, not one person, including the very parent she had approached with that particular intimate detail, would take the time to enlighten her on the issue.

Those were harmless little things most children ask in the hope of drawing a personal blueprint of their own existence. Nothing funny or cynical about them. “Will I be beautiful when I grow up?” “Do I have to get married?” “Where do babies come from?” However, her innocent enquiries either fell on deaf ears or there was a hefty price to pay for disturbing the adult.

Needless to say, after a few failed attempts, she was smart enough to quit asking. Not only did she resolve to put a lid on her curiosities for the time being, but she also planned on waiting for a more suitable time to withdraw her much-needed information from the universe. Having no choice but to internalize life’s negativities in order to maintain mental peace and

emotional stability was nothing short of having to apologize for her presence. Only a survivor would've opted for that kind of sacrifice. And that's exactly what she did day in, day out.

It took me years before I realized my parents weren't trying to be mean or spiteful. They simply weren't ready to start a family for the simple fact that they hadn't ironed out their own differences yet. Daddy might've been happy to see Mother busying herself with a baby; whereas her main excitement could've been all about to better fit within her circle of friends. And I'll never know whether or not it would've made any difference if their firstborn was a boy, which happens to be one of the greatest signs of honor for the Middle Eastern mentality.

Since I have a strong suspicion my seven-year-old self is already in the know about life's pivotal landmarks thus far, I am hoping this visit is more like an interaction of shared commonalities both social pariahs might see as

valuable. After all, one has been silenced and ostracized due to cultural and circumstantial ignorance, while this older modification of the very same has been equally as repressed during an exile in a toxic faraway land, a territory foreign to that which her naive imagination would've called "home."

Both battered, rejected, and ridiculed by external cruelties, along with a few of my own careless missteps, I am hoping this might be a decent time to embrace one another and say, "So glad to see you're okay!" I suspect there are a few hurt feelings in need of mending by now. Yet, I also believe the very positive approach that helped both of us brave life's harsh realities might come in handy, melting away certain oddities of character. Since the child in me was silenced at her age, hearing her into existence is my only goal for now. Knowing that the very essence of our sentience is the same, how bad can this visit be after all?

“Okay; let me think this through,” I say to myself; “...What do I do first? Do I start with asking her to forgive my tardiness? Do I acknowledge how fatigued she must be by this hostile environment she has been calling home? Or do I tell her right away that none of her aspirations have come to pass? Aagh how I wish a simple word of greeting and a warm smile would inaugurate our reunion!”

“And why shouldn’t they?” I answer; “...Isn’t she the same person who kept on dreaming and resisting the unfair number of facts that tried to deaden all hope? Isn’t she also the one who kept on pushing forward, even when experience suggested she quits wasting her time? Why shouldn’t you expect her to have set aside a few questions for you to answer?”

They say talking to yourself is like trying to create a “presence” to either feel safer or to have an accomplice, both of which are normal everyday needs and practices. However, things get a bit trickier when you start carrying

a two-way conversation, which might be considered a sign that you are on the verge of a full-throttle meltdown. Feeling the way I do right now, I wouldn't be surprised. My heated anxiety over having to see her disappointed face once again is tormenting me like a daunting beast, breathing fire from its nostrils and refusing to be appeased by the meekness of my heart.

I admit, ignoring her all together for this long wasn't right, even though it was the only thing I could've done during those nightmarish lessons of life, for which I was ill-prepared to begin with. And as most of us know all too well, with autumn came a few health related issues, due to which mortality took on a more concrete meaning. I am convinced this belated tête-à-tête can not be postponed any longer.

I have no intention of portraying myself as a stellar example of virtue, having led a life of morality and gallantry. Nor do I plan to conceal my mistakes. I know she deserves the truth -that is, of course, I can only give

her the segments of the truth I've been able to unmask thus far. The rest is yet to be uncovered, hopefully together and in the near future. I aim to offer her my sincere honesty. I figure, after decades of humbling myself before a bunch of good-for-nothings, to whom I mattered not, the least I can do now is to come clean with the one who really matters to me the most. I owe her that!

Though I believe she might have an idea about my decades of wading waist-deep and carrying the torch of singleness as a means of self-discovery, privacy, and independence -all in the right order; I still would like for her to understand that my goal was, and still is, to make her proud of who she has become.

True, most of her dreams didn't come to pass; but she also got to experience some magical alternatives she couldn't have fathomed back then. And who knows; she might even welcome the idea that being set apart from the rest of the world wasn't as cruel as it seemed at the

time. It gave her the opportunity to decipher life's intricacies at her own pace and helped her develop some well-needed boundaries.

I don't want her to think that I am just another inconsiderate creep who left her in the dust; especially since I've known all too well what betrayal does to somebody. It goes hand in hand with feeling shut down and being forgotten. It brings on a jab of bitterness. It even destroys one's trust in humanity. Therefore, her feelings are important to me because she is not just anybody to me. She is me. And I want her to hear it from me, in person, that I failed to live up to her expectations. It's not even about receiving forgiveness at this point. I feel it's time for her to be recognized, justified, and granted a much-deserved dignity. That's all.

A part of me worries that she won't even acknowledge my invitation. Why should she? Am I not the one who bruised that angelic vulnerability of hers by breaking every covenant and walking out on her? Last

time I checked, I was the only one who kept making empty promises, igniting further hope and expectations for the future, when all she wanted to do was submit to the darkness. Her only mistake was to trust me. So, the thought of me being the greatest disappointment of her life is like a dagger I've been turning inside myself. Could anything be worse than that?

Up until this very moment, I never knew the fear of rejection has the same properties as grief. They both cause anxious fluttering in the stomach, inner torment, restlessness, and jumpiness, all of which have me at the mercy of insomniac episodes. The only difference between the two is the fact that the unprocessed cause of fear keeps escalating to painful levels, while grief is always accompanied with stages of admission and acceptance, making it a bit less intolerable.

Stricken with dread at the probability of her refusal, I try to jump ahead of my thoughts with a desperate hustle, as if I were running away from an armed

perpetrator. With one final bleak effort, I blab a kiddish prayer, as pure as it can be, just so some of my memories of her would quicken to life. I can no longer stand the deafening silence between her and I. And since time is fading fast like the mere goodbye gesture of a fugitive hand from a departing vehicle, I've grown desperate to see her, willing to settle for any memory of her at this point.

CHAPTER 2

Finally! My eyes land on her disheveled look.

Realizing I haven't changed much, a timid yet hopeful smile brushes against my lips. Other than the fact that I am one foot and two inches taller, that I have gray hair accompanied with a few wrinkles, and that I am wearing glasses, she and I seem to be dancing to the same tune of weariness and dismay, as it's always been the theme song of our existence. I immediately sit on the floor, just so I can be at eye level with her.

The greatest difference I hope to find at this point is that she's been lucky enough to maintain her finer virtues which, I believe, are the eternal sunshiny display of a clear conscience and a spotless mind. Unfortunately, I've let mine slip through the cracks of my feeble walk through the hell and back version of life. That thought

alone propels this lonesome outcast of a teardrop,
causing it to snail down my left cheek.

I make no effort to stop it. It's too late for that.
Instant tears happen, and more often than not, for no
tangible reason. Whether they are a response to a certain
irritant or a sign of a much-needed succor from faith, or
both. Only time can tell. I no longer give those a second
thought.

Unlike any other, this particular reunion births a
host of unfamiliar feelings inside of me. I don't quite
understand if I am here for a well-needed closure or I am
simply looking to kindle a new relationship with an old
friend of mine. Nonetheless, it's an internal tsunami,
deeper and more powerful than anything I've ever
known. It's more like an express delivery package that
contains an awakening, a rebirth, and an earthquake, fully
designed to shake and revive the core of my existence.

Overwhelmed with this profound flurry of mixed emotions, my vision of her starts fading, just as gradually as it had appeared only seconds ago. I then start seeing this angry index finger suspended in mid-air, trying to warn me not to go there, scolding me for looking back and reminding me why I had vacated the past in the first place. I feel this sudden urge to give up and walk away at once, which is exactly what I've been doing for years.

I can still remember the combination of dread and fear that had me paralyzed when I knew I had to let go of the past. I literally had to convince myself that even a little bit of tomorrow would be enough to make up for a whole lot of yesterday, which is what gave me the mental capacity to cross that invisible line on some hellacious day. Such a major leap of action could have only taken place in a hurry. No time for hugs or goodbyes. A simple, "See ya... or not," had to do.

“But, aren’t you here because of the things left unsaid?” I ask myself; “...How much longer are you willing to carry that great big hole in your heart? It weighs a ton!”

“You have a point there,” I answer; “...It’s been heavier than I expected. But why do I feel like a recovering alcoholic who is about to wet their lips with that first sip of booze after decades of sobriety? I’ve already started hearing the titillating whispers of, ‘aww... you can handle it... you’ve done so well... stop worrying... relax...’”

“The sound of confidence scares me more than anything,” I exclaim with a bit of frustration; “...You, of all people, ought to know it sounds almost as dangerous as the time you thought you could make a difference in this world!”

“Well, who can blame me for trying?” I shout back; “...At least, I did something about it. And I gave it my best

shot. That's a whole lot more than what you would've done, miss scaredy pants!"

"Oh yeah," I yell louder; "...Just because I am not a dreamer like you doesn't make me a coward! I measure twice and cut once. It's called thinking. You should try it sometime."

Oh hell! This turmoil has to stop! I am about to put on a straight jacket and move into my bubble wrap wallpapered new residence. No joke. I've had just about enough with this back and forth mental bickering, which is totally out of character for me.

As I try to make one final effort to hold on to my childhood memory -disgusted with both ends of the argument; I somehow manage to triumph over that jittery pissing contest of mine. Standing vertical yet wobbly and shaky like a toddler's stance right after their first few steps, I seem to have conquered the ongoing divisiveness, which leads me to a tiny snapshot of victory.

Yet, it is a short-lived success which is being interrupted as this exquisitely sculpted gate comes into view and arrests my attention. I can't help but marvel at how intricately its wooden panels are carved with such detailed craftsmanship. I watch it free itself from an unseeable latch with a mesmerizingly soft click and move ever so slowly until it is wide open. All I hear is what sounds like a thousand harpists, oscillating back-and-forth over their instruments, inviting me to walk in and enjoy the serenity within. It's a no brainer! I give in and start inching through, without even an iota of hesitation.

Once inside this massive courtyard with infinite perimeters, a chorus of harmonious chanting hugs me, as if a massive ensemble of performers have been preparing all along to celebrate my arrival. Though I can't quite make out any signs of physical bodies for the time being, I imagine the presence of multitudes through their vocals,

of which the gentle zephyr kindles a rhythmic sway within my spirit.

I start dancing like never before, luxuriating in their electrifying yet soothing bestowal of reception. I am so overloaded with peace that I can't even be bothered by the fact that this colossal site is missing its ground and also the fact that it has no roof. It's as if it were dangling from an unexplorable emptiness, when it suddenly decided to pursue this exceptional idea to zip through the cosmos for an exclusive visitation. I am not even surprised by the fact that nothing about this place feels all that unusual to me. This deep-seated sensation keeps reassuring me that I am finally home. This is exactly where I belong!

As I am able to process the initial minutes of stupefaction and step further into the courtyard, various structures start taking shape, suggesting I might be entering a storage area of some sort. I see stacks, shelves, cupboards, even pyramid shaped units, full to

the brim with valuables. Everything is neatly organized and sealed with a thin deposit of translucence for safekeeping, and all of them carry the badge of excellence to the nth degree.

The only stack I am drawn to is a triangle of neatly arranged compartments which I instinctively know must belong to me. Though I don't quite understand why I am within this massive enclosure, I am also fully convinced that everything is going as planned. I am thinking of two reasons: Either I am about to receive permission to see my younger self, or to be reminded that I've missed that boat a while back. Is it possible that this joyful entertainment could be the calm before the storm? But since my gut feeling is not nudging me with negative nuances, I am determined to wait patiently for the good news. And until that moment comes, I will try to take it all in as best as I can.

So, I think of making this subtle move towards my stack of things. And within a nanosecond, I find myself

there, feeling out of breath with relief and excitement, like a champion marathon runner at the end of their race. As the timid motion of my trembling fingertip tries to reach out for the larger chamber, the thin translucent element starts to evaporate, leaving me with a certainty that I am face to face with the essence of tenderness and kindness, which I had believed was lost during some of my earlier dealings with life.

Immediately next to it, a slightly smaller nook voluntarily follows suit, displaying the grace and the piety I haven't been able to feel in my gut for quite some time, both looking as captivating in beauty as I remember. The third is a tiny one, holding that intimate love I could've sworn was long gone and forgotten even way before my adolescence. I am surprised how well preserved everything is, as if each cataloged chamber were systematically following the order of my heartbeat.

A glimmer of hope suddenly plummets to one of the lower ventricles with its inverted bursts of fireworks,

stimulating and reviving a tiny heart-shaped potion which, I am one hundred percent sure, is my innocence. There is nothing to say other than, "Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God! I am speechless!"

Seeing all my valuables kept in a pristine state gives me unprecedented comfort, unbarring a waterfall of happy tears I've been trying to hold back. Though I have known myself to behave very well even in the hardest hours of grief, this particular emotion exceeds all previous experiences. The large intervals between each breath make it hard to catch my composure. I am almost afraid I won't be able to stop. That's when a child's voice comes to my rescue; the very sound I've been dying to hear for decades.

"You don't get to do that!" she commands effortlessly.

CHAPTER 3

Demanding my complete obedience, her mandate slaps me with a thundering jolt of reality. Not only am I happy to hear her, but I am also overjoyed to see that the muddled hesitations of her former voice are now adorned with piercing properties. This is the first time that I am actually hearing her speak with confidence and fearlessness, which kindles an aching joy within me. And I have no doubt her calm and serious countenance will be remembered as a breath of fresh air for the rest of my life. Since I know better than to cry, I do the exact opposite, offering her one of those embarrassed smiles.

My immediate gaze starts caressing the sun-kissed brown tendrils, most of which cover her olive complexion, wanting eagerly to brush against the peach-fuzz of her skin. Thinking how she used to make silly observations about her question-mark shaped eyebrows and how her fluffy nostrils were wider than her nearly invisible lips add an instant grin to my nostalgic feelings. Though all of those so-called flaws were real to her at that point in time -and they might still be; I am no longer in agreement with her. To me, right at this moment, she is the most beautiful creation I've ever seen. In fact, she is flawless!

Her joyless stare delves into my soul like a myriad of spears, sending a case of the jitters all throughout the deepest darkneses of my inner being. I feel she is wanting to know why I, of all people, didn't tend to her dreams. Not even one of them! The entire context of her long-overdue message is loud and clear through her quiet yet disapproving perusal. That's what a tiny life full of unfathomable hurt does to someone. It turns them into

a gifted master of silence, insight, and rumination. Will she ever know how much I admire the vein of notable courage she has displayed for prevailing over her sad circumstances?

I have a hunch she's been waiting for this moment just as I have. I make a hasty effort to wipe away the rest of the senseless tears that haven't already adorned the upper part of my shirt. Remembering how she used to wipe her nose against her sleeve, I do the same, expecting for her to be impressed over the fact that I haven't changed much. She doesn't care. I need a quick second to regain my emotional equilibrium. She allows it. I take a deep breath and pause some more. She watches ever so patiently. Her self-restraint and stoicism are awe-inspiring.

"I'm not here for forgiveness," I say; "...for I already know I don't deserve it. I simply wish to visit you; that is of course, if you'd be so kind as to have me. Any little moment with you would be greatly appreciated.

However, I don't want to make you uncomfortable. I will leave at once, if that's what you would prefer."

I can't help but think she might have been just as unprepared to hear the rawness and the potency of her voice. Overtaken by a slight element of surprise, she stares at the floor for a while, as if she were pondering what to say. That same floor is where I remember seeing her sit for hours, Indian style, tending to her faceless little plastic doll. She would always choose the farthest corner of the living room, whispering to her only tangible possession, as if she were trying to confide her innermost intimate secrets.

The rest of her items were rather imaginary, such as fabrics, needles, and threads, with which she pretended the role of a dressmaker. Her imagination held the storage to all the exquisite colorful designs fit for a princess, or a teacher, or a flight attendant; depending on the mood. Other than the time she spent working on her

daily homework, this was the only activity that didn't get her in trouble.

Though being quiet was her only given option during those days, it didn't always keep her out of trouble. That very silence she had tried to master, based on her Mother's demands of course, didn't guarantee that she was going to be exempt from harsh words, especially when she was being accused of snooping around by the same parent. Contrary to the Mother's interpretation, her curiosity about the facts of life had never been about getting in other people's business. They were the innocent kind, a part of the learning process.

She had no one to talk to. No friends. No aunts or uncles she could trust. Just a plastic six-inch doll, whose facial features would disappear every now and then, until she took the time to draw new ones with her coloring pencils. She wasn't happy with any of her circumstances by all means. Yet, she was smart enough to understand

she was way too young to change anything. "Someday," she kept whispering to herself; "...I am going to be happy."

And that's exactly why she kept depositing every one of her unlived dreams into the future, expecting it to be holding the key to a better life, minus all the limitations. So, she spent much of her formative years mapping out the terms and the administrative details of what might lie ahead, patiently waiting to take the bull by the horns someday, and work on righting the wrongs.

"You can stay," she whispers. With that, I hold back another teardrop that's about to leave behind the rest of its comrades.

"Is it okay to say your name?" I ask.

"If you want," she answers as she shrugs off my question; "...I am still the same Alis!" With that, her dejected and dispirited features come to full view once again. I know she is not trying to punish me or to play hard to get. She doesn't even possess such thoughts.

This is her way of letting her guard down, one tiny brick at a time. I know her. Even that itty bitty reminder of her character soothes my soul.

She then decides to add, "I think you should call me Canan (Djahnahn.) That way, there will be less confusion." Wow! I remember how I used to envy that one classmate of mine whose name meant "Beloved." And she sure was every bit of that! She had it all, including a loving mother who always had her arms wrapped around her, hugging her tenderly almost all the time, as if she couldn't get enough. And all I kept receiving was this feeling of uselessness, as if I were an incidental weight that needed to be dragged and tossed around by the wrist every so often.

"Agreed," I answer with a sigh of relief, thinking that this long-awaited connection might have a future; "...I have so much to tell you. But before I go any further, I'd like to hear if you have any questions you want me to answer."

“I do,” she says without hesitating; “...tell me all about your accomplishments.” Though her very first question takes me by surprise, I can also understand why she has a need to rank someone’s achievements in order to form an opinion. After all, anything less than perfection would’ve been considered a failed attempt by the Mother who was deathly allergic to words of comfort or encouragement. She couldn’t even fake it out in public for fear that some outsider might throw a bit of nurturing my way.

“Fair enough,” I say; “...I am sixty-seven years old. Life’s mysterious circumstances took me all the way to America, which happens to be this magical place neither one of us would’ve dared imagine. I learned to adapt quickly, for I wanted to make my new country proud for giving this particular refugee a second chance. I never complained about working hard. Even during my most destitute moments, I always carried a sense of pride for being an American.”

She grades my hasty interviewee-like recital with a simple, “Good,” accompanied with a faint smile that gently touches the corners of her pale lips; “...And did you become the teacher, or the chemist, or the flight attendant you were always talking about?”

“I did not. Such professions require further education, for which my circumstances were highly limiting at the time. So, I became a nail technician and worked at a beauty salon. A few years down the line, a new opportunity found me, through which I studied and passed the State Board exam to become a licensed hairdresser. Shortly after that, I opened my own salon, owned and operated it for three decades. I know it doesn’t sound quite as impressive as you would’ve liked our future to be, but I really did my very best. And I always felt like this was a good enough accomplishment for a mere refugee like me.”

“Do you have a family?” she asks, as if she couldn’t care less about my personal excuses.

This is the question I like answering the most. Though somewhat bittersweet due to divorce and heartache I would much rather prefer not to explain to a seven-year-old, the fact that I gave birth to two remarkable individuals is my very best accomplishment. Not only am I fortunate enough to have them in my life, but I am just as privileged to know they feel the same about me.

“I have two kids. My firstborn is a girl, an amazing human being who is raising my only grandson at the moment. My son is four years younger and he lives in California. Both kids have surpassed all my expectations. They are hardworking individuals. I couldn't ask for more.”

Seeing her silence, I feel the need to go on. I am under the impression she wants to hear more. So I continue with, “Becoming a parent, whether naturally or through adoption, is the most extraordinary experience one could ever taste. It's the only time he or she decides to set aside their own needs in order to make an innocent

individual their number one priority; that is of course, if they, themselves, have enough maturity under their belt. I've adored being a parent. So; now that we're on the subject, I don't ever remember you talking about future children. Any reason why, Canan?"

I only wish I had half the vocabulary I need to describe the map of expressions that clouds her countenance, accompanied with the slight shaking of that beautiful head of hers, as if she were having a hard time understanding why she even had to be put on the spot like that. I am afraid I might have angered her. Yet, before I have a chance to retract my question, I hear her mumble under her breath, "I don't want to be a parent. They always let you down."

"Some do; but not all of them," I answer while I take a deep breath of comfort; "...There are many good parents out there who would do anything to protect their children. Just because you and I weren't as lucky as we would've liked to have been, it doesn't mean we can't

reverse our ill fate and make better choices for other little ones. Obviously, it would take a bit more effort, since we don't have a good role model, but it can be done. Well, come to think of it, it has been done! The level of love a parent is filled with from the moment they feel the presence of their baby makes all things possible. Their willingness to bestow affection and devotion upon another being is also what heals the past wounds. Does that make any sense to you?"

Though not as convinced as I would've wanted her to be, she graciously offers a nod. Seeing her pensive expression, I can tell there is another question nearby. "How is Jirayr doing? Do you see him?" she asks.

"Funny you should ask," I say cheerfully; "...I just saw him not too long ago. He drove down with his wife and their seven-year-old little girl, just like yourself. He is in a very good relationship. There is an atmosphere of peaceful intimacy between those three. Though he is seven years younger than me, nothing has weakened the

kind of light he brings into someone's life. His spirit still happens to be the brightest. He truly is a treasure. You can be proud of him."

"Really?" she whispers with a surprised look and furrowed eyebrows, as if she were having a hard time putting all the pieces together. "All he does is cry all the time," she mutters with a slight rolling of the eyes. Yet, I can tell she is pleased to hear that her little brother is doing fine. I never knew such a small body could carry the weight of so many concerns, until I decided to pay her a visit today. Though my initial intent was to put her at ease by satisfying some of her unanswered questions, I now realize establishing such a positive contact with the past was also the best thing I could've done for myself.

"Do you have a husband?" she asks.

"I did, but he is no longer with us," I say. I figure simple is better at her age. She can't possibly comprehend how tough life can be when one plunges

into it with an unprecedented level of ignorance and a pure determination to conquer it all. Going at it single-handedly, without any worldly guidance and support, is a sure sign of innocence. I don't know if she detects the slight climate change in my countenance with the sound of the word "husband," but I sure hope she has't. I make an effort to reshape my frozen half smile, with the hope of reassuring her trust in my sincerity.

"So, which one of your accomplishments are you the most passionate about?" she asks. I see she hasn't changed at all. "Always the smart one," I think to myself. She is going to draw the truth, one tiny sentence at a time, for she truly has the patience of Job.

"Every one of my accomplishments served as a stepping stone," I answer with extreme precision and care; "...Arriving in America offered me the kind of opportunities I couldn't possibly have imagined. It gave me a profession -not the highest by all means; but definitely something that put a roof over our heads,

clothes on our backs, and food on our table. Though we have never been financially independent, we always had what we needed, as we were also very thankful for what came our way.”

I watch her nod in agreement as she’s been doing since I arrived. My heart aches, knowing that the rough patch she is going through in grade two is just a foretaste of wishful expectations and barren activities, none of which will reach a fruitful phase for many decades to come.

She will continue to endure the nauseating stench of disappointment until someday, she will fall on her knees in the middle of the night, looking out from her bedroom window, and allow her heart to explode in a brilliant burst of light, just like stars do toward the very end. Watching the whole universe level itself with her soul, just so every bit of its touchable surface can be graced with the fragments of this once-in-a-lifetime spiritual extravaganza will have a soothing effect on her

tattered being. And that's exactly when the sacred etchings of her heart will be updated with the new coordinates of a supernatural journey. That's what will introduce her to a stunning disposal of hopeless complexities and their unnecessary pain, both magical and liberating at the same time!

It truly is hard to imagine her thoughts as she is having to process so many things at once. As far as I'm concerned, no one has ever sat down and spent a valuable time with her. For that, I am very grateful. What she does with all that information will be entirely up to her from this moment forward.

CHAPTER 4

I am still not one hundred percent clear about why seeing me in tears bothered her that much. Could it be that she can no longer handle pain? Or is it the fact that life has been a roller-coaster of hurting and forgiving thus far, and that she is simply done with it? Storing the curiosity for a later opportunity, I settle for a simpler one. “So, how have you been doing?” I ask.

“Everything is still the same for me,” she responds.

“Anything you want to talk about?” I ask, to which she responds, “There is so much to talk about, but I wouldn’t know where to start... I keep focusing on the positive, as I always have, which is what helps me not see the yucky stuff. Ehm... not having an opinion sucks.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” I say; “...Kids, more than anyone else in this world, have a deeper need to belong, at least until they have fully developed their own sense of identity. So, forcing them to be invisible is never a good thing.”

“How did you overcome it?” she asks.

I pause. At this point, I am not even sure if I’ve fully recovered from the paralyzing shyness that shadowed me everywhere I went. As a kid, playing hide and seek with my own individuality left me with a massive emptiness, which is a highly infertile terrain to grow any type of inner fortitude. I might have occasionally stumbled upon a little bit of self while doing my homework, filling myself with all kinds of fresh knowledge I somehow believed was my only way to freedom. And I might have also had a glimpse of a more profound level of self, especially right after acing an exam I also believed sprinkled me with feelings of contentment

and joy, both of which had to be savored quickly before making it home that evening.

Even if Daddy were to ask me about my day during dinner -which more often than not generated Mother's rolling-of-the-eyes reaction; I wouldn't dare sound proud or happy because she would swiftly remind me that's the least I could do for having a roof over my head. Her lecture almost always included the countless children who were homeless and hungry all over the world, which is why I was so very lucky I wasn't one of them. My emotions had to be controlled or bottled up for fear that she might sense a hint of approval seeking. So, sullyng our home with my personal parade of indulgence was totally out of the question. That role belonged to Mother.

A true sense of identity -the kind that's not based on tangible accomplishments; is founded through a sense of belonging. Having none makes one feel dull and colorless -no different than having no voice. And having no voice can lead to so many things -things like having no

vision, no opinion, no value, or no worth! In other words, every bit of my sense of individuality carried the wobbling outlines of a heat mirage in a desert expanse -almost there, but in a ghost-like manner, if you know what I mean.

“Well, Canan,” I say; “...that particular muddle didn’t change much over the years. For some reason, I always managed to designate someone new who called the shots and influenced my life not in a good way. One of the most valuable yet costly lessons I’ve learned over the years is this: Reverting back to old habits is much easier than establishing new ones. And I didn’t even understand what an accurate statement that is until I started writing my first book. My goal, at the time, wasn’t about being on the bestsellers list. I already knew I didn’t qualify for something that grand. I simply wanted to find my voice. I had so much to say, yet I lacked the courage to impart my views to others. So, I decided to put everything in a book.”

“Seriously? You mean you really are a published author?” she asks with amazement, as if she has finally stumbled upon something, of which she can be proud.

“Like I said, Canan, I am not much of a scholar. It was mainly to shed light on some of the past experiences, through which I received a good amount of healing. I’m sorry. Had I known you would find so much joy in it, I would have visited you sooner.”

With that, I literally see her eyes fill with anger within a nanosecond, flashing bolts of lightning my way, as if her bottled-up anger has finally posted bail on the grounds of unprecedented injustice and mental cruelty, both being the main theme of her life. This is exactly what she has never been permitted to display. In a way, I am thankful she finds my presence safe enough for transparency. Though I am trying to interpret her reaction as a good sign, seeing her fragile little body shake with fury is still a sad thing to watch. I fear this might even be the end of our short-lived reunion. I gasp in disbelief at

the level of her anger. I bite the right side of my lower lip. It hurts. I am afraid to say anything at this point. I pray she will eventually calm down.

Grief is love with nowhere to go. Her sudden flicker of outburst reminds me of something else. She is not allowed to cry. That's right; she has never been allowed to cry. Holding back tears is her only option -that is of course, if it can even be called an option! Her emotional state has been programmed to wait for that silent pillow-talk time, during which the enunciation of her sadness starts typing the impending bitterness of her feelings into tiny little pearls. I now understand why she couldn't stand seeing me cry earlier. Can't believe I missed that one completely!

It's an appalling injustice to a little one to demand that he or she be seen and not heard, which is exactly how some parents humiliate their children into submission, multiplying their pain and giving them no choice other than to bury themselves, one body tissue at

a time. That's similar to being a mermaid who is stuck in a massive hydrosphere of tears, yet she can't tell what that noble language of her own eyes looks like. And here I am, age sixty seven, still wondering about the ones I once surrendered to the same sea of unknowns.

Realizing she is starting to calm down, I wait some more, making sure she is fully recovered, just so we can move past what just happened. "Why didn't you think something like this would make me happy?" she asks; "...Don't you remember how you used to study every schoolbook, every subject, hoping to unchain yourself from senseless limitations? Shouldn't you, of all people, know how painful it is to have no hope, not even one tiny thing to look forward to? How can you forget any of that? What were you thinking?"

She is absolutely right. Knowing that nothing was ever going to change and that no one was ever going to treat me any better, I continued to ace every exam, just so I could improve myself. I can still feel the sour taste of my

endless solitude at the back of my throat, sitting at my desk, behind closed doors, and going through one homework after another, while making sure the radio blasted next to my ear. That necessary detail was to muffle the sounds of home and to escape reality.

I used to think my intellect was going to make a difference in the world. Once I was able to leave the family behind, I believed I was more than prepared for life. The only concern, at that point, would've been whether or not the world was prepared to welcome someone with huge dreams, such as myself. Little did I know at the time that Mother had already made plans for my future, making sure none of my own dreams would ever have a chance to survive.

"I am so very sorry, Canan," I start to explain; "...Next to your awe-inspiring aspirations, I didn't think authoring a book was good enough to report. My bad! Please accept my apologies."

“Anything positive would have buoyed my spirits. Even if you were ever so slightly satisfied with your accomplishment, I would have felt it. But you never were. Why?”

“By the time I was finally free to be me in my late thirties, I didn’t think baby steps were going to be enough to help me fulfill the dreams I had been storing for years. So the fear of not being able to reach my full potential turned into an inner torment for quite some time, until I learned to adopt a slower yet intentional pace; one that could take me from one tiny break to another...”

“...So, that initial sample of wisdom was also the beginning of my faith journey. It was like putting one foot in front of the other, believing beyond hope and expectation that those steps would somehow take me to a better role someday. Ever since that moment, I have been constantly looking around to determine the next latitude, moving forward and aiming to be the best that I can be. I now realize that when one grows up with no

factual coordinates, they have two choices: They either fake it, which is what most people do and try to fool the rest of the world with, or they cling to some form of faith, in the hope that they will somehow relocate the lost, such as the meaning and purpose of a life they once envisioned...”

“...Please don’t be mad at me, Canan,” I continue; “...I came to see you because your presence counts more than you can ever imagine. You will always mean a lot to me, no matter what the circumstance. You have been the one and only unrippable fabric, holding me together for decades. It is your pain and suffering that kept giving me the desire to speak louder. I don’t want you to be in the dark from now on. I am here to answer any and every question you might have.”

Her frayed nerves seem to have calmed to the sound of her recent validation, as I watch her posture adapt itself to a slightly more erect frame. “Did her

mistakes continue to affect you; like even to this day?" she asks.

I nod. "That level of immaturity never remedies itself over the years," I answer; "...You have to understand something: People who think they know everything there is to know, more often than not, don't see a reason to learn something new. And who knows, they might even be too uncomfortable to ask, for fear that they might be sullying their self-image. Simply put, some people don't have the courage to expose how much they don't know."

"You mean, she hasn't changed at all?"

"Nope," I answer immediately; "...Mother is still the very same person she always was. She won't change because she cannot change. But I did."

"How?" she asks with a baffled look.

"I started seeing her as a broken little girl who never made it past her own childhood. I will never know whether or not she was abused by one of her parents or

bullied by her peers, but I know for sure she was damaged as a child. What she displayed as a mature individual is exactly what she received in her youth, and unfortunately, she didn't have the stability nor the strength to right the wrong. So, she continued the pattern of abuse, which was the only thing she was familiar with. Do you want to know how I know this?"

"Yes!" she demands.

"Mother doesn't have any remorse over any of her behaviors. She is truly convinced she is doing the only right thing she knows how." I reply.

"Huh! And it's that easy to accept something like this upsetting?" she asks with a touch of sarcasm.

"Trust me, it wasn't at all that easy, Canan," I answer; "...but I had to find a way to make the relationship work. I can't possibly divorce a parent; and believe me, the thought of it crossed my mind many times. Yet, since I was the one who had sponsored them to emigrate to

America, I was also their only provider and caregiver. I couldn't turn my back on either one of them. And I'm not even sure if I would have done it had they not followed me to America. So, don't look so surprised because I already know that you're not a quitter, yourself."

"Do you think you have more answers now than you did at my age"? she asks with a smile.

"Oh, absolutely," I say with conviction; "...a whole lot more than I could've imagined. I even found answers I wasn't looking for. One thing for sure, time is an excellent educator, teaching us the difference between good and bad, worthy and unfit, virtue and depravity; you name it. I will never be able to claim that I have learned everything there is to know; but I can honestly say that I have a greater understanding about life."

"So what did you do with the old stuff?" she asks.

"Well, I kept holding on to everything until some newer awareness started making better sense. So I knew

it was time for that particular bit of information to be upgraded, which is something I ended up having to do with much of my so-called old stuff. But I must admit, a new revelation is like a two-edged sword. As each novel idea starts moving in, bringing in its own set of boundaries, it also has to slay its predecessor's ruling power. It hurts to realize how many missteps I could have avoided along the way due to my own lack of information."

"Did you cry?" she asks.

"Oh, did I ever, little one" I say with an embarrassed smile; "...I cried for both of us. I cried because you didn't get to. And I also cried because reality hurts. I had envisioned a life of happy circumstances and favorable outcomes. Then I found out that life is a series of quick peaks and boundless valleys. You are almost forced to tie a knot to the end of each day, hoping the dawn will bring a much-needed solution to the problem at hand. And the few occasional good moments you happen to scramble

upon must be celebrated right away, lest they will for sure be overshadowed yet with another one of life's unforeseen inconveniences."

She ponders. I know she has many more questions like, "Why is life so full of sadness?" "Does it have to be this difficult?" "What must a person do to find lasting happiness?" Instead, she simply asks, "Do you remember Pollyanna?"

"But of course," I respond with a touch of sarcasm; "...How could I not? As a matter of fact, had I known life was going to be this challenging and this unfair -pretty much like Pollyanna's was; I would've focused more on 'The Glad Game' her dad was trying to teach her. Because that's exactly what I ended up having to do, using every bit of my optimism, just so I wouldn't find myself buried under life's unending obstacles."

"So did you end up losing your confidence due to life's challenging circumstances?" she asks.

“I didn't lose it. I gladly exchanged it for humility.”

“I don't understand!” she exclaims; “...Why would you do such a thing?”

“You see, little one,” I explain; “...when you have so much confidence in your own knowledge, you become stubborn and inflexible in your preconceived ideas. But humility softens you up and helps you learn new things, just so you can grow. In other words, humility becomes your best friend. And it is through humility that you get to meet many greater qualities you never knew existed.”

“I don't think that thing called ‘humility’ helped me at all,” she responds; “...I can't believe you let go of your confidence for that!”

“Wait a minute, little one” I say; “...Humility and humiliation are two different things. Humiliation takes you places you wouldn't want to go unless you were being forced. But humility takes you all the way to inner joy and happiness.”

“So, are you happy now?” she asks.

“For the most part,” I answer; “...Of course, it took me a good while to identify the difference between happiness and joy. Happiness is a state of mind. It relies on actual events and circumstances; whereas joy radiates from within, helping us bypass or overlook all of that external stuff. It also brings forth hope, courage, and the spiritual confidence we will be needing in order to move forward, regardless of our tangible circumstances...”

“...Do you remember how Pollyanna’s father was trying to teach her the ways of finding small kindlings of pleasure in the midst of any given difficulty? So, that kind of mindset is the most powerful weapon you can ever wish to have. Imagine using it against all of your difficulties. And now, try to imagine all the things that could harm every bit of your progress throughout life, yet they will never be allowed to hurt you.”

“I see,” she whispers. I believe she finally understands why Daddy was reading her that small children’s book, over and over again. He must have known all along that he wasn’t going to be able to change any of their family dynamics. Yet, he also didn’t want her to walk away from a colorless childhood, all angry and empty handed.

There were many moments of frustration when anger got the better of me, as bitterness and unforgiveness made an excellent pas de deux, spewing venom during their private love language for one another. Needless to say, those two kept me stirred up with enmity towards both parents for quite some time -one of them for hurting me and the other one for not protecting me.

Years, months, weeks, days, and hours had flown by before I realized Daddy hadn’t wronged me. If anything, he had tried to endow me with his own legacy, wanting to pass down the inner fortitude which made

him smile and find beauty in the things that would have driven others to tears. He had given me the key to his own arsenal of optimism, the only armament he knew would defeat my future hours of darkness.

CHAPTER 5

There isn't much anyone can do when major calamities, wars, and natural disasters start using their heavy weaponry against human arrogance. Even a tragic accident or a severe illness can have a softening effect on one's overinflated ego. Those challenging incidents are crash courses in the frailty of life, during which humility creeps in with the slow shuffling of its tired feet. It makes its linguistic properties available, as a measure of precaution, for those who want to purify their thoughts before uttering certain words. And some people who are barely holding on to their dwindling coherence might even want to dip their final words in some extra sauce of truth before too late.

Unfortunately, this tender language of the heart doesn't grace humankind unless they are in dire need of dignity. Other than the select few who might be into the literary arts, most everyone often discusses arbitrary things, such as their "political views," their "personal opinions," and the "poetic justices of the world." As if such

topics weren't bad enough for children to be around, there is this growing epidemic of intolerance or respect for beliefs, opinions, or people that are different from one's own.

The point is, children aren't always growing up around encouraging and positive statements from their parents. And that's exactly why those who are still using the phrase "children should be seen and not heard" ought to be ashamed of themselves. They, themselves, are the disgrace of humanity. My advice is this, "Do not take on the noblest of all responsibilities unless you cleanse, prepare yourself, and be the best that you can be! That baby deserves the top-shelf version of you!"

As a child, I saw everyone work hard to provide for their families; but for the most part, people who didn't know anything about inner growth or spiritual awareness were like old leaves, covered with pale blotches, waiting to be scattered into an unknown destination by the next gust of wind. Subjects involving the heart, the soul, or the

psyche wouldn't be touched with a ten foot pole.

Mentioning "a hunch" or "a gut feeling" was as striking as a conversation would get at times, to which many didn't know how else to respond other than to dispense words like "luck," "chance," or "coincidence." In short, the lack of depth I grew up around never got past the everyday stuff, let alone searching for a higher level of understanding.

I still remember how passionate I used to be about life, craving knowledge, and wishing I were connected to a large circle of wisdom. Being surrounded with intelligent people who were tactful, sensitive, and caring enough to share their inner secrets with me would have been a dream come true. And it seems to me like, the more I yearned for deeper information, the farther away it escaped during my early years. Every passing day brought me closer to the sad conclusion that children were mere accessories, helping their parents look the part as a means of validation.

To add insult to injury, parents were also in the habit of telling their children what to think, instead of teaching them how to think. It's as if they somehow didn't quite understand that the very children they were breaking into submission were also the ones they, themselves, expected to make a difference in this fallen world someday. As if abdicating their own responsibilities weren't damaging enough, they somehow had to make sure their descendents didn't get to live up to higher standards as well. So, this messed-up pattern of ignorance kept its domino effect on future generations, making sure many youngins didn't stand a chance of surviving their childhoods.

I happen to know a slew of poor parenting examples. But I'd like to tell you about this particular one, involving a neighbor of ours whose daughter might have been about three years older than me. We all used to live in a four-story dilapidated building, with a great big front door, which might have adorned some medieval structure

at some point in time. It kept refusing to complete its duly assignment with grunts and squeals unless we pushed our entire bodies against it, just so it would start budging. I am pretty sure it would have preferred to be put out of its misery and burned in some nearby wood stove, but no one cared. It had a purpose; and by God, it was going to accomplish it. So, making it through the sound effects of that whalelike door was traumatic enough for any child with a vivid imagination.

Then came the stairs with their enormous creaks, sounding as if they were about to cave in any minute, abandoning their travelers into an abyss of critters and crawlers which, by the way, lived as if they were the lawful tenants of this chthonian pile of bricks. You could hear their scurried steps every second of the day or night.

So, as we walked home from school every evening, my friend would start shouting for help from the moment she touched that doorknob. While her howls escalated into sidesplitting shrills with every passing moment, she

would carry on her daily pandemonium until she made it into their apartment which, by the way, was on the first floor. And where was the mother this whole time? She was laughing out loud and ridiculing, instead of meeting her only child at the front door, like any caring parent would have done.

I remember shaking my head with disapproval at the routine hullabaloo, while I still had three more sets of stairs to climb all by myself. The only time I ever ran up those steps in a hurry was to make it to the washroom, because I didn't like using the public facilities at school.

If we fast forward, this little girl ended up building a fantastic career as a broker, designed a life of greater conditions, and continued to take care of her mother all the way to the end, which took a nasty twist. It was about the same time when the mother received a diagnosis of Parkinson's disease at the age of seventy-three, that my friend's business partner made some damaging decisions, causing the company to go bankrupt. The

mother who had failed to yield to any parental instinct up until that point never understood the depth of depression her daughter was having to walk through.

So, instead of trying to make room for her daughter's sadness over the pending bankruptcy, the mother continued to moan and groan about every bit of her own symptoms day in, day out. Sadly enough, after everything that my friend had done to provide her mother with as much comfort as she could, she was yet to realize that her own needs and feelings would remain meaningless to the mother. I'd venture to guess that was even a heftier loss for her than the monetary one.

And when the mother's physical activities became more and more tampered with the illness, she told her daughter that she would have gladly terminated her life if it weren't for her. But because she knew the daughter wasn't strong enough to handle her death, she had no other option but to endure the suffering all the way to the end. So, this beautiful young lady who had done so

exceedingly well through every one of life's dares and challenges ended up committing suicide, at the age of forty nine, just so she would stop being such a burden to the mother.

My friend had already proven the fact that she was not a quitter. She had survived her tough beginnings. And she had also stomped on every one of life's hurdles, fully determined to carve out a beautiful life for herself in a society where most women would have been considered lucky to get married and start a family. Every one of our lengthy conversations had always been about what more she would love to do for her mother. She truly adored her. Well, she obviously loved her enough to die for her!

The sad news is, due to her Catholic upbringing, the mother had never intended to end her life. Yet, eager to take advantage of her most recent predicament, she was simply exercising a new set of mind games, with which to torment her daughter. Even though that final ultimatum of hers had caused the death of her only child,

she kept it all to herself. No one was going to hear a word of regret out of that mouth of hers. Why would they? Wasn't she the one who had ordained that baby to a life of martyrdom from birth? And that's exactly what she kept seeing in her all the way to the end, regardless of all the efforts the daughter put forth to lavish her with the kind of care the mother had done nothing to deserve.

“Will I ever stop being scared?” Canan asks with this great big concerned look written all over her face. I've never been so thankful for an interruption in my life. My unintentional hiatus must have taken a turn in the wrong direction, causing me to start scratching some of my past bruises. And I knew better than to go there. Some memories are not designed to make you feel warm and fuzzy. If anything, they give you chills and break your heart every time they visit. That's why it's okay to see them from a distance, and never give them a chance to dig a tunnel of pessimism and forgiveness within you.

“Scared of what?” I ask, trying to tuck away the sad memories of my dear childhood friend.

“I am scared that I am not going to be good enough... or that people won’t like me... or that I will bring shame to the family...”

I interrupt her with, “Hold on a minute, love. Those are some hefty weights no child should ever have to carry. First of all, you are good because you possess the highest form of purity there is. Those who don’t recognize that quality about you, while you are still an innocent little girl, won’t ever notice it later on. I know you might think you are being annoying for asking questions. And I also know that you are being made fun of, laughed at, or even punished because of your hunger for knowledge. But how else are you supposed to learn things?”

“I am not a dummy. I just want to learn. If only they would give me a chance,” she expresses with a faint murmur.

“I know. Trust me, I do. Some parents don’t realize how inappropriate and damaging comments like ‘you are not being a good boy,’ or ‘you are being a bad girl’ sound to a child, because that’s all those parents have ever heard. They, more than likely, didn’t have a good upbringing themselves. So, when people step into adulthood, lacking all the proper ingredients of a grown-up might cause them to stumble and fall as parents. And during those intricate times of personal defeat or humiliation, one of the cover-ups for their own fallacy happens to be the maltreatment of the child...”

“...They do this not because bruising a child’s dignity would somehow make up for their own inadequacies. If anything, it exposes them even more. So, if anyone tries to bully you, try to always remember it’s never about you. It’s their way of exhibiting their own emotional crisis.”

“Really?” she exclaims with a glimmer of hope in her sad eyes; “...Go on... please...”

The sound of a “please” coming from a child finds your ears differently. It continues to echo until it vibrates through every one of your internal senses, demanding your immediate and absolute submission. Being able to communicate hope into a child’s parched existence is like chugging a cold glass of water at the close of a blisteringly hot summer day. It can be one of the most satisfying moments of your life!

“Well, the other thing you mentioned is that you are scared other people won’t like you. To that, I’d simply say, ‘who cares!’ Let them feel the way they do. Some unhappy individuals enjoy spreading their miserable disposition wherever they go, none of which is worth losing sleep over. Don’t worry about what people think. They are stuck in a cage of their own doing. And since they, themselves, don’t know how to fly, they try to pull others in, just so they feel less incompetent. Don’t let them do that to you.”

“Oh?” she whispers with an inquisitive voice.

“The last thing you were concerned about is that you might bring shame to your family. Believe me, love, a child is a product of his or her surroundings. They can’t bring shame to their family. The word shame doesn’t even apply to them. If there is any shame worth the mention, that’s because the adults of the family have brought it on to themselves. So far, you gave your parents every reason and every opportunity to be proud of your good behavior, of your good grades, of your healthy dreams, and of your unique aspirations, all of which went unnoticed. That’s on them; not you.”

I watch her take a deep sigh of relief. I vividly remember how concerned I was over the same nonsense, thinking, “If I can’t satisfy my own parents with good behavior and impressive accomplishments, how am I supposed to fit in a society of strangers?” Needless to say, earning love and approval turned out to be way too exhausting. I had to give it up for my health and my sanity.

“Does this mean I don’t have to be afraid of anything from now on?” she asks.

“You will feel the occasional discomfort of fear. But you will also learn to think twice before jumping into a decision, giving yourself enough time, wisdom, and a touch of the supernatural, just so you can make your journey into a success story. It is something you can control.”

“Does this mean fear is not a bad thing?”

“Fear and love are the greatest motivators of nature. When we are in love, we are full of passion and excitement, embracing everything that life brings our way. But when we are afraid, we pull back from life and act as if it has stopped being generous toward us. Yet, life is life. It remains the same. Its ups and downs don’t change. It’s how we respond to life that continues to vary, due to our own state of mind and, of course, our level of maturity...”

“...So, to answer your question, having a long-term relationship with fear can be miserable. My advice to you: Acknowledge your fear and give it enough time to explain itself. But if it remains baseless, feel free to walk away from it, and pursue your dream. Often, we are force-fed the fears of previous generations which they, for some reason, might have lacked the grit to either dissect or to question. Don't let their mistakes become yours. Be bold, be good, and be generous to yourself. And try not to let fear spoil your journey. One of the things you will regret the most is the actions you didn't have the courage to take. Don't wait until all chances of doing great deeds are gone beyond recall or desire.”

As I watch her exhale a huge heartfelt, “Wow!” I have no doubt she felt relieved and well pleased with her answers. I still remember how I used to torment myself by fearing others' opinions of me, suppressing my thoughts, words, and actions because I didn't think I had anything impressive enough to share with others.

That fear was so excruciatingly real to me that it even kept my soul devoid of divine spirit and wisdom. And I certainly needed those heavenly ingredients to fill the chambers of my heart as often as possible, because they were my only means for developing a compassionate inner voice. I must have somehow known that such growth would be necessary someday, helping me navigate through life's inescapable difficulties, and blessing those who would be looking up to me for guidance.

CHAPTER 6

The human heart is so full of surprises. It can be bent and broken on more than one occasion. Yet, the element of hope it carries within, no matter how little,

aims to shake the emotional damages and tries to use its newfound humility to refurbish itself, just so it can be even more desirable than before.

Though it's a well-known phenomenon that a heart weighs a ton when it's split in two, it also knows that's exactly the most favorable time to prepare itself for an upgrade. Using its razor-thin chinks to lasso in the healing elements of a supernatural light, it lays naked until the tattered soul is fully illuminated and re-energized with a deeper level of faith. That's why many serious heartbreak stories are great motivators because they've been steeped in heavenly wisdom and primed to infuse their audience with fresh objectives of resilience and survival.

I do believe any light would be good enough for today's meeting. However, I still want our conversation to be no less than the golden hours of sunlight, just so every seed of goodness will come into full bloom within her. That's not much to ask, considering my wayward

mechanical tendencies needed to go through decades of humility in order to receive a more refined self-identity, with which I believe my old self would be proud to associate.

“Can I ask you a question?” I ask, to which she says, “Sure.”

Her glassy eyes and the audible tiny gasp I hear in her throat reminds me of the time when a looming cloud of nothingness had started to claim my name, wiping away all color, all shape, until I was left with an inky void. Though my response to this strange darkness kept flip-flopping in small increments at the beginning, with time, I came to realize that I was far more comfortable with it than without. And the longer I appreciated its tranquility, as would any homeless person over a warm blanket in the dead of winter, the more I began noticing the levels of overlapping ebony shades it possessed. Up until I climbed down the depths of depression, I had never known black could be so colorful.

“Do you feel angry?” I ask.

“All the time,” she says; “...There isn’t a second that I am not angry. I’ve been shut down, yelled at, and spanked for asking a simple question. I envy my friends who love their parents, which infuriates me even more, because I don’t! Then I feel there is something seriously wrong with me. I am afraid I will never be able to get rid of this feeling.”

“You will, love,” I answer; “...I have already seen you conquer it. Let me explain something to you: Every moment that you waste expecting bad people to suffer for breaking your spirit, you don’t realize but you are tightening your grip on the damages and letting your anger weave a web of bitterness around them, which makes it even harder to let go. In other words, you keep reliving the pain, over and over again, by resetting your mind to a slow-motion replay. And those scoundrels are clueless.”

“...Their acts, more often than not, were never personal; meaning they haven’t gone out of their way to hurt you. They just can’t help being who they are. Chances are they have already moved on to the next victim, while you are still holding on to that anger of yours. That’s their drug of choice to feel validated and to feel better about themselves. It’s never about you.”

“Letting go isn’t easy. Don’t think I haven’t tried,” she whimpers with a hint of frustration.

“Believe me I know, love. But carrying a grudge over past experiences is like poison to your soul. Not only does it destroy every element of goodness you possess, but it also robs you of the amount of love you could be enjoying today. You really have to decide what you are going to do about it. You can’t play the victim, the advocate, and the judge, all at the same time. That’s a highly conflicting position to have. It never leads you to anything good.”

“Do I ever get even,” she asks.

“If you must get even with anyone in this world, focus on the person who once lended you a helping hand, instead of starting a movement of ‘paying-it-forward’ in a negative way. I assure you, that’s a far more gratifying approach than anything else.”

“How is that going to help my anger?”

“Well, if you think holding on to anger and frustration is a better option, guess again. One thing you must realize is that most everyone -including those you have been admiring from a distance; is troubled in some way or another. As we both know all too well, childhood can be really rough, especially for those who are in the wrong hands. And many people don’t have the resilience and the determination to make it through their circumstances. Trust me, love, there are better things you could focus on instead of carrying ill feelings throughout life. That’s not who you are...”

“But what if I want to wish them ill?” she yammers.

“No, you don’t, love.” I respond quickly; “...And I am going to tell you why. Everybody has some type of disability. The physical ones are mostly visible, as they inspire us to respect the individual whose journey is all about having to overcome their personal limitations. Yet, it’s the invisible kind that’s the most harmful to those around -be it mental, emotional, or even spiritual. If anything, we should feel sorry for them, because they are being ruled and defeated by their urges. In short, they are not able to conquer their shortcomings. Like I said before, not all parents have been lucky enough to survive their own childhood.”

Watching her jaw drop slowly fills me with hope. I can almost see that ‘aha’ moment in her peaceful countenance, pearled with tiny flickers of light near the pupils of her eyes, revealing the ongoing celebration she is feeling on the inside. This is one of those golden sunlight moments I was talking about earlier.

So, I continue to explain, “You are a thinker. You would have to put more effort into being inconsiderate towards others’ needs and feelings. So, if you decide to be like those who have hurt you in the past, that could only mean they are defeating you over and over again. You see; there are always two choices: You can either decide to fight the losing battles of life until you don’t even have a grain of happiness left, allowing your own emotional thermostat to be smashed to smithereens. Or, you can decide to go against the grain by focusing on something sweet and uplifting, which is what ultimately puts an end to the pain and suffering. That’s the kind of revenge true wisdom suggests.”

“Are you sure about all this or are you making it up?”

“I am positive, love, because that’s exactly what I ended up having to do with life. At first, just like you, I wanted to get even with those who hurt me. I wished them ill. I cursed. I cussed. I prayed for fire and brimstone

and burning wind upon them. I then realized I will be doing that for the rest of my life, since there are more broken people out there than good. Trust me, it was a big decision on my part to focus my energy on something worth having, instead of harboring anger.”

“Does it go away overnight?” she asks.

“It does not. It’s a struggle at first. But it gets easier in time. And some blessed day, you realize you no longer possess that gut-wrenching miserable reaction to things. You feel the kind of freedom you have never tasted before. Unchaining yourself from negative ideas, words, and actions is just as liberating as it is one of the greatest accomplishments. The reason I see it as an accomplishment is because trying to thrive in a world that’s designed to take advantage of goodness and kindness is quite an uphill battle in itself. It takes a great amount of courage and determination to be the difference you want to see in the world.”

“I am glad you are telling me it doesn’t happen overnight. I don’t want to feel bad about one more thing, if I can help it.”

“Understood. Deep-seated anger paralyzes us, keeping us from finding happiness. Life’s challenges can even infuriate us at times. However, it is also trials and tribulations that help us develop the kind of strength, endurance, and wisdom for future difficulties. So, it is up to us to identify the alternatives, choose one of them, and take the right action. Are we going to focus on the best solution that we can think of or are we going to succumb to anger and throw in the towel? Believe me, many people choose the latter because they are not thinkers like you. Knowing what an excellent fighter you are, I am telling you to work on letting go of unnecessary dark feelings. They have no benefit, other than to delay your good results.”

“What if my heart ends up being completely empty because I have let go of too much? What am I supposed to do then?” she asks.

“Your heart was not designed to be empty. Every negative pattern you choose to discard will make room for many wondrous virtues you didn’t even know existed. That’s a given! It will happen automatically, for it is written, ‘count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.’(James 1: 2-4)”

“Will I ever feel loved?” she asks.

“You can rest assured. Many people will love you for simply being who you are, especially for not changing your stance in order to be like the rest of the world. Look at it this way; there are many people who are so very angry, so very bitter, and so very hate-filled that the amount of adrenaline they possess, at any given time, can

help them run to the top of any mountain, in one breath. However, your poise and your contentment will help you take on the same journey, enjoying every step and every breath, instead of acting like a fool. What do you make of that?”

“Sounds good,” she whispers with a hint of uncertainty. I am afraid she might be too young to grasp all this information at once. I admire her dedication though. She wants to know everything, as if she were concerned I might not visit her again. Who can blame her for that? It only took me sixty years to take the time to pay her a visit. I do feel bad for not thinking about this visit any sooner. But then again, I wasn’t healthy enough to help her out.

“One more thing I must add is this,” I say; “...It’s okay to feel anger when you get hurt. It’s also okay to harbor it for a while, waiting for the pain to lessen in time. However, it’s not okay to react with anger, if it’s going to turn you into someone you are not. In other words, do not

let anger control you and cause you to do something you might regret down the line.”

“I understand. I will work on that.” she says. And I trust she will because I know she is not the type to make empty promises. In fact, she is the type who goes all out and makes a conscious effort to do the right thing.

The level of purity babies possess at birth is like a squeaky-clean glass ornament which, sooner or later, is bound to carry the prints of its handlers. That’s how most children are mentally or emotionally defeated early on. Then comes a time when each child must decide -that is of course, if they still have the ability; to escape the confines of his or her background, depending on how determined they are to fight the residues of the previous generations. As they are filled to the brim with a desire to spread their own wings and fly to distant horizons, finding a solid cliff, upon which to prepare themselves for a safe take-off, becomes their only perspective.

CHAPTER 7

I found out that flying the coop got a bit easier in time, so long as I stayed away from two major thieves called “the past” and “the future.” I had initially resigned

to the fact that my yesteryears were a period of incarceration. I didn't even want to acknowledge them as a part of who I was wanting to be, mostly because they were full of painful memories. But the more I tried to bury the past, the more aggressive and humiliating it became, harassing me with greater boldness as if it were going to own me, one way or the other. So, I decided to own it instead, using it as a reference and accepting each one of its disappointments as "small pathways," upon which I had to step to get where I am today.

And focusing on the future was almost as debilitating at first, since it represented the unknown. When you grow up being told you will never amount to anything, you tend to start wondering, sooner or later, how unsettling that future of yours might be. Or whether or not you even qualify to step into it.

So, making it through each day without looking back or forward was a good accomplishment for quite a while. And since I had already spent an entire childhood

planning ahead for a future I knew nothing about, I also had to learn how to keep pulling the reins occasionally and ease into it. After years of feeling and sounding like a hysterical pendulum, swinging rhythmically between life's two major extremes, I decided to start depending on the laws of gravity, the weight of which I knew could help me find a happy medium at some point in time. I truly was sick and tired of missing out on the present.

As if my personal insecurities weren't tormenting me enough, I also had to learn that, no matter how hard one tries to be as independent as they want to be, life never frees them from that element of segregation. It certainly doesn't grant anyone immunity from the hate, the anger, the bigotry, the violence, and the discrimination a huge cult of ignorance uses as excuses, trying to hatch further divisions amongst its people. In short, abuse is everywhere. Not to mention the fact that those modern day subliminal muddles have already given birth to yet another division called "the entitled middle class."

This non-wealth related newer class is spreading wide at lightning speed, as we speak, across all socio-economic groupings these days. By definition, entitlement means having a right to something. Yet, the idea is so mangled by now that most people who have fallen prey to its privileged mentality believe they own the right to have whatever they think will make them happier; when they really don't. Even if they did, such happiness could only be short-lived because it depends on external factors. So, they can never be the lasting kind of gratifications. And surprisingly enough, nowhere is that sense of entitlement more grossly visible than the middle class these days.

I have even seen people try to shove their own convictions down my throat -be it about religion or politics, or even something entirely trivial for that matter; sounding like their own views are the only ones to have. Some of those self-proclaimed gurus can't possibly fathom the fact that everyone else out there has a right to

develop their own set of beliefs and values. I have literally listened to some heavy-duty preaching stating why I had no right to stand against abortion, while he or she somehow believed they had the right to tell me who I should or shouldn't vote for. Differences of opinion are no longer slight disagreements. They are full-blown declarations of disownment.

Such disputable matters have caused further divisions among the mankind as if a modern-day Tower of Babel is being constructed before our eyes. It is so amazing to watch people speak the same language without being able to communicate with one another. As is, life stops at nothing, and it certainly loves taking us by surprise. I'd venture to guess that it waits patiently for a tender moment of contentment before dispatching its curveballs with full speed, in order to insure a greater damage on its victims. By the time its brutal battering stops for a quick breather, most unsuspecting journeyers

end up having little to no courage left to move forward with their agenda.

Obviously, staying the course and learning to develop strength, resilience, and a deeper level of determination that's needed to forge ahead would be the right course of action to take. Yet many of us choose to shut down and quit altogether after a battle or two. Since life's only guarantee for everyone is impedance -be it physical, relational, or monetary; surrendering to those so-called trials and tribulations should not even be considered an option. Yet, it is for many of us humans who simply run out of strength and courage, feeling spent and worn down.

I realize that even for those who were brought up with the best of care and support, there is never that promise of a dignified outcome. An individual's results have nothing to do with their past. It is their unwavering focus and determination that help them weather life's precipitous interruptions. Unless an individual is

seasoned and hardened with a healthy vigilance and a desire to triumph over the unanticipated turn of events, life is messy. It is designed to take the wind out of anyone's sails.

And unfortunately enough, there are and will always be too many babes out there who don't get to experience a kindly childhood, lacking the privilege of being loved or feeling special. How do those lowly casualties even figure out what they are missing? Would their uphill battle throw them into a ditch somewhere, as if they didn't even matter at all? Or could their solitude be so unconscionably massive that they somehow learn to heed some inner whispers, echoing, "Carry on... go the distance... stop at nothing... do whatever needs doing... just don't give up... happiness is right around the corner..."

Yet, no one ever knows which corner that inner voice might be referring to. Me; I kept turning as many corners as I could. I assumed either my personal configuration chart was a bit more extensive than

average or I was not good at decoding maps and blueprints. Nonetheless, my greatest legacy is the fact that I always had plenty of patience to start over. And that's exactly what I continued to do, until someday, tired of whirling like an amateur dervish, fully dizzy and discombobulated, I decided to ask, "Which corner are we talking about? Can you be more specific?"

Needless to say, there were no answers other than a few extra unanticipated questions on my part. So it wasn't until much later in life that I finally realized the word corner equaled "hope." The voice was simply trying to say, "Keep on hoping and expecting until there isn't even the tiniest doubt left inside of you." And that's what led me to the right pathway where I found personal redemption which, in most cases of extreme suffering, might be the only sense of happiness there is. Nevertheless, I was thankful.

Though the journey to the truth might be terribly dim, the intensity of light a true reality ends up shedding

on the pursuer's soul makes it worth chasing it all the way to the end. The truth, regardless of how hard it might be to locate, will never need any help finding tiny cracks among the boulders of life. It will start to surface in due time, just like a self-propagating dandelion manages to do after a long winter's icy ground covering. Even the smallest of all truths can be blindingly bright for someone whose vision has been impaired due to the damaging effects of lifelong secrecies.

For many, elementary school is a good venue to take notice of the inequality among peers, where most children tend to share the very landscape of their family background. It is then that life's unaware little victims first start identifying some of the fundamentals they had never been given, as they allow their ignorance to be peeled away one layer at a time. Their personal disillusionment -which is a flawless forecast of their future challenges by the way; might also be the

beginning of a few petty rebellions, causing them extra unfounded punishments.

Yet, the level of loyalty those unfortunate beings possess for their parents wouldn't even allow them to question anyone but themselves; things like, "Am I a bad seed?" "Is there something wrong with me?" "What can I do to earn my parents' affection?" And because they have only known to idolize their role models -like one worships a god; they couldn't possibly fathom it might be their parents' monumental blunder of meeting the necessary standards. The very same parents who would rather use strict measures and keep annihilating their own kids, instead of owning up to their own mistake.

That's where many teenagers' self-harm problems originate from -be it sex, booze, or drugs. It's those kids who are hurting so badly on the inside that they actually have to do something physically harmful to their bodies, in order to justify the pain. And more often than not, science disregards their background, prescribing them

medications as bandaid-like solutions, through which a much-needed inner healing is either delayed or restricted forever.

Once a child is forced to plunge into depression -those steep steps to the dungeon of self pity; they almost immediately lose their objectivity. They no longer see people and circumstances for what they are, as they start processing everything through a hallucinatory image of their own fears and desires. The terror of being ordinary is their greatest enemy at that point, for they assume not being exceptional enough is going to keep them from being noticed, or being lovable, or even being able to develop a sense of purpose.

Losing objectivity is the same as losing reason. And when one loses that much of themselves, they also fly by and fall past the level of humility, which is what predisposes humankind to love, the only reset button there is with the potential of healing and reviving one's soul. Once a person descends below that virtue, no

matter how much evidence of love and approval lies before their eyes, they remain blind to it all. If anything, they start sabotaging the chances to their own happiness.

Those wounded individuals keep chasing away a sense of normalcy or even a sense of belonging, almost as vigorously as they are trying to catch either one of those comforting elements. In all reality, no amount of therapist nor medication can help a childhood gone wrong, if the individual can not locate their own rock bottom, the very place where they are ready and willing to unleash the past, without the expectation of a sincere apology.

As a matter of fact, true forgiveness is just that: the untying of the knot and the releasing of oneself from the harmful memories of the past. Those who don't -or simply can't let go of the special effects of their own mind; continue to hurt themselves by regurgitating the gone-by episodes of their life. Having a Fishbrain is the

only way to navigate through life. Forgive the past. Focus on today. Forget tomorrow. Follow your dreams. Find a way to be thankful for everything.

“So, do I ever forgive and forget all this?” I hear her ask, which is exactly what I would much rather concentrate on, instead of visiting the old stuff.

“Believe it or not,” I answer; “...forgiveness comes at a snail’s pace. But you won’t be able to forget any of this; nor should you even try. Not because you want to see someone suffer and pay for what they did to you. because. Honestly, no justice and no amount of ‘I am sorry’ will ever make up for the torture you have been put through...”

“...I suggest you hold on to every bit of this experience, including every sore and every bruise that you can possibly stuff your soul with, cherishing them as if they were your greatest accomplishments. After all, surviving such a childhood trauma is an accomplishment

not many people get to do. Then, there will come a time when you will have the right opportunity and a greater imagination to lay every one of those past incidents as a foundation for your own personal concourse, upon which you will dance like nobody's watching. That's the best and the only definition of true revenge suitable for someone with a good heart."

"I sure have some bad thoughts every now and then. Do you still think I have a good heart?" she asks.

"You do, love. And that's why you will be given a swarm of assistance from the most unexpected sources. You will find treasures in places you won't care to look. You will hear wisdom from mouths you won't care to listen. You will catch beauty in things you won't care to observe. And you certainly will reach horizons you won't care to discover; all because the universe has already laid itself right beneath your feet, eager to soothe you back to health. No one will be able to stop that from happening.

And I mean that. Not one person will be able to keep you from living your innermost dreams!"

I can tell realizing that her existence has mattered all along is music to her ears. She smiles wide; this time without using her hand to conceal the large gaps between her upper teeth, which is strong evidence that she has started to free herself from every shadow she has ever known. I can feel the warmth and the brilliance of the light within her eyes, just as I start hearing the happy melody of her heart, oozing through the sweet whisper-like sentences of her. She doesn't even resemble the person I laid eyes on when I first saw her.

"And I was so sure you had come to hurt me. Sorry..."

"No need to apologize, love. I haven't been as loyal to you as I should have been. Knowing how deeply you were hurt by those you should have been able to trust, who could blame you for being unfriendly at first. And I

probably needed to wait this long, just so I could trust myself to have the right approach and the proper answers you so deserve to receive. Believe it or not, I am still trying to understand some of the blurry areas of my own heart.”

“Are you still confused?”

“I am afraid so. Since I was so determined to lessen my chances of getting hurt, I saw life as a problem to be solved. Not only did I spend way too much time trying to understand it better, but I also exhausted myself looking for safer and easier shortcuts. So, just when I would relax, thinking I might have made some progress, something new and totally unexpected would come out of nowhere and hit me like a ton of bricks, making me realize I was nowhere near my goal.”

“I see,” she replies, “...But all these things you have told me so far proves that you already know so much about life.”

“It sure sounds like it, doesn’t it? But trust me, love, I am still nowhere near my goal. Everything I have told you so far were my personal discoveries because, other than a few good friends who stood by me no matter what, I had no way of knowing those painful facts about life. So, by the time I was mature enough to unveil a certain truth, I would pursue its factuality if and when I was fully convinced that it wasn’t going to hurt me. And more often than not, the truth wasn’t even as scary as I had imagined it to be. But, being kept in the dark for so long had made me imagine greater beasts than I was ever going to face.”

“Give me an example.”

“Well, I had thought all along that Mother didn’t love me. Either because I might have done something extremely unforgivable, or because I wasn’t lovable to begin with. So, I carried those hurt feelings to bed every night and cried myself to sleep for years. I finally realized not too long ago that Mother’s coldness towards me

wasn't about me at all. She had been hurt as a child by someone she had loved deeply, which made her unable to show affection."

"Did she tell you that?"

"She didn't have to. Once I was mature enough to get my personal needs and feelings out of the way, I could clearly see how badly she had been damaged as a child. And at the ripe old age of eighty nine, I wouldn't want her to remember or narrate any of that nasty stuff. That kind of suffering was difficult enough to bear when I started remembering things in my early forties. No one deserves that kind of punishment this late in life. I can only pray she won't remember any of them, just so she can enjoy what little she has left to live."

"I feel bad for her," she whispers.

"I do too, love. But when someone is mistreating you in a way that, you know for sure, you haven't given them a reason to do so, it's not always about what you

might have done wrong. Think about it for a minute. If you had done something to deserve their ill treatment, don't you think they would come out and tell you all about it? But they don't. And if you really pay close attention, they probably treat everyone else the same way. That's simply because they want everyone to be aware of the fact that they are having a hard time processing their internal hurt. Not being able to voice an emotional pain is one of the highest forms of suffering. It not only affects those who have resigned to silence, but it also affects everyone around them. So, the harder it is to associate with someone, the more likely it is that they are desperate for affection."

"I see."

"Let me tell you another secret," I continue; "...There is a big difference between worrying about what an unkind person might do to us and thinking what they can actually do for us."

“You mean to tell me they can do something good, while they are being mean to us?”

“Not knowingly, of course,” I answer; “...Remember, they don’t even know how hurtful they are towards others. Remember also, the roughness of their attitude is all about exposing how they are feeling on the inside, and more often than not, it has nothing to do with us...”

I pause, waiting to see if she is interested to hear the rest. “So?” she goes with a touch of enthusiasm.

“So... since they’ve been sitting and waiting in a dungeon-like darkness for a very long time, lacking positive passion and energy, they feel undeserving of our reverence. And they are also totally unprepared to receive goodness or kindness from us. Therefore, my love, an ear you might so very patiently lend or an affectionate word you might decide to utter could validate their sadness and be a massive shock to their system. I’d venture to guess that it might even smack them right in

the face, as if a great big jolt of daylight had made its way through the stone walls of their existence.”

“Is it because they are used to being yelled at all the time?” she asks, eyes wide with curiosity.

“Exactly,” I say; “...and you already know how that feels. They have never known what it is to be accepted or to be appreciated. Therefore, the amount of warmth they might end up feeling in their heart at that instant could be so very radiant and so very powerful that it would warm them up, head to toe and fingertip to fingertip. No telling what kind of magic that tiny compassion of yours could help them unlock.”

Seeing the slight puckering of her lower lip, I don't have to be a genius to know she needs time to absorb all this. After all, it has taken me years to understand the intricacies of the human psyche. Up until then, the more rejection I received and the more I got hurt, the harder I worked at pleasing others, trying to earn their approval. I

even brought out the violins from time to time and gave myself a sentimental pity party. I was the host, the guest, and every small bit of rainbow confetti that rolled down my cheeks, emphasizing the funeral march of my departing teardrops. Had I known my perseverance wasn't going to make any difference, I wouldn't have exhausted myself. Lesson learned.

CHAPTER 8

“Daddy loves laughter,” she says with a slight excitement in her tone, as if she were trying to change the subject; “...He spends every Sunday morning reading the comics, while my head is tucked under his left arm. I

look forward to sitting next to him, enjoying his boundless sense of humor. That weekly boisterous pleasure of his can be very contagious. I don't understand any of the jokes; but I laugh with him, simply because that's the only time silence is broken to pieces in our house. And it feels good. Do you remember those moments?"

"How can I not? That's the only time darkness ever left our house for a while. Come to think of it, I also remember how Daddy used to push my curls out of the way, just so I could see the newspaper better, as if I knew how to read. Though he acted silly, cracking jokes and making light of things, I believe Daddy was a wise man. He knew, deep down inside, that humor was the only thing that was going to preserve our unity."

"Did he laugh all the way to the end?" she asks.

I feel chills dripping down my spine as I keep hearing the resounding mile-long echo of her question.

“She knows,” I think to myself; “...She knows Daddy is no longer with us.” No wonder she had said earlier, “If you had been even slightly satisfied with your accomplishment, I would have felt it.” She has been processing every one of my feelings, all throughout life, without a peep, for six decades. That itty bitty particle of realization hurts more than I could have ever imagined.

“Yes, he did,” I answer; “...Daddy never allowed darkness to overtake his joy. His response to anything and everything was humor. He spoke it as often as he could. He chronicled his personal funnies in countless notebooks, most of which I took home with me after his passing. But his most valuable asset went to Jirayr, our brother. Do you want to know what that is?”

“What?” she asks.

“Jirayr inherited Daddy’s sense of humor, which is an unlimited supply of inner joy. I can’t say that I am not

envious. But I am also so very thankful that one of us did receive it at the end.”

“That’s good,” she says, emphasizing it to sound more like a great big pulsating “Amen!” after a heartfelt prayer.

“Tell me more about Jirayr,” she says with a joyful expression.

“Well, do you remember how you got in trouble during class not too long ago and how Ms. Maggie attached a piece of paper with two safety pins on the back of your school uniform?”

“I do,” she replies with a solemn look on her face.

“Do you even know what was written on the paper?” I ask.

“I don’t and I don’t really care to know.”

“I am going to tell you anyway. The paper Ms. Maggie scribbled on read, ‘I laughed during class!’”

“Oh! Is that all? And I felt this huge embarrassment over a silly phrase! I really wanted to get rid of that thing. It was all because I was laughing with one of my classmates. And I was the only one who got in trouble for it. I guess laughter during class is not okay,” she jokes.

“I guess not,” I answer with a wink; “...But I still feel bad for the fact that you had to walk up and down the hallways during recess as Ms. Maggie followed you, making sure you weren’t going to remove your penance until she was fully satisfied. To this day, I believe your punishment was greater than your offense.”

“I was more hurt because I thought Ms. Maggie loved me. I guess I was wrong about that too,” she sighs with the rolling of her eyes.

“Well, something similar happened to Jirayr in that very same class. Do you want to hear?”

“Of course,” she says with eyes locked on mine, while brows furrowed and nostrils flared.

“Jirayr prepared a short bio about Barbarossa, the Great Admiral of the Ottoman Empire, and presented it to Ms. Samiya, the history teacher. She read it with contentment until her focus landed on the bottom of the page where Jirayr had drawn a cemetery plot with the Admiral’s name attached to it. And I am pretty sure he had thrown that little extra touch in to impress the teacher even more. Except, right above the man’s name stood a great big cross, the sight of which made Ms. Samiya scream with terror, throwing the entire assignment to Jirayr’s innocent face, embarrassing him to no end.”

“Oh no; so what happened?” she asks.

“Mother went to have a talk with Ms. Samiya and tried to explain that her seven-year-old boy had never seen an Islamic cemetery; thus he couldn’t have known there were no crosses. But the teacher was still beside herself. She wasn’t going to end Jirayr’s punishment

there. She continued to harass him throughout the school year until she would never have to see him again.”

“Did Jirayr ever recover from it?” she asks, wiping away a tiny tear.

“I don’t believe he did,” I say; “...This incident scared Jirayr so much that he started disliking school with passion. As a matter of fact, he sat on Daddy’s lap, shedding bitter tears at the beginning of each school year, begging to be excused. And Daddy took the time to console him, telling him there were no other options. And Jirayr continued to go to school like a lamb to the slaughter.”

“Do you mean to tell me that one incident scarred him that badly!” she exclaims.

“It sure did. You see; Jirayr was never exposed to fear, anger, and criticism. It only took one act of unexpected tyranny to break him to pieces; whereas your every breathing moment has been filled with those.

What really hurt you more than anything had nothing to do with the incident itself; but it was the fact that you had trusted Ms. Maggie's love for you."

"That's true," she affirms; "...I really thought she was the only one who cared for me. And I guess that's what I was trying to prove to myself that day by being disobedient. Oh well! Laughter is such a rare thing these days. It's worth getting punished for it."

"I simply celebrate the fact that none of those human flaws mentioned earlier had a chance to beat you down. You continue to overlook the peer pressure as you continue to do what's right. Ah! There is something else you need to know about Jirayr. That little brother of yours is going to be your hero some day, believe it or not."

"Really? All he ever does is cry. How could he be anyone's hero?"

"He might be a baby for now, but he will grow up, like you and I did. As time goes by, you will find so much

joy in being his big sister, teaching him all kinds of things. And the measure of that joy will start eating away the darkness inside. You two will go all out and develop unbelievable fun games based on your unlimited imagination. It might sound funny, but you will even dress him up as an entertainer, put him on a stage with a make-shift microphone, and applaud his performance until your hands hurt.”

“That sounds cool!” she exclaims; “...Does he like spending time with me?”

“Does he ever!” I say; “...From the very moment he wakes up in the morning, all he does is wait for you to come home from school. He adores you.”

“I am so glad you came,” she says with a faint whisper; “...I never knew Jirayr was waiting for me to come home after school. No one ever tells me those things.”

“Even though he doesn’t talk yet, he really looks forward to being with you.”

“Hah! All he mumbles is ‘da-da-da’ and ‘goo-goo-goo,’ like he doesn’t know anything else to say,” she chuckles like I have never seen her do before. I know the real reason behind her excitement is the fact that she means something to her little brother, which is more than she has ever felt from the rest of her family members. I am pretty sure this little information is like a feather in her cap. What a heavenly sight she is!

“He doesn’t; at least not yet,” I answer; “...but he is going to learn all of that just like you once did as you were growing up. There will come a time you two will get to discuss various issues concerning relationships, finances, and buying a house. How about that?”

“Do we ever own a house?” she asks.

“Of course you do. You each own a home and adopt a good lifestyle. Neither one of you falls into bad habits.

Not only do you take parenting very seriously, which helps make up for all the unpleasant memories of the past, but you both see it as a privilege. You see, love, your past won't stand a chance of defining the future, because neither one of you will let that happen. Both of you will strive to do what's right, which is a golden invitation for all favorable opportunities to come and find you. And sooner or later, you will also manage to chase away all your acquired misconceptions, which in itself, is the ultimate freedom."

"What are acquired misconceptions?"

"So, when a baby is born into a family, he or she learns the basics from their parents, their teachers, and their extended family members. Yet, none of these adults is one hundred percent qualified to be an excellent educator. They do their very best -one can only hope; but more often than not, they tend to pass down some unnecessary misinformation, exposing the child to certain unresolved fears and concerns. The child grows up

believing those to be genuine facts of life. And most everyone thinks they have all the right information. Now, do you understand why there is so much confusion in the world?”

“So how can I tell which is the right information?”

“Trust no one other than your own instincts. When someone tells you to do something, take it, thank them for it, and think it through before making a decision. A good rule of thumb is that a shortcut to any problem you might have is rarely a healthy idea. And taking the higher road is always more strenuous, but worth the effort at the end.”

Noticing her heavy eyelids, I ask, “Do you need a little downtime?” to which she simply responds by lying on the floor, moving her outstretched arms and legs as if she were trying to make angels in the snow. That activity lasts a few seconds before she starts shuffling and trying to get a bit more comfortable.

“I would really like it if you were to place your head on my lap,” I say. She looks surprised at first; yet finds no reason to argue. As I watch her close her eyes for a hot minute, I realize, once again, how fortunate I am to have this awesome experience. This is a once-in-a-lifetime event, for which many individuals spend hours and hours in therapy. Again, I am filled with gratitude.

From the occasional flaring of her nostrils, I realize she is ready to fall asleep. If memory serves me right, this might be the first time she is sleeping on someone’s lap. As I continue to stroke her curls, the warmth of our shared memories immerse me into a deep sea of satisfaction. I rest my head against the side panel of the couch and close my eyes. I whisper a mini prayer of thankfulness for everyone who has come to my rescue when I, too, was desperate for a few words of encouragement. I will be thanking God for the rest of my life for their sacrifice.

A successful life on earth depends on how pure and wholehearted our commitment is to uplift and inspire one another. When we intentionally set aside time and effort to free the trapped butterfly within someone else's tangled-up soul -regardless of the fact that we might not even like them as a person; they are not the only one being dipped in sanguinity. We also start receiving a level of divine help needed for our own personal journey -be it direction, courage, hope, or faith; based on the intensity of our willingness to help. So, that simple act of sacrificing time and effort to remedy someone's temporary brokenness leads us to celebrate two revivals at the same time; theirs and ours. It's a win-win situation for both.

CHAPTER 9

As my precious little lamb falls asleep on my lap, my heart is filled with peace and thankfulness. I am trying to take in this perfect moment of heavenly bliss. I rest my head against the side panel of the sofa once again and close my eyes. She has got to be emotionally beat, mainly because she is not used to receiving

attention, much less having so many answers within a short period of time.

I can't fathom the emotional exhaustion she must be feeling. Too many things to absorb and process all at once. It is hard to imagine how such a tiny existence can put out a guerilla-like resistance against such a huge opposition and try to annihilate potential threats to her progress. And the good news is, the longer she is kept in the dark, the more zealously she demands and pursues good results. Giving up hasn't even crossed her mind.

Lifting my head to take a good look at her peaceful countenance, I start placing her beautiful tendrils away one by one, freeing her cheeks and her forehead, just so there aren't any deterrents between us when she wakes up. I can hardly wait to see her almond-shaped brown eyes look up to me filled with more questions.

"This has been the most delightful visit," I think to myself; "...I only wish I had done it sooner."

“What?” I hear her whisper, with eyes shut against this angelic smile.

“I am so sorry, love. I didn’t realize I was being loud.”

“You weren’t; but I could still hear you. I just didn’t understand what you were saying, that’s all.”

Seeing that she snuggles her head against my chest paints a smile of pure bliss on my face. I whisper, “Well, I was just thinking what a great time this has been. I hope you are feeling the same.”

“Yep!” she exclaims; “...I have another question though, if you don’t mind.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way. Shoot.”

“Would you do anything differently?” she asks. It’s now my turn to pucker the lower lip with a goofy grin.

“There are many things I would have done differently,” I answer with a nervous cackle; “...For starters, I would

have been kinder to myself. Growing up like a noxious weed was tough. Nobody wants to be that unwanted debris of a seemingly well-planned universe. So, I had no choice but to resign myself to a failed self-identity, due to which I wasn't good enough to receive love.”

“I know,” she confirms; “...That’s exactly how I feel.”

“I now realize it wasn’t love I should have been pursuing,” I continue; “...Instead, I should have reeducated the part of my soul that had believed I wasn’t worthy of it.”

“So, you were believing one thing and you were also trying to prove it wrong?” she asks. I love the way she interprets things. She makes everything sound so simple. And they are simple. And so is life; that is of course, if we wouldn’t complicate things by focusing on the vastness of its possibilities, thus placing so much pressure on ourselves.

More often than not, our own self-perception presides as a judge and announces a certain verdict. It either finds us guilty of all charges all the time or it acquits us, giving us the full entitlement to reshape any given situation any which way that we want, giving us the power to make anything and everything fit our personal agenda. Yet, whatever that sentence of ours might be, we always manage to sound like we are so very tired of being the victim. Those oxymoronic patterns are perfect for such an organized chaos we call life.

“Correct,” I answer; “...I was in a state of confusion. I guess that’s another word for being broken. Let me give you an example. I would make a decision based on the facts I had believed to be solid and consistent. And I would be gung ho about pursuing it until some inner suspicion would start to surface, making me doubt the entire idea. I could hardly detect its obscure warnings which sounded something like, ‘Don’t go there, little one!’

That's not who you are!' And then I would need more time to regroup before coming up with a different plan."

"Were they loud?" she asks.

"Nope. They were more like whispers, the barely audible kind. But they were noticeable enough to start a different type of curiosity for something that might have been hiding inside of me. It was worth looking into, which is when I started rewriting some of my previous misconceptions. That's what delayed me more than anything. But it had to be done because my brokenness was about to reach the point of no return. If I had waited any longer, I am afraid I wasn't going to recognize the pieces, thus be unable to complete the jigsaw puzzle of my existence. And that's exactly why reconnecting with you was such a hard thing to do, even though it was the most important part of my mystery."

"Is that why it took you so long?" she asks.

A combination of a nod and shake of the head describes my point to a T: I don't have a decent answer for that one. Not yet anyway. What would be the simplest way to explain to a seven-year-old how self-rejection works? And how that darkest part of the psyche stands guard twenty-four-seven, making sure the soul doesn't receive any visitors?

So, all I can do is take a deep breath. "It's complicated," I whisper; "...It took me a good while to realize that I was trying to please everyone else but myself, which led me to utter barrenness and starvation. Imagine emptying yourself for people who keep walking all over your valuables, never being satisfied with any of your offerings and demanding more, until there's nothing left to give. At that point, they just simply walk away without even looking back to see if you are okay. Not even a glance! In other words, I have been trying to find my worth in the eyes of individuals who really didn't have my best interest at heart."

“And did you find it?” she asks.

“Not through people, love, not through people at all. That almost never happens. And if it did, it would only be short-lived. I learned a valuable lesson though.”

“Oh, yeah? What’s that?”

“What I learned is this: Life demands the same from everyone,” I start to explain; “...regardless of their family background, their level of education, or their socioeconomic status. Life is designed to indoctrinate impressionable young minds, placing superficial dreams and expectations in a positive light. Most people spend a good portion of their existence either trying to fit in or trying to reach a more prestigious result than the rest; none of which fully satisfies any of them.”

“So, do they end up quitting?”

“No, not necessarily,” I continue; “...but life also teaches people it’s okay to have their own set of beliefs and aspirations, instead of trying to follow others’ set of

footprints. More often than not, those who depart from the norm end up being more impressive, more inspiring, and even more respected at the end. Not to mention the fact that they are also happier because they haven't been swayed by others' plans and guidelines. What I am trying to tell you is this: A child who is different from the rest can have a soul-stirring effect by changing their own path and causing others to start questioning theirs. But you must prove your own set of beliefs first, before trying to convince others."

"Am I different?" she asks.

"Oh yes, love, you sure are. And that's something to be proud of. Today's silent struggle due to isolation and loneliness might be the most amazing instructor you will ever have. What if it's trying to teach you endurance and skill for the time being, just so you will learn how to labor through the rough seas of the future, when you will actually be swimming to a safer harbor someday? Better yet, what if you could even successfully sail port to port

with the help of that heavenly wisdom you are being given during this time of silence? And what if you somehow knew ahead of time that those who are lacking such a training early on would get caught in a net of mundane and dull repetitions, wondering what they could have done differently? So, instead of questioning your world now, try to see how it's helping you."

"So, being different is not a bad thing?"

"Not at all. Why would you want to be like the rest of the world in the first place? Your greater potential is already within you, patiently waiting to surface some day in the future. Why not take the time to discover it while you still have plenty of life ahead of you, instead of trying to be like everybody else? It took me a while, but I finally got this part right."

"Yeah?" she whispers with a sigh of relief; "...Are my parents different?"

“I am afraid not. Mother’s childhood was full of deception, due to which she never knew what it’s like to be free. Daddy’s love for her made him dive headfirst into the same net of routines and repetitions, and he did everything in his power to abide by his devotion to her. So, by the time you came along, neither one of them was free to resume life the way they could have. I’d venture to guess that they didn’t even know another version existed because they were too eager to fit in and make it work.”

“So, did someone teach you all these things or did you have to figure them out for yourself?”

“Little bit of both,” I answer; “...Though I disliked the feeling of loneliness almost as much as I hated being so different from the other kids, I also struggled internally, trying to silence this obnoxious curiosity within. I guess when you are so isolated from the rest of the world, it gives you plenty of opportunity to study your inner sphere, which is something many people don’t have a reason to visit. I must admit; that part was more grueling

at first. I turned on myself. I had to navigate through stages of anger, frustration, and defeat; until someday, due to mental and emotional fatigue, I decided to pray.”

“Like praying to God?” she asks with furrowed eyebrows.

“Well, I didn’t know I was praying to God. Remember; I, too, was mad at God who was always hiding around some corner, waiting eagerly to punish me. I wouldn’t have approached Him with a ten-foot pole if my life depended on it. But, I was desperate enough to offer a whisper of a prayer to anyone who could hear me at that time.”

“And did anyone hear you?” she asks.

“Well, once I started to pray, I became weightless like a feather, floating aimlessly as if I didn’t have a care in the world. I am not one hundred percent sure whether or not there was a presence, but I remember feeling a hug while I was saying the only prayer I had learned

during catechism. And as soon as I got done praying, I found myself floating again. Except, this time I felt as heavy as a pile of bricks. A downward force kept sucking me no matter how hard I tried to find something to hold on to. It was like that one dream I used to have where I would continue to fall into these light blue silky looking linens. Do you remember that one?”

“Aagh; do I ever! Isn’t that the one where I keep falling with no place to land? That’s a nightmare. That’s why I will never pray!”

“Well, right after that one prayer, I found myself in that same dream; but this time, there was a featherlike touchdown. I actually felt the daintiness of the fabric between my toes, which was quite pleasing. Though soft and doughy at first, it gave way to a solid path that stretched as far as the eye could see. I was actually able to walk on it, as if I had always done so. And the further away I strolled, the more vibrant the color became -almost like a purplish periwinkle. It was such a unique

experience, but it didn't last long enough by any stretch of the imagination. However, knowing that I wasn't alone after all and that someone could hear me was awesome. So I decided to pray more frequently."

"And then what happened?"

"Each time I closed my eyes and imagined myself inching through the confines of my body, I learned yet another answer I had been looking for. And it didn't feel like someone else was giving me those answers, one by one. It felt as though they had been hiding there all along. Not only had they been waiting to be plucked from the inner perimeters of my being, it was also obvious that I was the only one who could have extracted them, when the time was right."

"Don't you wish someone would have helped you with some of those discoveries instead of having to figure them out all by yourself?" she asks.

“It’s kind of weird how we somehow expect our parents to present us with those valuable shortcuts, just so our journey is a bit easier. But, no matter how attentive and willing they aim to be, parents are still fallible human beings. They don’t always have all the right answers. Not to mention the fact that they have so many other responsibilities such as holding on to a job, making ends meet, and trying to be a role model for their little ones, etc. They can not be perfect all the time.”

“Are you saying we shouldn’t expect too much from our parents?” she asks.

“Something like that,” I reply; “...No matter how ready they might think they are, no parent is one hundred percent up to the task of rearing a child. Many of them don’t even remember a lot of things during the sleep deprivation stages of the first few months. Considering each child’s needs are entirely different, it’s not hard to imagine parents have their work cut out for them. And to

top it all, they are still learning and evolving as individuals.”

“You think so?” she asks.

“I am not trying to say parenting is so very hard that parents don’t get to enjoy their babies. I am not saying that at all. On the contrary, parenthood -whether it is through natural birth or adoption; is one of the most gratifying -if not the very best; positions anyone would hope to land. A stable parent gets to enjoy every bit of the child-rearing experience. They either get to relive some of their innermost fun memories through their kids, or they somehow manage to make up for the things they didn’t get to experience during their own childhood. This whole adventure called parenthood keeps adding to their portfolio of inner-worth.”

“Is that how you finally found your inner-worth, the one you were looking for?” she asks.

“That’s a part of it. But a person’s true sense of worth comes by connecting with the One who created them.”

“Is that like a religion?” she asks.

“No, love. It is not.” I answer; “...Religion is like a book of rules and regulations that we keep reading, only to understand that those conditions aren’t humanly possible to abide by. However, once we dive into a relationship with the ‘giver’ of that book, we no longer need to memorize any of its demands and conditions, because the relationship, itself, gives us so much joy that we no longer see any of its requirements as obligations.

“I am really trying to understand,” she whispers.

“I know, love. I know it’s a bit confusing for now, but let me give you an example. Let’s pretend this friend of yours gave you this huge birthday party and invited all your friends. She made you sit at the head of the table and offered you all your favorite desserts before you

blew out the candles on your birthday cake. And she made sure you received every one of your favorite gifts you had ever wanted. So, at the end of the evening, as she starts to clean up the place so you wouldn't have to, she sees you walking toward the kitchen and she asks, 'would you mind getting me a cup of water?' Would that sound like a chore to you or would you jump for the occasion and say, 'Absolutely, it will be my pleasure'?"

"Of course I would do it willingly," she answers; "...But what does that have anything to do with religion or relationship?"

"Well, the friend I am talking about is the giver of that book. And because He has already given us so much more than we deserve, his expectations of us are no longer considered obligations. It's almost like we want to do more to please him."

“I hope you are not talking about God again!” she exclaims; “...The same God who can’t wait to punish me? I don’t want to know about him!”

“I am afraid we were fed the wrong information about God. Some messed-up people tend to use Him to verbally flog and discipline their kids. Mother happens to be one of them. And I am pretty sure Daddy tried to reason with her, but to no avail. They were both wrong. Very wrong.”

“Are you saying I should be mad at Daddy too?”

“You can’t hold any of these against them, love, because they didn’t know any better. Ignorance is not the same as wickedness, even though our pain and suffering make it difficult to discern those two major villains of life.”

“How can you tell the difference then?” she asks.

“Well, imagine hurting one of your friends' feelings with a silly comment. The minute you realize you might have hurt him or her, even though you haven’t done

anything terribly unforgivable, your conscience starts churning with this feeling of restlessness called regret. If you don't take the time to contact and try to make things right with them, that torment keeps growing inside of you, making you feel bad, as if you had committed a terrible crime."

"Okay..." she whispers with a slight hint of impatience.

"Well, compare that with a serial killer who has actually taken lives, watching his or her act of violence shock the entire nation through the news outlets. Yet, they feel no regret. Even though both incidents have caused pain and suffering, mankind's conscience is what helps discern the difference between ignorance and evil. I guess if you ever want to pray for someone to get what they deserve, pray that their conscience be resuscitated. There is no power more rehabilitating than that."

“So what determines the results between hurting others intentionally versus unintentionally? Isn’t there supposed to be a difference?”

“Absolutely,” I reply; “...Like I said earlier, everything, the good and the bad, is an opportunity for us to earn more maturity and selflessness. As long as we are doing what we believe is the right thing to do, we are simply stepping into a world of relative consequences, through which we learn growth and grace. And we keep reliving similar situations until there is sufficient humility to correct our patterns of misinformation. However, such a mistake gets a bit tricky when we do something harmful, knowing that it is going to cause pain and suffering to at least one other individual. A deliberate attack is not a simple enrollment for another lesson in life. It is the exact time we have allowed the universe to take us as far back as we can possibly go, where our own baby steps of adolescence were about to abandon caution.”

“Does that mean more humility then?” she asks.

“Not even close. That decision takes the wrongdoer through various stages of humiliation -that is of course; if they are mentally and emotionally sound enough to know the difference. Though everyone qualifies for heavenly forgiveness, some people make it harder for us to forgive them.”

“Were you able to forgive our parents?” she asks.

“I think so. Extending forgiveness takes some doing, even after receiving a heartfelt apology. Imagine how much harder it is to forgive those who won’t admit to their wrongdoing.”

“Did any of our parents ever apologize?”

“They didn’t have to, because you and I are able to extend the kind of unconditional forgiveness only a handful can. By doing so, not only are we able to escape the clutches of our painful memories, but we are also able to swim unobstructedly and live a life of freedom. You see, love, the more we hold on to unforgiveness

against someone, the more we chance becoming just like them. I have seen people who resent a parent, especially their role model, only to find out that, sooner or later, they are caught in the same net of bitterness and unforgiveness, just like that parent once did, exhibiting the same characteristics without fail, just like that parent once did.”

“How long did it take you to forgive?” she asks.

“It wasn’t overnight, that’s for sure,” I reply; “...But, like I said earlier, once I made up my mind that I wanted to be better than my role model, as a parent and as a mature adult, I started to pray. And I received the inner fortitude to help me go against the grain, which is near impossible without some heavenly help.”

“Huh! I am still having a hard time imagining God as our help during difficult times,” she mutters.

“I understand. And I am not expecting you to forget everything right this instant. But, please, promise me that

you will at least think about it, just so you won't ever feel abandoned or alone..."

"What are you talking about?" she yawns; "...I am alone! Will that ever change?"

Remembering the mighty sting of silence and solitude, I fully understand the animated gush she unbooms in one breath. Little does she know that life will be filled with occasional efforts to escape the ravages of loneliness, leading her to foolish impulsiveness and humiliation. I believe lack of companionship is one of the curses mankind keeps having to endure from time to time, as a means to calibrate the worth and the meaning of their existence.

"You won't be alone forever, love," I say with a convincing smile; "...Though you will get to know a few characters whom you wished you had never met, you will always manage to find a handful who will want to be with you, for the right reason. That's all you need to start

life with. And once you realize being with the wrong person makes you feel even lonelier than being alone, your handful will become lesser in time. I know your circumstances aren't the best for now, but there will come a time when you will understand that being unique or different from the rest is a heavenly gift to cherish and to celebrate."

"What does heavenly mean?"

"That word means anything and everything that is not of this world; every valuable aid that can only come from a higher place unknown to us, human beings. Though no one has ever seen this place for themselves, we are to believe it is, by far, the most concrete, the most sound, and the most secure environment anyone could ever wish to live in."

"I have never heard of this place. Tell me..."

"Well, this place is known as 'heaven,' within which live all the people who have achieved the highest level of

maturity, which is 'selflessness.' Once a person has been refined through the difficulties of this life -and that's exactly why I believe life guarantees plenty of hardship; they are taken up to this place of rest, where they are immersed in every one of their dreams and aspirations. It's like being rewarded, but infinitely."

"Infinitely?" she hollers.

"You heard me right," I confirm; "...infinitely. It is written, there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."(Revelation 21: 4)

"I have so much to learn, don't I?" she says with a hint of discouragement.

"We all do, love," I explain; "...You see, even though it might feel like God is punishing us at times, He is simply granting us those much needed errors of judgment, just so we can continue to learn and grow. God never abandons us. He remains with us through it all,

waiting for that one tiny morsel of goodness to spring forth during each dilemma of ours. God's undying patience is a perfect display of the kind of unconditional love He possesses for us, his creation. All God wants to do is pluck that minuscule element of innocence left behind after each storm and replant it, modifying us into a better version of ourselves. And He continues to do this until we are fit for heaven. This is the true and ultimate purpose of life. Everything else your five senses might convince you of being the real thing is false advertisement."

Watching her take a deep breath and swallow hard, with a slight incline of the head, indicates a sure sign that she needs a break. Yet, it is refreshing to see she is not discouraged by my honesty. If anything, she wants to know more.

"So, I shouldn't worry about pursuing my own dreams," she asks.

“You have every right to go after your dreams; and they are yours to materialize. However, do it because you want to, and not because you are trying to impress the world, which is a waste of your precious time. That image of perfection you have been programmed to see for now is not the real thing. It is something people have made up to feel, to look, and to sound impressive. The comforts and the freedoms of this world you are looking forward to having some day are just shiny ornaments and empty noises.”

“Do you mean I shouldn’t want the riches nor desire a comfortable lifestyle?”

“Everything you want to achieve is never a one-time deal,” I answer; “...It is one thing to have all the abundance you want at your fingertips, which is what most people enjoy having. But many of them don’t realize the lifelong demands and obligations such a lavish lifestyle requires. They will never get to have a break from their duties. And for the most part, their mind won’t

get to rest, thinking and planning what else they could do in order to maintain the status. In short, the lifestyle ends up owning them, instead of being the other way around. True comfort and freedom are not out there. They come from within.”

“You can’t be serious! That’s such a tiny place! How can it give me the freedoms I have been wanting to have?” she exclaims. Seeing how freely she has been expressing her concerns, without fearing the probability of being silenced again, marks a landslide triumph of the human spirit.

“Believe me, love, that hollow cavity of your small body hides powers and abilities unknown to mankind. It is simply waiting for you to develop the wisdom, just so you can put your God-given skills to good use. As God placed you in your mother’s womb, He had already appointed the ideal path and the purpose, for which you are made. I’d even venture to guess that all the sad encounters you experienced so far were also prearranged

to help you stop questioning others for answers, and start looking inward. Because of the hurts and the misconceptions you have been going through, it will be a while before you grasp the depth of this revelation. However, once you get it, you will also see that there are countless other privileges at your disposal, things you didn't even know existed, ready to be unwrapped and explored. I am telling you, my little one; from then on, the sky's the limit!"

"Do you feel that right now?"

"I do, love," I say with confidence; "...I certainly do. It is like a gift that keeps giving, constantly and abundantly, overflowing with more surprises through every passing day. This is what I call true freedom, the kind that won't cost you a thing, other than your sense of awe and gratitude. And I assure you that its amazing taste of contentment will never leave you!"

“I can’t wait. So, what else can you tell me about God?” she asks.

“God is life,” I say; “...He is also the essence of love, of light, of goodness, of kindness, of generosity, of forgiveness; you name it. Human beings don’t possess any of those heavenly elements all on their own. So, anytime you see a good deed come your way, it happens to be one of God’s warm displays of Himself, shining through others’ works, as a token of encouragement for you to believe in His sovereignty.”

“I see.” she whispers, trying to scratch her puzzled head, fingers trying to travel through an unruly clump of hair; “...So, does God ever punish someone who is truly bad?”

“I personally am not interested in seeing people be punished for their bad deeds. I used to. But now that I have a better understanding, I realize that I can't possibly analyze others’ behaviors without the risk of sounding

self-righteous. So I would much rather leave that part to God. I simply pray that those who have an innate tendency to cause harm to others will come to recognize their own mistakes, no matter how small, just so they will have a chance to humble themselves. God's main concern is for us to receive His gift of salvation, thus extending everyone the opportunity to receive it, over and over again. However, He might take His hand of protection away from those who are stubborn in their own ways at some point in time, leaving them to their own demise."

"Does that mean those people don't get to go to heaven?"

"I really don't know exactly what happens to someone's soul as they prepare to depart from this world. It is my understanding that, as long as there is breath, there is an ample opportunity to get right with God. So, just because we haven't heard someone narrate the 'Sinner's Prayer' or ask forgiveness for their bad deeds, we don't have the faintest idea about what is happening

within their heart. That sacred conversation of theirs is with God only. And believe me, as long as I focus on my personal journey with God, I shouldn't have much time to invest into others' worldly experiences and their spiritual growth."

She nods in a lamb-like obedience and nestles back into my arms, her mile-long disappointments giving way, slowly but surely, to a triumphant grin. Her gaze, lingering through liquid eyes, looks more than satisfied with my answers.

CHAPTER 10

“Why can’t people be kind?” she asks out of the blue. Having just started to enjoy my own quiet wakefulness, I am a bit startled by her investigative attitude. I was honestly preparing for her to fall asleep, just so I could close my eyes for a quick power nap.

“I wish I knew, love. Why do you ask?” I say.

“Well, Mother and I were at one of her friends’ house not too long ago. The lady served tea and some homemade cookies. They were delicious. I wished I could have more, but I was forbidden to ask. So I thanked her. She instructed me to take my cup to the kitchen and place

it on the counter. I did as told, but I also decided to wait there. As she walked into the kitchen to carry a few more items, I thanked her one more time, which made her repeat the previous instruction. It wasn't until my third effort that she finally realized that I was too shy to ask for more. She did give me more tea, for which I was grateful. But she also went and told her guests how I had managed to get a second helping from her. Wasn't that mean?"

"I remember that incident real well. I also remember how upset Mother was for embarrassing her out in public. And just like you, I thought that was a mean thing for a grownup to do. But I happen to have a better understanding these days. Let me start by explaining why certain things are handled so thoughtlessly in that culture. A good majority of the Middle Eastern population navigate through a highly oppressive lifestyle. Not to mention the fact that its demands are especially rough on women and children, as you well know."

“Are you saying it’s okay to hurt someone’s feelings?” she asks with a puzzled look.

“I’m not saying that at all, sweetheart. It’s never okay to hurt someone’s feelings, even if one believes they deserved it. I still remember shedding tears over that one silly cup of hot tea which, by the way, is nothing special. Every household has a samovar tea maker on the stove at any given time, day or night. However, looking back, I now realize I may have been exhibiting a slight protest, if you will, against the social ostracism that discounted children, as if their existence didn’t count outside a certain personal benefit. Kids were never worthy of positive attention...”

“Exactly!” she interrupts in agreement.

“You are right,” I continue; “...That lady should have never exposed such a tender moment. And the rest of them should have never made fun of you, especially knowing how bashful you are to begin with. I am very

truly sorry that you got your feelings hurt over something so insignificant.”

“You mean it?”

“Yes; cross my heart and hope to die! However, I am still going to explain what went on that day, just so you can put it to rest. There is nothing wrong about wanting more tea or more cookies first of all, so long as you are being polite. And you were. But being forced to yield to so many unnecessary restrictions is exactly what causes a person to renounce a few, which is what you were doing that day. I don’t know why it had to be that particular day and that particular place. But I’d venture to guess that you might have felt it was safer to demonstrate your beef while out in public rather than at home, where punishment might have been far worse. At least, Mother had a chance to cool down before addressing the issue. I am just guessing here.”

“You know something, even though Mother participated in the laughter, I could still read into her disapproving eyes,” she mutters with a mischievous smirk; “...And I must admit, I was okay with my penance, which wasn’t that awful next to what it could have been.”

“I remember that too,” I confirm with an impish smile; “...Let’s go back to the time where both you and I came to an agreement about how Daddy is so very cleverly using laughter to cancel out our home’s negativities. That’s exactly what those women were doing that day. They weren’t trying to make fun of you, because there was nothing to make fun of. They were simply trying to add some well-needed humor into their otherwise extremely miserable existence. If you think hard enough, you might remember that those happy breaks were few and far in between. People were beat down by the glum and the weightiness of their circumstances.”

Watching her pause for a while, head slightly tilted to one side, gives me hope. I want her to understand that the culture into which she was born isn't equipped to bring up a good-natured child. If anything, it is designed to extricate the innocence, the goodness, and the kindness out of most every newborn at lightning speed, before they can even have a chance to unveil their other-worldly assets.

As a matter of fact, ancient Middle Eastern cultures denigrated children as nearly useless. In a fire, a husband was first obliged to save his father, then his grandmother, then his wife and then, if he had time, save the children. During famine, children were also last to be fed, based on survival of the fittest, the greatest, and the best. So, growing up against all odds is an accomplishment in itself. Surviving and thriving after such rough beginnings is worthy of praise, something to be celebrated for the rest of one's life.

“I see,” is all I hear. Then this awkward silence settles between us. It does feel uncomfortable because we haven’t stopped talking yet. This is our first recess, other than the time she had to rest her eyes for a few seconds. I watch her yawn and look around, as if she might be trying to make sure she is not in a dream. I try to read her every move.

“Do you want me to pinch you, just so you will know this is real?”

“No need,” she says with a smirk; “...I know it’s real.”

“How can you tell?” I ask.

“For starters, the clock hasn’t moved.”

“Wow! Once again, little one, you are a step ahead of me.”

“You do remember how important that clock is to Daddy, don’t you?” she asks.

“If you mean how he took it apart every now and then, and put it back together? Oh yes. I sure do,” I answer.

“Then you must also remember how Daddy always had that one little part that would be left out or he wouldn’t know what to do with it. Yet, the clock kept operating without it!”

After staring at each other with sideways fish eyes and with the corners of our lips tugged downward, we burst out laughing like neither of us had done it before. We totally surrender ourselves to this loud outburst, as if countless tentacles were tickling us to death. This is not a nervous laughter one opts for, just so they can somehow conceal other emotions. We giggle and giggle until our vision is blurred with tears of overflowing happiness. Such a string of big-hearted laughter is what I have seen babies do. It is catchy. It is lively. And most importantly, it is pure joy.

It takes a while before we both start taking deep breaths, trying to calm ourselves down. Unlike anything else I have ever experienced in life, such a release has revival written all over it. It is uplifting. It is joy-filled. And it is holy. Seeing the way she quickly wraps her skinny little arms around my neck, I am convinced both of us are experiencing a heavenly moment. I add a few tears to my previous episode, stating that my life dessert is complete with a cherry on top!

“Leave it to Daddy to have us in stitches again,” I say; “...Isn’t he the most amazing human being?”

“Yep. I get mad at him from time to time for not being a bit more assertive, but I guess he has chosen peace by accommodating Mother’s demands. I know he is doing his best to keep everyone happy.”

“Well, my sweet love, can you keep a secret?” I ask.

“Sure!” she answers, bug-eyed with curiosity.

“You know how Daddy mumbles this one song while he shaves every morning.”

“Yeah?”

“As you have noticed, this one happens to be a real tear-jerker, which is highly typical of that region’s musical notes. It’s telling a sad story about a man who has fallen in love with a cruel woman. And sometimes, Daddy even gets teary-eyed, sounding more like he is talking in tune with the music in his heart.”

“Yep!” she says with a rolling of the eyes; “...I am used to hearing that song every now and then.”

“Well, both Jirayr and I had believed that Daddy was referring to an old flame of his. So we made sure Mother never knew about that intimate moment of his. However, years later, we decided to request that particular song from the musicians at this one restaurant, where we were celebrating Jirayr’s thirtieth birthday. Seeing Daddy’s countenance change as he heard the

song being played, we were both very excited, knowing that he was going to enjoy this wonderful surprise of ours; except the surprise was on us. Daddy hotly denied having heard that song until that very moment. That's when we both realized the cruel woman he had been referring to was Mother, and she was sitting right next to him."

"Are you serious?"

"Serious as a heart attack, my love." I answer; "...Daddy wouldn't have done anything to hurt her feelings. In fact, he did everything in his power to make sure Mother was happy, and he did that all the way to the end. Daddy was in love with her, and that's the only way he knew how to show his devotion. Not to mention the fact that the level of contentment he possessed was out of this world. I don't know one other person who is like him. Well, I will take that back. Jirayr is the spitting image of him."

“If you say so,” she whispers in a state of melancholy.

“On top of it all, Daddy is more present and more involved now than he has ever been.”

“I don’t understand. How can Daddy be gone and also be present all at the same time?”

“Well, it’s like this: The love you, Jirayr, and Daddy secretly share is a dazzling ribbon that only a select few have, because it is based on the ability to love unconditionally. This God-given unique essence surrounds your hearts and it is designed to keep all three of you tied to one another, no matter what. It is covered with a gazillion faerie lights which not only illuminate your soul, but they also add a feeling of warmth every time you think of one another.”

“Really?”

“Yes; really,” I continue; “...Remember, you two have been Daddy’s main mission in life. It is because of your

presence that he learned to set aside his own needs, aiming to provide you with stability and means, just so you can be more steady throughout future obstacles and setbacks. So when Daddy leaves this place some day, that ribbon will pull him right back to you every time you think of him. And the more frequently you focus on the sacrifices he made to give you his best, the deeper into your heart he will settle, shining brighter and more tangible every time you miss him. So much so that you will always feel his warmth throughout your body. That's how Daddy will continue to communicate with you both."

"Did you just make this up to make me feel better?" she asks.

"I did not," I answer; "...I was very sad when Daddy left us. I remember crying a lot. Though he was seventy-eight at the time, I wasn't ready. Days and months of crying didn't help. Once I resigned myself to the fact that he was gone for good and that I was never going to see him again, something inside my body

became aggressive and obnoxiously loud. It felt as though a broad dagger was etching the inner parts of my body, forcing this quiet scream echo deeper and deeper into my psyche; to the point that I had no choice other than to pay attention. I soon realized my heart was shouting for attention. And the more I listened to what it was trying to say, the more I understood it was Daddy, telling me that he was still with me.”

“No way!” she blurts out; “...I know you just made that up!”

“Again, I’m telling you, my little munchkin, I did not make this up. I, too, just like you, was skeptical at first. I thought it was my grief playing tricks on me. So, I had to ask him to give me some kind of proof. He simply said, ‘ponchik.’”

The quivering of her lips are followed by two mega teardrops that instantly hang from her lower eyelids, determined to do everything in their power not to let go

of those itty-bitty bottom lashes. Though they are only one blink away from their inevitable fate, watching her try to keep them from falling is one of the hardest things I have ever done. No one -and I mean not even my enemy; should be forced to suppress their feelings to this extent. I wait. And I am silent. I want her to figure it out on her own.

She focuses on the ceiling, as if she is trying to relive their little secret. Daddy has been walking her to school every morning, right after breakfast, which happens to be about a thirty minute walk from home. But on the way to school, as soon as they turn around the corner and start nearing the neighborhood pastry shop, she waits for him to place his index finger vertically in front of his lips, reminding her of their little secret, before entering the premises. He buys her a ponchik which is this delicious Armenian doughnut filled with custard or rose petal jam, and he enjoys watching her devour that thing all the way to school.

Then he gets out his handkerchief, wipes away all evidence, dusting the powdered sugar that covers half of her face. He plants a kiss on her forehead before she runs and disappears through the doors. This is Daddy's way of spoiling his little girl without being scolded. And this is the only memory that could have convinced her of my sincerity.

All of a sudden, summoned by the urgency of their surprise mission, her hands leap into the air and cup her cheeks with a half slap, fully prepared for her long-awaited admission of brokenness. Yet, she stays there, with mouth wide open, as if her mind couldn't quite locate the pathway to her voice. And the minute my tender cuddle places her grief-stricken head against my chest, a huge howl defects from her palpitating little body, immersing her in groans and tremblings.

I wait patiently because she has waited for those tears all her life. I also wait out of respect for her pain and suffering, making sure she gets to express every bit of her

anguish caused by that one parent's inability to show affection.

"It's okay, love," I whisper while she sobs; "...It's okay. You can let it all out. You and I will have plenty of time to be real with one another." I pause, allowing her plenty of time to catch her breath. I don't even dare think of anything else to say until she reclaims her calm. The jelly-like feebleness of her body starts taking its original contour as I continue to stroke her hair.

Then I whisper, "The kind of joy you are capable of spreading around, in spite of your circumstances, is made of the strongest and the shiniest of all ribbons, my little soul. Hang in there."

My gentle hug, a bit tighter and warmer while she clings even closer to me, is a silent decree, sealing a promise that I will never let go of her again. Extending love to myself for the first time has been like a heavenly ointment, washing me clean from every painful memory. I

now realize that the amount of hurt and unforgiveness I have been carrying around would have never allowed me to make better relational choices.

In fact, acknowledging her importance for my existence is what gave me access to my God-given valuables. She has been the key that locked and sealed every one of those heavenly goods I believed were lost a longtime ago. And I'm afraid she had been waiting all this time in the hope that I would want to redeem them someday.

I fully believe life's most important purpose is to teach us how to hold on to the essence of love, while navigating through unlikeable individuals and circumstances. We must learn to appreciate and to develop the kind of love it took for our Creator to keep us within the palm of His hand, in spite of our flawed nature. Love is what gave birth to our existence -not meaning the earthly kind; and that pure Love is where we are essentially going back to at the end. So, the ability to

love, no matter what, is the only power that will make us fit for our heavenly zip code.

CHAPTER 11

“I don’t want you to go,” she says; “...I don’t like being alone.”

“You won’t be, my love,” I reply as I keep stroking her back with a million hugs; “...I promise you will never feel alone, for I am within every whisper, every tear, day or night. We will always be together from now on.”

“Since I am not allowed to have any friends,” she continues; “...anger has become my only friend. I know it sounds bad, but I am being honest with you. I am ashamed of feeling this way. I keep finding myself swimming in it, no matter how hard I try.”

“That will eventually go away, sweetheart. Trust me. The fact that you have even tried to fight anger is a tribute to your strength because it takes a mega-courage to go against something so powerful. More people -just like you said a minute ago; end up swimming in it until they find themselves immersed in far worse situations, like drugs, alcohol, overeating, you name it.”

“Does the pain get easier,” she asks.

“Compassion is an amazing element you already possess within that tiny cavity of yours,” I answer, pointing at her abdomen; “...Even though you are very sensitive towards others’ pain and suffering, you haven’t learned to offer the same level of kindness to yourself. At least not yet. But once you truly accept and start believing the fact that you are worthy of love, you will start being more generous with yourself. So, instead of going through an alphabet of negative thoughts, you will open yourself to self-compassion, and watch the shaping of tiny wings take place, until they are fully developed

and ready to take you through better landscapes, my little butterfly.”

“You make it sound so easy,” she whispers.

“It is and it isn’t. It takes time. And it takes plenty of patience. But like I said earlier, the minute you start believing that you are worthy of love, you will also start being kinder to yourself during this process of inner healing. This one is not an overnight kind of journey. But knowing that you are not alone will help alleviate its sting. Being so isolated from the world makes you want to believe you are the only one carrying this massive responsibility of growing up, which can’t be further from the truth. Even grown-ups are having to face similar traumas on a day-to-day basis.”

“What do you mean?” she asks; “...Aren’t grown-ups grown up already?”

“You can say that; but there is a significant difference between growing up and growing up

responsibly, just as it is between teaching and indoctrinating. Being a parent is primarily about developing a powerful relationship with the child who needs to be guided through the stages of teenagehood on the way to their full-blown adulthood.”

“I can’t wait to get out of here. How much longer do I have to go through this?”

“The reason you feel so frustrated is because no one is preparing you for anything. Mother is trying to indoctrinate you in order to reduce her own burden. And Daddy is staying out of her way because it’s easier. But parental responsibilities can never be based on a set of strategies and techniques in order to shape the child to fit a certain mold that feels more acceptable for the family. Yet, a lot of parents who see children as a dead-weight that needs to be hauled around for a while, never understand how crucial those formative years are in a child’s life. This is exactly how they were made to feel

growing up and that's all they are able to offer as not-so-mature adults."

"Will I ever free myself from all of this someday?"

"Of course, you will," I answer; "...However, since it has already developed a tiny shadow of scar tissue inside of you, it will try to challenge you from time to time. And you will have to spend a bit more effort to fight those occasional urges."

"Give me an example... please," she says.

"Let's pretend someone is looking, sounding, or acting like he or she is mad at you. Instead of wondering what they might be going through at that point in time, your initial question might be, 'Have I done anything to anger them?' even if you know for sure that you have never seen this individual until that moment. You then will have to make a conscious effort to take a step back from such a negative thought process and try to find a more logical approach. Though it may not feel that way

for now, I can almost guarantee that the kind of strength you will end up having by trying to heal yourself will someday help another person who is lost in their own pain and vulnerabilities.”

She wraps her arms around my waist with such a featherlike poise that the rhythm of her breath enters in a perfect harmony with what I believe is the smooth flapping of wings I have just begun feeling around my heart. I am finally convinced that this little one will be starting to enjoy her God-given worth through the freedom of her mind. Nothing would please me more than to know that the abundance of tenderness she has been giving to everyone but herself, will soon penetrate deeper and coat the inner membrane of her heart, never to be stripped away again.

Though the extent of her solitude won't be any less than before, it will no longer poison her with the effects of “abandonment,” “rejection,” or “punishment.” Learning to see it as “an opportunity to celebrate her unique

individuality” will continue to destroy its devastating properties, until every bit of its negative power is overthrown for good.

CHAPTER 12

The world tends to bully ordinary people by emphasizing their imperfections as a shared experience. Each person starts out with this urgency that he or she must measure up to certain expectations, which transforms this beautiful gift called life into a brutal race. No one gets to rest or enjoy the ride until they somehow find a way to claim a level of success -be it position, possession, or both. And those who choose not to exhaust themselves are often believed to have settled for less.

Therefore, self-compassion is one of the most important ingredients needed during challenging times as well as for individual shortcomings, because it

compliments mankind's sensitivity to the experience of suffering. It soothes their inadequacies, mistakes and failures with necessary coping and healing properties, especially when they are facing painful life situations that are completely outside of their control.

The harsh judgments and criticism that people endure throughout life fade next to the kind of despondency their self-condemnation is able to create. So, whenever someone starts feeling the pull of such an awful internal darkness, they best be prepared for some serious soul-searching which, in order to produce good results, needs to be facilitated with a touch of divine intervention.

Perfectly in tune with our experiences, the human psyche is like a mechanical typewriter, converting every worldly exposure into emotions and behaviors, one tiny clack at a time. Its highly developed compatibility has no difficulty redoubling its efforts during our most

challenging times, chronicling our ill-fated labyrinths of deception with perfect ease.

Even though we are what our childhood taught us to be, we continue to teeter between the past and the future, hoping to map out the best path for a personal journey. True, some of us remain stuck in the past and allow some of its painful memories to dictate a mediocre destiny, while others are better at unlearning the past and healing themselves from it.

Every stage of our lives is full of crossroads, offering us an opportunity to choose between different options -in other words, fine-tuning our ability to reason with life and processing its countless intricacies. So, instead of wasting our time, trying to figure out “why bad things happen to good people” or “what we might’ve done to deserve such a sad outcome,” we offer ourselves the gift of seeing life’s less than fortunate moments as favorable occasions to modify our views, adapt to a newer set of standards, and to start over.

My personal motto is: I must leave people better than I found them. Sure, there will be a few who don't deserve my generosity due to their unreasonable and self-centered mindset, sullyng my motives with their deviant behaviors. Still, I find nothing wrong with helping them out, so long as I am doing it without expecting back a favor or even a simple thank-you.

Others might resent me for my honesty, for having higher aspirations and wanting to be successful. Again, there is nothing wrong with wanting to be a good example for those who aren't quite up to par when it comes to taking bigger steps. Just like, there is no reason to quarrel with individuals who don't quite get me or don't share my views, which doesn't make them any less or better than me. Everyone is entitled to their own opinions. I believe, as long as I am giving others something to critique, chances are I might also be doing something worth talking about.

These days, I worry more about mental stagnation than what others might be thinking or saying about me, since none of those comments has the power nor the authority to define me. From where I stand, people who don't have the courage to speak to my face are broken beyond repair. If anything, I want to thank them for helping me realize that it was their baseless criticisms of the past that made me start questioning the logic behind it all.

I used to keep concentrating on someone's disapproval of me as if my life depended on it; while there could have been many others who were perfectly fine with the way I conducted my life. Then I would make it my life mission to help change that one individual's opinion of me, hoping and expecting that he or she will start seeing me through different lenses. Even though I don't recall such a reversal ever happening due to my good-hearted perseverance, I continued to torment

myself until, someday, I simply stopped. And just like that, it stopped being important.

I believe this was one of the residual injuries I had carried with me, touching its scab every now and then, just so it wouldn't have a chance to heal, until some fortunate future point in time, I decided to let itself convert back into a molehill. And that's how it remains to this day.

Those who believe "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me" are in for a rude awakening. Sure, physical signs of damage can either heal completely or become a noble sign of our victory in time. But, no matter how hard we pray that they boomeranged and harmed their source instead, unkind and belittling words are the ghosts that haunt us for many years to come. They can destroy our spirit with one tiny venting of rage, the effects of which will outlast its fleeting existence, just like many trees that keep thriving after the gardener who planted them has passed away.

Regardless of how mentally and emotionally drained they might make us feel, life's junctions are all about spiritual growth, designed to help us shed yesteryears' unwanted leftovers. They are none other than stepping stones. Why would anyone, in their right mind, want to carry stones for the rest of their life? That's why we must be overly sensitive to pain and suffering -be it ours or someone else's; and learn to gain the right perspective.

If we only knew how energizing our words of encouragement and our acts of kindness could be for someone who is a walking disaster, with a luggage of vulnerabilities way too heavy to haul. Even if we knew nothing about the ledge on which they were standing with one purpose in mind, seeing death as their knight in shining armor that is about to put an end to their state of defeat, wouldn't we want to be the one who carried some of their excess burden? It gets even better. How noble would it be of us to move aside our own set of

problems, just so we can be that temporary helping hand for someone else? If such an idea doesn't give someone warm and fuzzy feelings, they, too, might be broken beyond repair.

Considering life's challenges are for everyone -young or old, rich or poor, well-versed or ignorant; endless solitude is highly debilitating. Everyone needs someone for accountability; to rely on, to look up to, and to learn from. And those of us who haven't had a mentor, or someone we could rely on for strength, choose to open our hearts to a higher being who, in my case, happens to be God. I needed Him as a young adult, still do, and always will, to save me from this victim mentality, which is another word for slavery of the mind. Unfortunately, childhood trauma leaves the deepest of all scars, because it remains woven within the fabric of one's being.

I joined Kempsville Christian Church (KCC) a while back, because I love the humble interaction of its congregation, their camaraderie as well as their heart to

serve others in need. The church supports all fourteen locations of Battered Women Shelter, which happens to be a place where the kids and I had found safety once upon a time. And it also stands against Child Trafficking which is a huge epidemic these days.

So, nothing would give me more pleasure than trying to quote Josh Childress, my pastor, whose main purpose is to help us grow into a solid community of Christ followers. He is absolutely one of the most noble and humble individuals I have ever known. He says, "Research has indicated that infants who lack a significant interaction -particularly physical touch; during the first months of their worldly existence, experience severe deprivation. It can essentially lead them to a condition called Marasmus, when they essentially waste away due to a lack of nurturing and stimulation, even if they are being fed regularly. Even babies cry out for community way before they learn the proper words to express themselves."

He continues with, “Children and teenagers long for acceptance. They will do almost anything to get it; even if they need to fit into some group, or some club, or some sports team. Sadly, some even choose a gang if that’s what it takes to satisfy their hunger for community. And this need doesn’t go away when we become adults. There seems to be this deep cry of the heart that says, ‘I don’t want to be left alone. I need to love and I need to be loved.’”

He then adds, “God, himself, is a community of triune identity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. God designed an entire world as a home for all mankind, his beloved creation. So, out of the magnificent richness of his eternal community experience, God decided to broaden his circle and made room for mankind. Not because God was bored or He needed minions to do his bidding. But because God simply wanted the human beings to join his circle. That’s why He created us after his own image.”

We were designed to interact with one another. No one can feel the depths of a complete wholeness without participating in a community. God calls us to be together for all of life, through the triumphs as well as the challenges. Yet, we live at a time when more people are trying to silence that deep yearning for a community by isolating themselves from the rest of the world.

My personal period of isolation gave birth to one of my biggest misconceptions which was the fact that I didn't deserve happiness. Not only did I believe such a foolish notion, but I also let those roots of despair grow deeper and wider than a thousand-year-old oak tree, while my yoke of solitude kept getting heavier by the minute. Though my greatest desire was to be happy, I was also chasing it away by showing interest in people who weren't available for a relationship -be it mentally or emotionally. I even managed to sabotage the ones with honorable intentions, just because I didn't think I was worthy of love.

Yet, when I finally realized no amount of “I am sorry” could have possibly made up for the suffering I had endured for six decades, my only choice was to forgive it all, without a word of apology. I literally put forth this massive effort, all on my own, reached out and grabbed my own gift, and presented it to myself for a well-deserved closure. I even planted one of my most heartfelt kisses on my trophy, just like professional athletes do after their championship game.

I also promised to hold on to my past as my greatest asset because it taught me everything I know about life and about myself. So, instead of rebuking it, I started valuing and appreciating it as a mentor. Each one of my sad beginnings was an opportunity for a deeper understanding of who I really am, as it also taught me to rely on my own views, instead of others.

I know my facts these days without being told, just like I know my shortcomings without someone having to point them out to me. My facts are, “God loves me -He

always has and He always will. And my worth has nothing to do with my accomplishments, my good deeds, or my bank account. God loves me, no matter what. And I can only boast about my weaknesses because, through them, I am being made strong. He says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12: 9)

Conclusion

If life isn't taking the wind out of our sails from time to time, causing us to stumble over some unforeseen plot of adversity, chances are we are traveling without an inward growth -in other words, our spiritual metamorphosis might have slipped into a coma without our knowledge. If the jungle of our history doesn't consist of critical milestones; packed with arresting bursts of lessons, progress, and insight, I dare say we are simply existing. And if we are standing at a major crossroads without a clue as to what its redeeming coordinates are, it's more than likely that we are caught in someone else's agenda, trying to please them.

Giving our future a new home has never been about making sure the skeletons of the past are out of sight. Life is so very messy that it takes a deep sense of commitment and an unfailing hope to make it through its challenging circumstances. Each arduous step taken to help us get to a place of rest and safety is a sign of growth. It is something to be proud of, and never to feel embarrassed by. No one gets to lead a mistake-free life. There is no such a thing!

That's why it is highly important to focus on our journey, its fundamental purpose, and the spiritual growth it is trying to bestow on us, before we miss the opportunity. We must learn to welcome every circumstance -no matter how uncomfortable or even painful; in order to decode its underlying notes, making use of every one of its moral messages. Those are far more valuable assets worth the mention next to the worldly humiliation we might have experienced along the way.

So, the longer it takes for us to reach a healthy balance between what took place in the past and where we had aimed to be at some point in time, the harder it is to feel satisfied with who we truly are, which is something no one else could possibly know but us. Parents can only mold us to fit a worldly presentation of our identity, yet they remain utterly clueless about our heavenly version. Therefore, unless we see our personal journey as an ordinary life -a prerequisite that everyone needs to graduate from before attending its more advanced courses; we might not be as savvy as we think we are. A good rule of thumb is that the more heaven-bound we become, the less we talk about ourselves.

Ultimately, this earthly life is designed to teach us our own value, disregarding all exterior opinions and influences. If we don't learn how to love and respect ourselves, we will continue to attract people and circumstances who will disrespect us just as much as we

do. Self-love is the beginning of inner peace and wisdom because it enables us to greet and embrace the One who made us in his image. And God doesn't make mistakes.

Prayer

Those who look up to me for means, shelter, and guidance, I pray that God's grace will enable my thoughts and my words to be a lamp upon their paths, supplying all of their needs during their times of personal difficulty. And those who dislike me or my submission to a heavenly path that's being less traveled among the occupants of this fallen world, I also pray that their negativity towards me will draw God's attention like a magnet. Not because I want them to be punished for their adversity. But because I sincerely desire for them to taste what it's like to give earnest heed to the right shepherd, instead of the false advertisements and the shiny

ornaments they have been chasing after. May God, in his magnificent riches of mercy and grace, extend his forgiveness even to the unrepentant, for they know not what they are doing. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Alis Cerrahyan lives in Virginia Beach, Virginia, and loves writing about God's unconditional love for mankind, his beloved creation. Spreading the Good News of the gospel being her primary focus, she shares her story and beliefs to help others who are under the bondage of discouragement or defeat, due to certain personal encounters. She sees life on earth as being a journey, a platform where people learn how to become the best version of themselves, trying to get as close as they can to that image of God who created them from dust. Christ, their Shepherd, leads the way as the Holy Spirit enables them to stay on a narrow path of righteousness.

Photography for the cover by James Wheeler.

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