

CAFÉ FOR TWO

DECODING MASCULINITY:
WHAT MEN LIVE BY

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To my sons

Praise for *Café for Two*

“‘Café for Two’ has the power to change hearts and minds; it is bold, beautiful, and authentic.”

“With elegant prose and deep insight, the author crafts a novel that is as compassionate and vulnerable as it is powerful.”

“One of the best epilogue scenes I have read in a while, providing a poignant and reflective conclusion to the narrative. It ties everything together beautifully and leaves a strong emotional impact.”

“A masterful exploration of modern masculinity and the quest for authentic connections in a power-driven world. Hasmik Mkhitarian’s eloquent prose guides readers through Manhattan, revealing the profound struggles and insights of its characters.”

“The incredibly vivid descriptions of Manhattan’s allure, accompanied by a street artist’s performance of ‘Petite Fleur,’ turn the city into a character in the novel, immersing you in its vibrant streets and iconic landmarks.”

“‘Café for Two’ makes a significant contribution to the ongoing dialogue about what it means to live a fulfilled and responsible life as a man today.”

“‘Café for Two’ is a beautifully crafted and impactful novel that explores timely and significant issues with sensitivity, insight, and literary elegance.”

“The recurring motif of ‘What would Tolstoy say?’ powerfully illustrates the character’s deep engagement with Tolstoy’s philosophy, framing his personal and existential dilemmas within a broader intellectual context.”

“I deeply felt the pain of fatherless boys, which made me truly emotional. This narrative serves as a powerful voice for those who might feel voiceless, reflecting the silent struggles that many households endure today.”

“The authenticity and balanced presentation of various perspectives on patriarchy demonstrate a thoughtful and open-minded understanding of the nuances involved.”

“The contrast between characters’ perspectives, experiences, and emotions adds depth to their interactions and enhances the overall richness of the story.”

“Writing about deeply painful experiences, especially from the perspective of vulnerable boys, is an act of courage.”

“‘Café for Two’ is amazingly natural and beautifully crafted, like your morning coffee: exciting and invigorating.”

“Very impressive work, powerfully connecting historical insights with modern dilemmas.”

“Drawing parallels between Tolstoy’s Saint Petersburg and modern Manhattan is a brilliant move. The timelessness of these societal issues enriches the narrative with profound literary depth.”

“Memorable and impactful reading experience.”

“A well-read, intelligent examination of masculinity in the modern world; honest, gritty, healing, and ultimately hopeful.”

Acknowledgment

Reflecting and observing the world through the lens of a woman's infinite intuition, where uncertainties around modern men, women, and society present a labyrinth of complexities, I found myself captivated by Friedrich Nietzsche's profound words: "Someone who does not write books, who contemplates deeply, and who resides in an unsatisfying society will often possess a gift to become a good letter-writer."

Once I began writing, my family's and friends' encouragement and belief in me and this journey became my guiding light, bringing my lifelong contemplation to the publication of this book.

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CHAPTER ONE

EXPECTATION

*“What is done out of love always takes place
beyond good and evil.”*

– Friedrich Nietzsche.

“Can I get out here?” I asked the taxi driver as the traffic light turned red.

“But we haven’t arrived. It’s quite far to walk still,” the taxi driver replied.

“I know, but I’ve changed my mind. I’d like to get out here. May I?” I asked, handing him the fare.

“Alright, but make it quick,” he commanded firmly, more than suggested. Keeping an eye on the traffic light and pleased with the generous tip, the driver pressed a button, and the door smoothly slid open.

Stepping onto the sidewalk, I glanced around and smiled. The bright, crisp air and blooming daffodils were a clear signal of spring’s arrival in New York.

The delightful fragrance of roasting chestnuts, mingling with the smoky aroma from the charcoal fire, pleasantly tickled my senses, holding the excitement on my face. I smiled warmly at the vendor stationed at the street corner. In return, he greeted me with a friendly smile, wisps of steam billowing from his cart.

My love for chestnuts stemmed from childhood, when the chestnut men would come around with their hot chestnuts during the Christmas holidays. I purchased a small brown bag from the vendor and strolled away from the steaming cart.

Opting to walk the five blocks to a coffee shop, I didn’t regret getting out of the taxi. Walking down the bustling streets of Manhattan always ignites a sense of excitement.

There's a palpable thrill in the air as if I can feel the heartbeat of my beloved city pulsating with an incomparable vibrancy unique to New York. I cherish this feeling deeply.

Everything about my incredible city is amazing, but the magical energy truly stands out. Where does this energy, with its astonishing transformational power, come from? Perhaps it arises from the abundance of iconic skyscrapers in Manhattan, which radiate an aura of ambition, innovation, and the dynamic, accelerated lifestyle of the city.

Maybe this invincible power emanates from the New Yorkers themselves or the countless pilgrims, the tourists from all corners of the globe. As they navigate the bustling streets of the metropolis, conversing in over six hundred languages, New York City resembles a modern-day Babylon, echoing the diverse array of languages from biblical times.

Amid this incredibly beautiful chaos, they create a vibrant and magical collage that never fails to captivate and inspire. Amazement abounds everywhere in New York City, where each day unveils something new and exciting.

The energy is tangible, from the chess hustlers engaging in intense matches to the ever-busy and perpetually hurried businessmen trudging the streets and inseparable from their devices.

The street artists, performers, and musicians further enrich the tapestry of life in New York City, making each moment feel like a dream come true. Their creativity and passion infuse the streets with energy and excitement, leaving a lasting impression on anyone who experiences it.

As I continued walking, soulful jazz notes reached me, gently caressing my ears and creating a moment of peace and magic amidst the bustling streets.

The soundtrack of Old New York jazz perpetually celebrated diversity and creativity, reflecting the vibrancy of a city where dreams were born. Jazz held a special place in my heart, always integral to the enchanting nightlife. I believed jazz passions flourished under neon lights, where musicians converged to craft something magical, embodying old New

York's spirit.

A crowd gathered around an African American saxophonist, mesmerized by the unfolding spectacle. As 'Petite Fleur' filled the air, pure enchantment swept through the streets, halting pedestrians in their hurried steps.

The saxophone's lament, carried by the urban symphony, created an atmosphere of wonder. Some captured the moment on cellphones, while others contributed to the saxophonist's collection box. Amidst it all, a young couple danced the tango, lost in each other's embrace.

After generously placing money into the saxophonist's collection box, I stepped back, the melody lingering in my soul. This was why I cherish this city so deeply for inspiration and wonder.

Incredible New York, magical Manhattan—it's not just a dream for New Yorkers, but a haven and a beacon for artists and musicians worldwide, a true home unlike any other that always inspires awe in every corner. There is nothing like it elsewhere, and I often wonder whether the world truly appreciates its wonder or fully grasps its magnificence. What an honor to call it home!

As I engaged with the city, my heart swelled with gratitude, and emotions welled up in my eyes. It was then I realized I had reached the coffee shop on Madison Avenue.

Pausing at the entrance for a minute, I soon saw him in the farthest corner of the crowded coffee shop. He stood up and cheerfully waved in greeting.

"I am so glad you came," he greeted me with a warm embrace.

"How do you do, my friend?" I responded, touched by his sincerity. "Your call was a delightful surprise."

"I was so excited to see you again."

"I really wanted to meet you," I admitted.

He pulled out a chair for me and began speaking to the waitress who had come over to our table. A stack of hardcover books lay on the small table set for two.

"We can always find great companionship in the company

of books,” I said with a smile, habitually scanning the writers’ names.

He smiled. “Indeed, books are always good company if you have the right sort.”

He was a cherished, old university friend, notably the youngest in our group. He was a smart guy, always impeccably dressed as an indicator of his success and ambition.

My friend believed that dressing elegantly reflects a man’s integrity and sophistication and demonstrates respect for others, no matter where he is. His mere presence could brighten any room, drawing genuine smiles from those he met.

Above all, his engaging smile, helpful demeanor, and seemingly unconditional acceptance of others made him incredibly likable.

Despite his outgoing nature and affable, courteous demeanor, something mysterious about his personality intrigued people. This enigmatic aura surrounding him only deepened as time passed, fueling speculation and curiosity among his friends and acquaintances.

My dear friend was raised by a single mom after losing his father, a courageous fireman, at a young age. His father’s selfless act of saving two siblings from a burning home in Brooklyn left a deep wound.

His bravery was honored with a medal, which my friend rarely speaks about. It was his grandfather who, during one of his birthday parties, showed me the symbol of courage and sacrifice hanging in their living room.

Facing many challenges and hardships, he had grown into an independent man. His determination shaped by his father’s legacy and his mother’s sacrifices. As I told before, he was exceptionally bright and had won a scholarship to university.

His respect for single mothers was profound and rare, viewing them not just as caregivers but as heroes.

His empathy and compassion for others were as striking as unexpected, contrasting sharply with the image of the self-assured and ambitious young man he projected to the world.

He was exceptionally sensitive to the feelings of those

around him, and we all admired him and found joy in his sensitivity.

We frequently encountered each other in the library, more often than on campus. To him, Tolstoy's works were the most ingeniously written pieces of literature ever created. My friend's fascination with *Anna Karenina* was unparalleled among the countless pearls of world literature. It held a special place in his heart. For him, it wasn't just a novel; it was a timeless masterpiece, a cherished companion providing solace and inspiration.

Immersed in Tolstoy's world, he absorbed every page, effortlessly recalling passages from memory.

We were living proof that true friendships stand the test of time.

He was convinced and delighted by Plato's line that "The true friendship between man and man is infinite and immortal. I always reminded him of Aristotle's maxim, "The best kind of friendship is only possible between good people similar in virtue."

People around us, most notably our families and mutual friends, often humorously commented on our unique bond, holding it in high regard. Indeed, we had a lot in common, as is typical of two genuine friends, but he never shared my conviction to attend church.

"It doesn't make sense anymore," he confessed quietly during one of our rare discussions about faith, a subject we once debated with fervent passion. "I've driven my mom to church in Manhattan many times. She hoped it would bring me closer to something greater, but it never quite clicked for me.

"She once insisted I come in and join the Morning Worship. I'd hoped to meet religious people there, but that wasn't the case. I saw were people disconnected, more engaged with their phones than their faith. I didn't care for the Sunday religion community," he murmured, appearing composed.

I listened, knowing my attempts to sway him were futile; our discussions on church attendance had long been

abandoned, preserving peace as my efforts and arguments proved in vain.

Years had passed, and he had traded the quiet corridors of public libraries for the frenetic pace of Wall Street. When questioned about this astonishing pivot, he replied, “Wall Street is a place where the success of self-made millionaires isn’t dictated by financial education or credentials, but by sheer will and effort,” a remark that surprised none who truly knew him.

His rise in the financial sector was meteoric. I considered it natural, knowing my friend’s disciplined nature and his life philosophy: “To achieve anything anywhere in life, you have to work extraordinarily hard.” He was convinced that this was the model for everything meaningful.

Soon, he found himself at the center of attention, courted by numerous young women from affluent Manhattan families, all dreaming of marrying him.

Always diligent in all his endeavors, his new commitments on Wall Street kept him busy, and my regular business trips to Europe rendered our meetings infrequent, despite his move from Brooklyn to a nearby neighborhood in Manhattan, Tribeca.

“Good books, like old friends, hold valuable lessons, can be trusted,” I said, picking up a volume from the table, hoping to reconnect through our shared love of literature. Looking at him, I could sense the changes he had undergone since we last met.

I had never seen him like this before. His usual vibrant demeanor was shadowed by a veneer of success and an unspoken tension.

“I agree, but I don’t read as much as I used to,” he confessed with regret, taking a sip of coffee.

“The coffee here is quite tasty, isn’t it?” he remarked, taking another long sip. “This café takes pride in that,” he said, pouring me another small cup of coffee and filling his own. I stopped flipping through the book and placed it back on the table.

“Coffee takes my headache away,” he said with a smile. “I love to come here. Do you like it?”

“It’s an excellent place,” I said and picked up my coffee mug.

As we sat in the bustling café, surrounded by soft chatter and the clink of cups, I realized how much we had both changed. Yet, despite not meeting often, the core of our friendship—our shared past and mutual understanding—remained strong and unshaken.

“So, how does Wall Street’s pace affect your reading habits? Do the rich and powerful find time for books?” I asked, curious to learn more about my friend’s new world.

“Wall Street is rife with countless tales and legends about its golden eras, especially about books and learning. But realistically, achieving wealth necessitates reading and thoughtful contemplation,” he explained with a smile, revealing a deeper understanding.

“Really? What’s on their billion-dollar reading list?” I pressed.

“That’s an excellent question. Their reading habits are as varied and intriguing as their fortunes. It’s surprising, but the most successful people are fervent readers, prioritizing non-fiction—business books, biographies. They don’t just read; they study and reflect.”

“The connection between learning and earning matters.”

“Absolutely,” he nodded. “Take Warren Buffett, for instance. He spends a significant part of his day reading and thinking. Thinking is the hardest part, which is why it remains a rare habit—even on Wall Street.”

“That’s why so few engage in it,” I said. “Tell me about your Wall Street experiences, man. They say it, much like New York, never sleeps.”

He chuckled, “Jesse Lauriston Livermore put it best: ‘Wall Street never changes, the pockets change, the suckers change, the stocks change, but human nature stays the same.’ That’s the constant.”

Encouraged by his openness, I said, “So, my friend, I think

it's time you rediscovered your love for great books. Perhaps consider joining the club of reading billionaires," I suggested enthusiastically, my voice carrying enough for others to glance our way.

"It's hard to know what to trust these days," he confessed, his tone turning somber. A hint of desperation appeared on his intelligent face. "I've been lost in the maze of self-help bestsellers, hoping to transform my life. Yet, the more I read, the more confused I became. It seems these books promise more than they can deliver. Eventually, I've come to realize that self-help books fall short. They are unable to offer the solutions they promise."

Leaning back, he crossed his arms over his chest, a gesture of defense, and said, "Think about it—despite countless books on making relationships work, why do so many fail? He paused, keeping his arms crossed, and pondered deeply.

"You know, the widespread failure of relationships worldwide reminds me a lot of the issue with human obesity," he remarked, drawing a parallel that initially confused me.

"What?" I asked, eyes widening. "What are you talking about?"

He chuckled. "Every year, more books about healthy lifestyles, exotic exercises, and strange diets claim to solve obesity, yet the problem only worsens globally. It's a bizarre paradox, isn't it?"

"That's an amusing observation, though perhaps a bit exaggerated," I replied, joining in the laughter. "The paradox of human relationships has always been a source of both frustration and bewilderment, buddy."

"Seriously, though, these books add to the chaos. Millions are published annually, feeding into a billion-dollar industry mainly targeting women," he said thoughtfully.

"That's for sure," I agreed. "The publisher guys know that women buy more tomes."

"That explains why most of its readers and believers are women," he rejoined.

"Everyone finds different value in self-help books,

depending on your preferences,” I countered.

He sighed, “Sometimes, I wonder if the issue isn’t with the books but with us—with our modern world and the very nature of our relationships.”

“It’s easy to feel lost,” I agreed, “but we might be expecting too much. They aren’t solutions in themselves.” I offered a reassuring smile and added, “We need to act buddy.”

There was a pause. My friend’s expression remained unchanged, and an awkward silence filled the air for a moment. I realized this meeting wasn’t merely a casual catch-up. He hadn’t invited me to the café to celebrate his monumental success on Wall Street but to share something that deeply troubled him, something tormenting his heart. He was seeking not advice but understanding and perhaps a way back to the simpler truths found in our long conversations and the books of our youth.

“You see,” my friend began reluctantly, his voice tinged with a rare vulnerability, “I believe you understand me better than anyone. You’re my trusted friend and always make me feel stable and secure.”

“I’ll always be here for you,” I assured him.

He looked at me sincerely, yet with a hint of hesitation, then asked, “Do you think family truly brings happiness? What’s your take on it?”

“Absolutely,” I answered without hesitation, though his question caught me off guard. I do believe that families are the most beautiful things in the world, a life jacket in the stormy sea of life.”

“If that’s the case, why are so many young people falling out of love nowadays and refusing to build families? I believe marriage has lost its excitement and spirit and become much less important in their lives. Look around. Open relationships are on the rise. People simply don’t want to be married to the person they are living with. It seems they wish to be ‘free’ at any cost.”

“Don’t take it too seriously, my friend,” I replied gently. “But you are right. There’s so much cynicism surrounding

marriage and married life. It really saddens me. Who made up these rules? Why do they wish to be free? Free for what?" I asked, irritated, and continued, "I believe that openness and escaping from responsibilities create a lot of uncertainty and discontent."

"Meanwhile, people continue to wonder, 'Is real, true love achievable? Can one truly find happiness in marriage today?' Is that what you want to say?" he asked earnestly, adding, "From what I've read, psychologists see it quite differently."

"Listen, the psychologists have actually unearthed an intriguing discovery after delving into romantic relationships: "The best marriages today surpass the quality of the best marriages from earlier eras."

"Really," he exclaimed sarcastically, and after a short pause, he continued, "Listen, everybody has their own truth. Maybe others don't understand or don't believe it, but the truth is there is no love in marriage. Love expires in relationships, I mean in all relationships, you understand, and a modern marriage is no more than a symbolic gesture."

"Obviously, too many people don't understand the sacrament of Marriage," I said. "The union of marriage is seen as fulfilling the human need for companionship, as stated in the Bible, where two people come together to co-create and reflect the image of God."

"Exactly," he agreed. "Companionship in marriage, as I see it, is entirely distinct from love."

"Look, companionship in marriage is more than just romantic love. It goes beyond the fleeting feelings of love. Many of us even believe that marriage does not necessarily require love."

"What do you mean?" he asked, brows pulling together.

"You don't need to be married to love, but I think everyone must decide what makes them fall in love and why they marry. Love and marriage are completely different stuff, buddy. For me, without love, there is no marriage." I said with conviction and hastened to add. "If you love someone, you don't need to marry them."

“Marriage is a religious institution, rooted in faith for those who trust in God”. He said firmly.

“And for those who believe that ‘God is dead, everything is permitted.” I retorted, reflecting on the sad reality of high divorce rates as evidenced by Dostoevsky’s words.

The beauty of life is that love begets love; it magnetizes and always returns to us, no matter what form. If you live without love, then it’s not truly a life at all. “Love is life. Everything that I understand, I understand only because I love. Everything is, everything exists, only because I love.” I continued, quoting Tolstoy, then added triumphantly, “Aren’t those inspiring and brilliant words to live by?”

“Only Tolstoy could express it that way,” my friend acknowledged, then sighed. “People have always known love—real, rare love characterized by pure intimacy that transcends physical attraction and connects two souls in an innocent, profound way. See, over time, the nature of love has evolved, and I believe that maintaining love relationships today is more challenging than it was in Tolstoy’s era.”

“Marriage, human love relationships, have always been a challenge, but it’s harder now,” I remarked.

“With such deep connections from the past and being deeply inspired by Tolstoy, why can’t we learn more about relationships? Why does life, with its various twists and turns, make us unhappy even today, in this digital, alienated age?” he pondered.

“Well, in the digital era, buddy, modern technologies and society together shape our understanding of love and relationships. AI can often make you feel primitive, no matter how intelligent you are. In fact, some algorithms are even pickier than girls on dating sites,” I said with a laugh. Then, my expression sobered as I continued, “Erich Fromm succinctly confirmed this idea: ‘There is hardly any activity, any enterprise, which is started with such tremendous hopes and expectations, and yet, which fails so regularly, as love.’”

“Sometimes, I wonder if love belongs to another era,” my friend started, his voice tinged with nostalgia, “A time when

chastity and honor were the utmost virtues for couples to cultivate their grandest visions of love and relationships. Back then, men regarded women as muses, sources of inspiration, but I'm unsure if that's true now. It seems many of us believe genuine love rarely ends up in marriage," he persisted stubbornly, disregarding my earlier remarks.

Reflecting on his disillusionment, I looked at him, puzzled and concerned.

"Don't look at me like that. You never feel that way? Don't you agree?" he asked sharply.

"Agree with what?" I leaned forward, eager to grasp what he said.

"That we are living in a culture that doesn't encourage virtue," he said earnestly.

"Which virtues are you talking about?"

"Virtues that once framed true love and relationships, like chastity and honor," he said seriously and continued, "When someone lacks these, everything in his life becomes self-centered, including his approach to love and marriage. You get what I mean?"

"Yes, I do," I nodded.

"It's so sad to witness that society today emphasizes individualism too much, weakening marriage," he stated bluntly.

"I understand you, yet my view on the endurance of love and marriage, even amid shifting and twisting societal norms and values, remains unchanged," I responded firmly. "Fortunately, many, including myself, still believe love can last longer than a lifetime. I think some people are just afraid or suspicious of love—indeed, it happens—but they aren't in the majority."

My friend shook his head. "No, you'd be surprised. Loveless, sexless marriages are more common than you think," he declared firmly. "They're widespread, yet remain hidden behind closed doors, usually unnoticed, unless they involve the extraordinary lives of Manhattan's elite, taken up by those creating the narrative at The New York Times, who have the

power to shake up people's imaginations."

"Marriages without love and intimacy are probably the most painful experiences one can endure," I agreed.

"Peoples trapped in such relationships often struggle in silence, hopelessly," he said with a low voice and added, "yet don't dare to leave."

"Why do they tolerate it?"

"Because leaving would make them look bad; we're always concerned about what others think of us in relationships, in society, and even on social media, whether it's through one account or across multiple platforms."

"You've never been so judgmental and sarcastic, my friend," I said, taken aback. "I'm sorry to see you feeling this way. These hurt feelings can affect those around you and make everything worse."

He bristled. "I'm not being judgmental; I don't judge," he insisted.

"But you do. You harbor all kinds of judgments and resentments. What you have is unrecognized resentment," I explained.

"Unspoken resentment, you mean?"

"If you prefer, call it unresolved anger," I suggested.

"Resentment," he repeated, still confused.

"Yes, because you believe you've been wronged."

He looked surprised at me and repeated, with less indignation, "I am not judgmental. Just because I clearly and respectfully speak the truth about what I feel and know concerning love, marriages, and all types of relationships nowadays, it doesn't mean I'm judgmental."

He paused for a moment. A shadow of despair crossed his handsome, intelligent face before he spoke again, "Can I tell you something?"

"Sure." I assured him.

He glanced away, shame mingling with reluctance, before whispering, "I got divorced," the word 'divorced' barely audible.

"I think you might have already guessed that," he said,

looking into my eyes and sitting back, his shoulders slumping.

“Yes, I did,” I nodded, feeling a wave of sadness wash over me. Trying to understand, I asked him, “How come you never told me until now?” He didn’t reply. The silence lingered until I finally said, “It will be good to start now, buddy.”

Gazing into his empty cup, he said somberly, “I lost everything—my dreams, my money, my home—all because the woman I loved and trusted most took everything after the divorce.”

“Come on, man!” I exclaimed, bursting with disbelief. “You don’t mean that, do you? “I asked clearly troubled.

“I have no reason to lie.”

“Why didn’t you get a prenup?” I exclaimed, still struggling to believe his devastating words.

“Why should I?” he replied, resigned. “No man in my family ever did, not my father or grandfather.”

“But times have changed, and so have marriages, man, and you know that.” I argued.

“A prenup is a statement of mistrust.” He insisted.

“A prenup is simply a recognition of our current realities, buddy.”

“I guess I never saw it like that. I was raised to believe in marriage as a lifelong commitment, unconditionally.” My friend sighed.

“Having a prenup doesn’t negate that commitment, man. I reassured him. “It’s like insurance for your house. You don’t expect it to burn down, but you’re prepared in case it does.”

He nodded, his expression thoughtful and unchanged.

“I don’t understand it,” he said, shaking his head sadly, “I believed we’d always be together.”

After a heavy, heart-wrenching confession, a long, uncomfortable silence settled between us. Each of us was lost in his thoughts, weighed down by the conversation, staring at the dregs of our cold coffee. The buzz of the cafe around us—other guests chatting, the clink of spoons against mugs—all seemed distant, as if we were enclosed in a bubble of our shared distress. Taking a deep breath, as if gathering the

strength to continue, he suddenly asked, “Do you think love is material?” His voice was low, almost hesitant.

“No, love isn’t material!”

“I believe it is. These days, it seems people love things more than they love other people.”

“Money can buy things, even people, but not love,” I assured him.

“You know, I had the most sincere and noble intentions for my marriage. I loved her madly and unconditionally; that’s why I invested so much in our relationship. I did everything possible to make her feel comfortable, safe, heard, and happy. I worked hard for that, always honest with myself about my priorities. I was obsessed, never feeling free, but it was never enough for her. I never received anything in return, not once. Everything was taken for granted, including me. And guess what? She never admitted or even realized that she took me for granted,” he spoke, ashamed of himself. “I believe,” he continued, “there are many reasons for divorce, from the most serious to the most trivial, or even bizarre, but nothing is as painful as when love is taken for granted,” he said, his breath heavy as he paused for a moment before continuing. “You can’t understand how painful that feeling of being taken for granted is.

“Feeling that your love is taken for granted, not appreciated as you would like it to be, is deeply painful. I wholeheartedly feel you, my friend. There is no shame in loving or in losing. It’s not shameful to feel hurt or disappointed; it’s a real pain, brother, and I understand your emotions.”

“I’ve often asked myself since, “how come I didn’t see it?” I should have felt it,” he expressed with frustration.

“People usually feel they’re in control of their lives, I said and added, “But in love, our beliefs can easily change. When we fall for someone, we can’t control our emotions.”

“You know why?” I asked my friend and continued, “Because true love is like a kind of madness takes over. The deeper we love, the more we lose control.”

He nodded and said, “Yes, I believe that’s exactly what happened with me. This is the cost when a man loves unconditionally,” he replied, expressing disappointment and resentment.

“I understand you, but it seems to me it wasn’t unconditional, my friend,” I said, hesitating slightly. “Consider all your investments; you had expectations for what you did.”

“Investments?” he exclaimed baffled. “Oh, man! You call that an investment?” he repeated, clearly frustrated, adding, “I invest in Wall Street, why you....”

“Why not?” I interrupted. “There’s nothing wrong with making a financial investment in a woman. After all, a wise and faithful woman plays an unparalleled role in a man’s life. She is a driving force, a pure inspiration to every man who can handle her, desires to have her. Such a woman, bro, can bring out the very best in a man, supporting and inspiring him even to ascend to thrones and presidential cabinets.” I paused, leaning in closer. “But, buddy, remember that, hell opens up for a guy when he invests in the wrong one.”

My words hung in the air for a moment, both as a warning and a reflection of past pains. His expression darkened as he confessed surprisingly calmly, “I poured my soul into this relationship, and still, I can’t understand why I couldn’t find happiness. What do you mean by ‘expectation’?” He asked, his voice tinged with bewilderment and deep contemplation. “What could I have expected?”

“Marriage comes with a bunch of expectations, buddy. Everybody knows that; I didn’t reveal anything new. That’s just the way it is. Most of us don’t realize it when we’re doing that, but it’s all about expectations, bro.”

“I’ve always believed that a man’s true worth is shown by how much he values the strength of the woman he loves and accepts love in all its forms without expecting anything in return.”

“The love you feel is beautiful enough, and it’s not wasted. Love is a powerful and enriching experience, regardless of the outcome. It’s about your ability for empathy, compassion, and

having a big heart. Embracing the love you feel, even if it's not reciprocated, will lead only to deeper self-understanding."

"Without open communication and honest talks about our needs, setting clear expectations is useless. I just gave her unconditional support and made sacrifices."

"That's admirable." I exclaimed, adding, "try to think differently. You sacrificed a lot for her and see that your sacrifice was anything but a loving gift for her."

"Gift," he nodded sarcastically in agreement and said in a toneless voice, "Sometimes, seeing our actions in a different light can bring clarity and peace."

"You see, there is a saying," I noticed and continued, "when we stop pressing others with our expectations, we create an opening for them to spontaneously respond positively to us."

"Come on, man!" he burst out. "I don't press anyone with my expectations."

"You might not, but that's just how things are," I responded, hoping to convey understanding.

"Everybody drives me nuts talking about expectations, we are so fixed on what we want to get from other people", he said visibly irritated and said firmly, "Listen, I never had any expectations of her. That's the one damned word on people's tongues that I can't stand."

The anger in his voice made me uneasy and prompted people around us to start looking our way.

"What do you mean by 'everybody'?" I asked.

"I mean all those therapists, experts, the gurus who have written volumes about relationships and love stories. I mentioned them at the start of our conversation."

"It depends on the experts. We can't control others and don't always arrive at the same conclusions as they do," I responded.

"In that relationship, I believe I lost myself. My priority became her happiness, neglecting my own well-being. Think about! I'm building a life for both of us,' but I never felt confident or comfortable because she never opens up to me." He paused briefly, sighing heavily.

“If she truly loved me, she’d inspire and support my dreams. But no, she lacks the instinct to anticipate my needs as her husband.” He concluded with genuine anguish, adding, “A man, when he gets married, needs to know that he is important. A man yearns for a woman’s love and attention. Her vanity-filled life, with its tedious high-society events— as she called them— and empty-minded, superficial girlfriends truly tires me.”

After a heavy silence, my friend spoke up with regret, “I thought she was smart enough to say, ‘I’m not sure that I need man at all. I should listen to my mom telling me, you don’t need a man.’”

“Really” I exclaimed with disbelief. “That’s the worst thing someone can tell a young woman, man. I wish people could realize that.”

“I believe she was more influenced by her shallow divorced friends, whom she admired at those vanity parties, than by her chaotic mother, whom she never liked,” he said with a sense of despair before adding, “You know what I am trying to say.”

“I do, my friend.” I responded. There is a lot of disillusionment and misunderstanding within relationships and society these days, and they can destroy you if you dwell on them or believe in them.”

“And you told me that you understand me, but you don’t,” he said, frustrated, before falling silent.

I paused, deeply moved by his strength and honesty, reflecting his true decency. Despite personal struggles and little emotional support, he dealt with rumors of his marriage ending as a wealthy man in Manhattan’s high society. In a place where reputation means everything, he stayed kind, not bitter. His strength and positive public image in Manhattan were remarkable, yet he felt lost. Loneliness and isolation made him more frustrated than angry.

“It’s hard when you give everything and don’t feel appreciated. Forget expectations and focus on yourself now. If things don’t work out, other opportunities are waiting. Tough times don’t last, and I’ll be here to support you. You’ll get

through this,” I said, offering reassurance.

“Choose freedom,” I emphasized. “True joy is feeling free. For me, freedom means living without expecting anything back from those I’ve been kind and generous to, including everyone I care about, in any relationship, be it friendship or love.”

“I am free,” he responded in a dull, indifferent voice.

“When we let go of expectations,” I continued, questioning his sense of freedom, “we find peace. It comes from feeling light. Don’t weigh yourself down. Life feels heavy unless you detach from these burdens, you understand?”

“I do, but obviously you didn’t,” He explained, glowering at me. “Listen, I accepted that she saw our marriage differently. I’ve always held conservative family values, while she had liberal views on marriage.”

“Who did you marry? Anyone I know?”

“No, you don’t.”

“Where did you meet her?”

“During my trip to London, on the airplane.”

“Thus,” I said with a smile, trying to alleviate tension, “marriages are made in Heaven.”

“And celebrated on earth.” He murmured.

“Why did you marry her if you didn’t share values?”

“It’s certainly too late for that now,” he responded as frustration momentarily crossed his face. Then, he added, “I can’t explain everything. Our marriage was unequal from the beginning—not a sudden change but a constant mismatch.” He paused thoughtfully before continuing, “The confusion originally arose from how we saw our needs and feelings differently. I only realized the extent of this imbalance later.”

I hesitated. “What do you mean by the imbalance?”

“While I yearned for emotional closeness, she craved financial intimacy.” Continuing, he reflected, “In every marriage, there is a longing for deep emotional connection and friendship, isn’t there.”

“It is not a lack of love but a lack of friendship that makes for an unhappy marriage,” I remarked, recalling Nietzsche’s

poignant observation, and continued, “You see, buddy, we often make choices of partners entering into unequal relationships without even realizing the reasons for the inequality, and these choices often result in unhappiness.”

“Perhaps that,” he replied with a hint of resignation, “is that we were different.” He glanced away.

“Differences can bring excitement to a relationship. What one lacks, the other may excel in,” I suggested.

“That wasn’t the case with us. We didn’t complement each other’s qualities,” he admitted.

“Then there could still be other reasons.”

“She became completely different from the way she had been before. Everything changes for the worse after the marriage,” he stated.

“People do change after marriage. It’s selfish but painfully obvious,” I remarked.

“The good-hearted marry selfish women. Money spoiled her,” he concluded.

“More marriages fail over money issues than sexual ones. Even great wealth can lead to unhappiness and separation.”

“The knife and the wound both need each other,” my friend poignantly quoted Sheldon Kopp and continued.

“See, when a man loves a woman, he respects her differences and beliefs, giving her personal space when needed. Yet, my efforts weren’t appreciated or valued. Nothing turned out as I had expected. I always felt disappointed,” he expressed with a puzzled look.

“Again, with the expectations!” I exclaimed with amazement.

“Let’s not talk about expectations,” he said in a conciliatory voice, but it was too late to stop me despite his gentle warning.

“Sometimes we create our own heartbreaks through expectation, my friend,” I remarked. “Expectations often limit our happiness in relationships and, even worse, simply ruin families. Remember, we receive what we desire when we let go of it.”

“We were on the brink of divorce many times, but I sought numerous ways to fix it. I was grateful for that, but...” he trailed

off, lost in thought for a moment. “I don’t know why. It’s hard to explain, but the thought of divorce was extremely frightening to me.

“And for all good reason!”

“I always felt fear in our relationship, which only led to more frustration. The overwhelming terror that it might not be right for me, and the fear of divorce, was constant,” he confessed, adding, “I was afraid of losing her.”

“You’re not alone. Many men fear abandonment and divorce for understandable reasons. Divorce can be expensive and devastating,” I said, empathizing with his concerns.

“I never had a thought about divorce.” He sighed deeply.

“No one enters marriage expecting to get divorced. But men should remember that *if* a woman seeks a divorce, it comes at a high cost.”

My friend stayed quiet, putting his hands on the table and aimlessly spinning an empty cup while wrestling with his inner turmoil. Feeling his pain, I hesitated before speaking.

“Listen, it’s not a tragedy, buddy, believe me,” I said and kept speaking with encouragement. “You can recreate anything with your talent, expertise, and energy. You’re smart. You never lose. Making yourself attractive to women has never been an issue. And you never compromise your standards.”

“No, you don’t understand!” he repeated, turning toward the window and falling into silence. From his indignant profile, I could tell he was upset with me.

“I think you’re harboring a grudge against her for that divorce,” I remarked.

“No! I’m not,” he countered.

“You know, once the turbulence settles down, you’ll find peace in your heart.”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

“Who knows, you might even remarry one day.”

“Hell, no!” He exclaimed with an irrefutable voice.

“Why not? Do you know a man’s emotions can swing wildly, from love to hate, and vice versa after experiencing a

divorce.”

“I don’t hate her.”

“It’s possible for some people to remain best friends with their ex-spouse.”

“After a painful divorce?” My friend exclaimed in disbelief, leaning forward.

“Even after a painful divorce,” I affirmed. “I know, it sounds crazy to say this, and I understand if you don’t believe it. Continuing with a friendship with your ex requires a high level of mutual respect.”

“Respect,” he echoed with a grin, his voice resembling an echo. He was obviously contemplating my words deeply as he remained quiet.

“Above all, brother, even a painful divorce should not deter a man who is embracing the true nature of masculinity and is truly committed to fulfilling his purpose.”

CHAPTER TWO

LONELINESS

“Loneliness is and always has been the central and inevitable experience of every man.”

– Thomas Wolfe

I often think,” he spoke carefully after a thoughtful pause, “I simply rushed into my marriage. What do you think?”

“Well, I think Tolstoy could offer you the best advice: ‘Don’t marry until you can tell yourself that you’ve done all you could, and until you’ve stopped loving the woman you’ve chosen until you see her clearly. Otherwise, you’ll be cruelly and irrevocably mistaken. Marry when you’re old and good for nothing,’” I said.

He grinned. “I had this exact conversation with a divorced friend recently. He said the same. Do you think men will ever learn from that?”

“It’s not just men,” I offered, “women also have much to learn about the sacred union. Have you heard the saying? ‘No man or woman really knows what perfect love is until they have been married a quarter of a century.’”

“Yeah, only you can decide when the time is right. Do you believe there’s a ‘right’ age?” he asked thoughtfully.

“See, buddy, when it comes to marriage, it’s not about finding someone at the right age—it’s about finding someone with the right maturity. Someone who matches your soul, not just your life plan, not even when your family, or your best friend says you should or when the timing of the commitment seems right. That’s what most people do nowadays, right? A real man should be true to himself, standing firm in his values. That’s a profound way to look at it, bro. It’s about the depth of the connection. Maturity has nothing to do with age, really. It

doesn't just come with time; it can be reached at any stage of life and be considered the right time," I replied.

"I believe that a mature woman is someone who has standards, someone who genuine grows into her authentic self.

"Exactly! In addition, she never compromises her standards, especially not for people or materialistic things. She values her principles highly, staying true to herself despite the temptations around her. A mature woman isn't swayed by fleeting attractions or superficial interactions. She doesn't need validation from anyone, least of all from her silly, superficial divorced friends at vanity parties or chaotic mother. Her strength lies in her integrity and the calm confidence she carries."

He listened in silence, reflecting deep respect and understanding across the café table without saying a word.

"A truly good wife is a selfless soul blessed with all the gifts of God," I spoke again with passion. "She is the most precious treasure a man can find. Believe it or not, there are many wonderful women out there. The allure of these women lies in knowing their value and what they truly want out of life. It's what makes a mature woman truly irresistible."

"I don't need any other woman," he said gruffly.

"How could anyone not desire such a woman? Don't ever be lonely. Every man, deep down, wants to be in a committed, genuine relationship with the right woman. Nobody should live and die lonely, brother, remember that. "When a man dies unloved, his life must be a failure to him, and his dying a cold horror," I reminded him of the harsh reality told by Steinbeck, and continued earnestly, "Listen, a mature, loyal woman is indeed a gift to a heterosexual man. In every man's heart lies the desire to create a sanctuary of love and belonging. You know that. He yearns for a family and for that dream woman." I concluded.

"A dream woman is someone who loves him with the openness of a child," he said thoughtfully.

"I've always believed that we all possess pure love, but

many of us are hesitant to embrace it. Only the most courageous of men, those who embody true masculinity, cherish the person we truly love,” I said fervently, pausing for a moment to gather my thoughts. “True masculinity involves the bravery to embrace and uphold love, despite fears or societal expectations. I said and added with a smile, “I call that a dance between vulnerability and strength.”

“When a man is secure in his masculinity, he has the power to love. Men always struggle with vulnerability and strength,” my friend said, leaning in closer. “It’s a constant battle, really. To be strong, yet open enough to show our true selves.”

“Who said that balance is easy? But it’s what makes us grow as men, brother. It’s about discovering our inner strength and courage,” I stated firmly, locking eyes with him.

“You know, I keep hearing people say that men have lost their humility,” my friend remarked, shaking his head as he sipped his coffee and continued. “But that’s just a misconception. How can a man be humble if he’s insecure about his masculinity? True strength comes from knowing your own power, not from denying it, right?”

“Denying your masculinity brings resentment into a man’s heart, harboring a deep sense of frustration and the pain of loneliness,” I continued, gazing intently at my friend. “When we’re not true to ourselves, it eats away at our hearts, diminishing our vitality and our value as men, brother,” I stated firmly.

“I think, sometimes, our wounds run so deep that we begin to doubt our worth.”

“I can tell you more, bro,” I exclaimed excitedly. “This doubt stops us from accepting someone who genuinely sees our worth and believes we are ‘good enough.’ And the more we convince ourselves of our unworthiness, the deeper this belief embeds itself in our beings,” I explained.

My friend listened to me intently without saying a word.

“You see, buddy, allowing resentment toward your ex, or her lack of appreciation for your admiration and love to linger for years, will not only leave you with feelings of sorrow,

uncertainty, and guilt but also hinder you to recognize and experience genuine love and value from other women.”

“Women struggle to understand men in relationships,” he remarked, shaking his head.

“It’s common for people to view themselves and others as complicated or imperfect, especially after a divorce.” I said. “Do you know why? It’s a way for us to try embrace the unbearable pain of loneliness that divorce brings.”

“They say that relationships serve as a great mirror,” he said.

“Not just relationships, but our entire life, and people mirror back to us that we have failed to recognize within ourselves—mostly our beliefs.”

“Women don’t understand men in relationships, and finding their perspective challenging,” he repeated and continued, visibly frustrated.

“Men experience suffering differently. Women can never fully comprehend that.”

“Do you believe men suffer more? They don’t, bro. Their suffering is on par with everyone else’s. Men are equally emotional as women. We aren’t inherently different,” I added.

“How is that?” he asked, “No two men think the same way, and no one goes through the same suffering as others. We all have different ways of coping with hardship and pain.”

“It’s common these days to hear failed couples blaming their issues on choosing the wrong partner, attempting to assign blame to the other party, without realizing that it only sustains and prolongs their pain.”

“We often feel embarrassed, and it’s painful to admit to ourselves or even tell a close friend that we have been abandoned in our relationship. We tend to be ashamed of that.”

“Until we fully acknowledge that our choices create our pain, we will always live with sorrow and shame. Sadly, many men think the same way, worrying about what happened in the past.

There is a lifelong belief from Tolstoy about that, you should hear: ‘Remember, there is only one time that is

important-- Now! It is the most important time because it is the only time we have any power,” I stated, hastening to add, “Only by accepting this now can a man truly realize his strength and the limitless depth of his masculine nature.”

“There is no question that much unhappiness has come to those obsessed with living in the past,” he agreed. “This is painful, but even more poignant is the fact that we all know what it feels like to be unloved. Yes, this is perhaps the worst thing that can happen to a human being and the hardest to accept. Among all other desires, there is an intense one: to be loved. “Seize the moments of happiness, love, and be loved! That is the only reality in the world, all else is folly,” said Tolstoy.

“Certainly,” I exclaimed. “Try to simplify your life, acknowledging not only the power of now but experiencing the power of true love and compassion. Remember, buddy, life is too short for a bad relationship! Spend your life with only the person you absolutely love. This is all a man needs.”

“You know well what men really need in a relationship” my friend said earnestly and continued, “what a man expects from his woman, what made a man feel loved.”

“Respect,” I stated firmly.

“Exactly!” He affirmed with fervor. “There is nothing a man values so highly as respect. Men feel loved when they are respected! Yes, love can fade and perish without it. What’s keeps couples together isn’t love—it’s respect.”He confirmed and continued passionately: “Nothing ignites a sense of worthiness and honor within a man like feeling respected.”

“Respect is everything for a man; it’s like oxygen, validating his identity and inherent dignity, affirming his place in the world,” I said, concluding with a sense of conviction. “Respect is the true foundation for admiration and intimacy. If a man finds a woman’s behavior disrespectful, he should not live in illusion or cling to silly hopes, waiting for these unspoken feelings to change. He should be the first to leave and never look back.”

“For a woman to truly love a man, she must respect him

and see his true worth. To him, respect is not merely a courtesy—it's the very essence of his being.”

“And women need to be seen and respected,” I said. “All humans need to feel respected and valued in all relationships, in all aspects of life.”

“Certainly, but here I am talking about romantic relationships. There is nothing that enriches relationships as much as unconditional respect,” said my friend, emphasizing the word “unconditional.”

He fell silent for a moment and, as if remembering something, spoke to me again with a smile, “See, there is a common saying that only women and dogs are loved unconditionally. A man is only loved under the condition that he provides something,” he said. “The more you can provide, like money, status, a well-trained body, an attractive personal appearance, the more you are valued, loved, and respected.”

“It's never been easy for a man to keep up with society's needs and women's desires. Respect is earned. Without respect, you can't maintain the relationship, bro.” I offered.

“While a man earns this conditional respect and dignified treatment from society, he realizes that women are not interested in men as loving human beings, but rather, they're interested only in what they can get from the men.”

I attempted to interrupt him, but he raised his hand as a signal to halt and asked me, “What do you think is the opposite of a lack of respect in a relationship—contempt?”

“Not really,” I replied, “Even though many of us are convinced that disregarding your partner's feelings is contempt. For me, I think it's simply disrespectful. Without respect, my friend, not only do relationships suffer, but societies also face conflict and chaos,” I said, looking at him with an expectant gaze.

“Respect is probably the only emotion that strong relationships are based on,” he agreed, pouring more coffee.

“Enduring disrespect silently in a relationship not only leads to loneliness and isolation but the more you tolerate it, the more it messes up your psyche, buddy,” I said seriously.

Locking eyes with him, I added, “Disrespect kills your confidence, man!”

He nodded slowly. “You are absolutely right.”

“The more a man feels undervalued, the deeper his loneliness becomes, bro,” I explained with earnestness and a hint of sorrow. “Respect always fosters a sense of belonging and connection. When respect is gone, a man’s world collapses, plunging him into deep loneliness.”

My friend remained silent, intently locking eyes with me.

“You see,” I continued fervently, “there are many ways we can witness and experience disrespect in our lives. Sometimes, it is done to us unconsciously, unlike the highest form of disrespect, which is always deliberate.”

“I’m not following. What do you mean?” he asked, quieter now and with a curious tone.

“Cheating on someone is perhaps the most painful and humiliating betrayal one person can inflict upon another, especially within the confines of an intimate relationship. Once trust is broken, it becomes exceedingly difficult to repair, sometimes impossible. Respect, once lost, gives way to contempt, festering within the wounded heart.”

“Familiarity breeds contempt,” he quoted, looking at me expectantly. “Every action, every word, every encounter has its reasons,” he continued. “Some say this applies especially to women, while others believe it’s true for both genders. Betrayal’s pain knows no bounds; it affects both men and women. But when a woman is betrayed, the damage often goes beyond emotional hurt, shattering the intimacy that once bound her to her partner. The Scriptures warn, ‘You must never let familiarity breed contempt.’ Yet, how many of us truly follow this wisdom?” The answer seemed all too clear.

“Exactly!” I exclaimed. “You can’t imagine how many relationships lack respect these days. Many believe a man’s respect for his woman diminishes if she takes him back after cheating. Meanwhile, a woman often thinks giving him another chance is for the sake of the family and children, not realizing that cheating is never ‘for the kids.’ Worse, children

who grow up in such families are more likely to be unfaithful themselves.”

“Life isn’t easy, buddy, and the truth is often complicated,” I agreed. “Family can be like a dark forest. Many believe that true love means forgiving and accepting cheating but forgiving a cheater is hard and painful. I don’t judge anyone,” I said and fell silent.

“Do you think a man can truly love a woman and still easily cheat on her?” he asked.

“It might sound absurd,” I said with a heavy sigh, “but cheating doesn’t erase your feelings for someone you love. Even when hope for the relationship is lost, love can still be there. Trust is a pattern, my friend. When you marry someone, you marry their patterns. If someone cheats once, they’re likely to do it again. It’s hard for people to resist their habits,” I concluded. Then, I added, “Nobody ever does anything just once.”

“Then why do so many people stay in a marriage after being cheated on? Is it fear of loneliness or something else?”

“I believe so,” I replied gently.

“Everybody is lonely,” he remarked sadly, his shoulders slumping.

“Not everybody, brother, but many,” I noticed carefully.

For a moment, his eyes scanned the coffee shop customers, and then he turned to me abruptly.

“Do you think these people are here,” he asked, gesturing to the crowded café, “for the cozy atmosphere, the taste of the coffee, the beautiful servers, or the ‘Petite Fleur’? No, my friend,” he answered, shaking his head.

“They’re here because of loneliness, seeking human connection, even if it’s just a fleeting interaction. I understand them perfectly. I remember the first few weeks after my divorce, suddenly finding myself alone and grappling with the shock of separation. I forced myself to get dressed and come here.” He paused before continuing, “The overwhelming changes to my daily life left me feeling deeply depressed and emotionally drained.”

“Navigating the depths of loneliness after a divorce is undeniably painful,” I said with empathy. “It’s not that simple, brother. Being alone and feeling lonely are not the same. You can be surrounded by people and still feel lonely. The presence or absence of others doesn’t change that feeling.”

He seemed to dismiss my words and continued, “It’s astonishing how lonely people are these days and the toll it takes on their minds and hearts. There’s a wave of loneliness, and you’re part of it. You’re deeply alone, and that’s the truth. Accept your solitude and embrace life as a lone wolf.”

“Loneliness is definitely sweeping over many like a snowfall.” I agreed somberly.

“And guess who suffers the most? Men!” he exclaimed in frustration. “Of all people, men are the loneliest. Do you understand?” he growled before quieting down, his tone turning somber. “Being a man is the loneliest experience on the planet!” he exclaimed desperately, adding, “Only God knows how much men are suffering. Why do so many men feel this way? Loneliness hurts,” he said with a voice full of sadness, reflecting the deep emotional toll that loneliness inflicts.

“I empathize with you, brother,” I said firmly.

“I see you’re surprised,” he said, locking eyes with me and tilting his head. “I know what you’re thinking,” he added. Without waiting for a response, he continued, “You want me to admit that I’m exaggerating again.”

“No, buddy, you aren’t,” I replied earnestly. “But social media does. It can make you feel lonelier than anything else. People turn to social media when they feel lonely, insecure, and unfulfilled, seeking meaningful connections. Unconsciously, they don’t realize that their loneliness and insecurity only deepen with each interaction.”

“Busy, successful people work sixty to eighty hours per week, “my friend said, “It’s too little time to cultivate relationships outside social media.”

“I believe this is the typical workweek on Wall Street, right?”

“Yeah, sometimes it can be up to one hundred plus hours,” he said.

“How badly a man must feel to work one hundred hours, keeping him away from home?” I asked, saddened.

“Don’t ask me,” he said with a small shrug. “It’s not just about those of us who are divorced or single; the less that family life is working out, the more married guys tend to stay at work more.”

My friend leaned toward me, his voice filled with resignation and candidness. “Working on Wall Street is like navigating a maze—not just any maze. Every turn, every corner demands that you mask up, suit up, button up.”

He chuckled dryly, shaking his head. “It’s this ‘buttoned-up culture’—ever heard of it? Everything is buttoned up tight, emotions most of all. You’re not just following stiff protocols; you’re maintaining an unbreakable facade, even when you’re breaking inside. And the more badly you feel fucked up, the more vigorously, with a clanging voice, you declare, “I’m fine!” He said sarcastically and laughed.

“Showing vulnerability is considered a weakness for men everywhere, buddy, not only in the powerful world of finance,” I stated.

“There’s no question about it,” he responded, “But it goes deeper. On Wall Street, it’s seen as a double frailty. We feel compelled to appear unbreakable.”

My friend fell silent, his gaze fixed on the steaming cup between his hands.

“It should be disheartening,” I noted with frustration.

He nodded and took a sip of his coffee, his eyes narrowing. “Keeping up appearances, suppressing what you really feel—it’s the unspoken rule. Show weakness, and you’re like chum in shark-infested waters.”

He took another sip, his expression hardening.

“It’s draining, honestly, the relentless pressure. There’s no room for the real you—for openness or authenticity. You either conform or you don’t fit. This kills any chance for genuine connections, empathy. Everything ends up feeling... I don’t know, manufactured?”

His words lingered, a poignant echo in the lively hum of

the crowded cafe. He was more than sharing experiences; he was revealing the layers of a world where toughness often masks vulnerability, where genuine connections are all too scarce.

“It’s disheartening,” he concluded, “but that’s Wall Street for you. All glitz on the surface, a grind underneath.”

“The more we suppress our true feelings, our personal struggles, to meet external expectations, the more we disconnect from our emotions. This inability to be vulnerable and show our true selves means relationships remain superficial. This enhances feelings of isolation and loneliness—all to project a composed, controlled image.”

“You haven’t been on Wall Street long enough to know about it,” I pointed out.

“It’s not hard; you don’t need to be there long,” he replied subdued. “Once you become one of them, you find out faster.”

“The same loneliness awaits you at home after work,” he said with despair. “We work long hours to numb the feelings of loneliness, only to discover that the walls of our own homes have turned into cages,” he concluded, his eyes cast downward in sadness.

I paused, sensing the depth of his distress, before replying thoughtfully, “When a man’s heart is heavy, every shadow seems darker, brother.”

“Slowly, steadily, we men are learning to open our hearts despite the weight we carry,” he responded, with a tone hinting at hard-won wisdom.

“It’s hard to believe this painful truth, but lonely men often compensate for their loneliness by accepting longer working hours,” I affirmed, searching for the words that might bring solace.

“Sometimes lonely men don’t know any better than to extend their hours,” my friend said with a cracked smile. His voice trembled slightly, revealing his vulnerability as he acknowledged the harsh reality.

“Look, the madness is that the passion and the fascination we might usually reserve for personal relationships are now

invested in our work.” I reflected aloud, fully grasping his point.

“By immersing ourselves in work, we cure ourselves of disastrous marriages and painful divorces. Working hard, we are usually too tired to think of anything else at night,” he said, a hint of sadness discernible in his voice. “It’s as simple as that”.

“It’s not simple, but it’s insane.”

“I know. It is not always easy to understand. Loneliness is the greatest pain for a man, surpassing all others. Some of us turn to alcohol, while others resort to drugs.”

“Often without fully understanding the consequences of how dangerously this can lead to addiction, all without finding lasting peace,” I said, saddened.

“You see, loneliness, like any addiction, becomes more ingrained the longer you remain in solitude. I think it goes deeper than that. Eventually, it is no longer something you feel. It’s something you are. It becomes like a habit, you know?”

“Loneliness affects all humans of all ages.”

“The world is in a mess,” he said.

“The world is always in a mess, and you know it,” I said, “Many of us come to terms with loneliness and are lonely all the time, I mean, with or without relationships, so we shouldn’t blame the world being in a mess, and believe it or not, women are lonelier than men.”

“Women maybe cope with loneliness in a different way than men do,” he said and looked penetratingly into my eyes, a gesture he always did when he wanted badly to know my thoughts or opinions to gain a deeper understanding of something.

“Why are Americans so lonely, especially in New York?” he asked, leaning back in his chair and scanning the bustling café. “Does loneliness have a cure?”

“It’s not fair to say America is a lonely place,” I answered, trying to balance his view. “But it’s true that in cities like New York, the pace and the pressures can isolate us, even in crowded rooms. People surround us, yet the connections can

feel superficial.”

My friend didn't say anything in response; he just looked at me with sadness and frustration, then averted his gaze.

“Loneliness is not a cultural thing, buddy. It's everywhere. Alas, it's a universal experience, touching lives in every Western nation, much like the US. It's hard to imagine the profound solitude that countless people suffering from acute loneliness endure around the events; they might even be lonelier, experiencing deeper loneliness than here in America.” I paused, reflecting on the gravity of our conversation, before continuing: “Take my Swedish cultural heritage as an example. Despite its very high standard of living, loneliness is morphing into a public disease. People live longer and longer than ever but are more isolated than ever. Millions live alone, not by choice, and the toll of loneliness on them is severe.

“So, loneliness—or should I say, this public disease—is contagious and, even worse, seems incurable, right?” My friend said, grinning again. “How does loneliness actually spread?”

“Yes, it's contagious, just like fear. “I affirmed and said, “Listen, I have an amazing story to tell you. Please, listen carefully,” I said excitedly, getting ready to share my tale.

“It happened many years ago during the Christmas shopping rush in Stockholm. I was nearing an ICA store, a popular supermarket chain in Sweden when a happy, excited female voice caught my attention. ‘Good folks, buy a hug! Hugs for the lonely! Hugs for everyone and at any price. Don't miss your hug, good folks, hugs for the lonely.’ Driven by curious excitement, I approached the woman.

“‘Please buy a hug for the lonely ones,’ the woman from the Red Cross urged, gesturing towards a sign. Only then did I notice a beautifully designed, large sign beside her, laid out on the freshly fallen snow, displaying the prices in bold. A regular hug was priced at SEK 20, a bear hug at SEK 50, and a teddy bear hug at SEK 100. As I read, I couldn't help but laugh with joy. The concept of monetizing hugs to aid the lonely intrigued

me, prompting me to ask the woman, 'What does all of this mean?'

"'It's a hug party for the lonely,' she explained. 'Different hugs cost different amounts.' Then, with a sudden curiosity, she asked, 'Are you good at hugging?'

"'Yes, that's me,' I replied, my heartbeat quickening with excitement.

"'Can I hug you?' she asked, her smile brightening the chilly air. I happily accepted a hug from the woman. Who could resist such a sweet offer?'

"'I asked her what my hug had to do with helping the lonely people out there, half-guessing it was a fun Christmas gimmick. 'Not at all,' she replied, her voice full of warmth. 'Hugs are meant to reduce loneliness in our kingdom. It's easy and simple, and everyone can spare 20 kronor, no?'

"'Are you the only one selling hugs?' I asked with childlike curiosity as I glanced around.

"'No, my dear. My colleagues are spreading hugs all across the country,' she explained.

"'Are you serious?' I asked in amazement.

"'Yes, I am. There are so many lonely people out there who are craving human touch.'

"'I understand,' I said, then asked her, 'But why right now?'

"'Loneliness never feels as deep as it does at Christmastime. No one deserves to be lonely at Christmas,' she answered with compassion. Her big blue eyes dimmed with sadness for a moment. Then she brightened with a smile, thanked me again for the hug, and asked suddenly, 'Why do you give away a hug?'

"'It's the least you can do, and I hug every day. But today, I'm happy to give away a big hug, a teddy bear hug,' I laughed, feeling as joyful as a child.

"'Thank you, dear,' she said, brushing her straight blond hair from her eyes. Then she asked me thoughtfully, 'Do you have any experience with loneliness?'

"'Yes, of course,' I replied. 'We all feel lonely from time to time.' She smiled, choosing not to probe further into my

personal experiences with loneliness. After a short pause, she added, 'Now you know, dear, we sell hugs for everyone's benefit. You can help by becoming one of our hug sellers.'

"Not today!" I laughed heartily, giving her another big hug along with another 100 SEK, and headed to the ICA in search of my Christmas turkey.

"I couldn't believe what I had seen and heard, how this sweet, kind woman spoke about the mission and how she, alongside the Swedish Red Cross, aimed to shield these beautiful blue-eyed people from loneliness in a country ranked number one for affordability, safety, and overall quality of life."

"Wow, what a story!" my friend exclaimed, leaning forward in excitement. "It seems," he continued, "you really have to feel deep loneliness to fully appreciate such an amazing act of kindness, to genuinely understand someone else's pain, and have a fervent desire to help them in their solitude."

"I agree," I replied. "Tolstoy believed it is rare to truly understand another's pain, whether from loneliness or other hardships, asserting that 'If you feel pain, you're alive; if you feel other people's pain, you're a human being.'"

My friend paused thoughtfully, then remarked, "That's what makes us truly human."

"After all these years," I said, "I can still vividly recall that beautiful woman who reminded me of the Nordic goddess Freja in the heart of Stockholm. She stood there with open arms, brimming with hope and good faith."

"Life is indeed paradoxical, my friend. Hearing your story, I am once again convinced that this growing loneliness, this public disease, as you aptly described it, doesn't solely depend on a country's high standard, the wealth of its people, or of living longer."

The truth is that people don't want to live longer; they want to live happily and create more memories. There is no happiness in loneliness. Happiness thrives in meaningful relationships, and memories are formed through shared experiences with others. Everyone needs a sense of belonging

and connection, my friend.”

“Absolutely!” I agreed quickly. “You really do feel joy more when you have someone to share it, right?” I paused, then added, “I once knew a wealthy, lonely man who found joy in something as simple as setting out two coffee cups each week. When the social worker visited him, he would always prepare the table with his finest porcelain cups. Just imagine! I still remember how deeply moved I was by the story of this lonely man.”

He explained to me how he felt immense guilt and shame about his loneliness. “It made me realize that shame can be even more agonizing than loneliness.”

“That’s a profound reflection on the human condition. It’s truly heart-wrenching! You know, I firmly believe that the worst torture one can inflict on another is solitary confinement.”

A heavy silence hung between us following his prolonged and awkward words. Each of us was lost in our thoughts.

“What is your most cherished memory of a hug?” he finally asked.

“Aww!” I exclaimed, breaking free from my reverie and bursting with excitement. “It has to be that teddy bear hug that day, given for the lonely,” I shared with delight, reliving all the details of that heartwarming embrace.

A wide grin spread across his face as he nodded in understanding. “Your own loneliness, buddy,” I noted, “unlike all the others, arises from your feeling of being misunderstood and your sense of rejection.” I continued vigorously, “Listen, there’s no need to feel lonely. Forget about her, pick up the pieces of your broken heart, rebuild your life, and never think of her again. She, goddamn it, wasn’t your sole connection to humanity! Begin to lead a new life, man! You have me, your biggest fan.” I added with encouragement, pausing before asking, “Do you know how many men don’t have any close friends at all?”

“I know. You’re the friend everyone wishes they had. But for me, loneliness is defined by the absence of close

relationships and a happy family. I can't describe the deep loneliness I've experienced due to that."

"To endure the pain of loneliness has never been easy for anyone, buddy. After a breakup, all a man needs to do is accept loneliness and allow himself to feel his emotions. No one else can do it for you bro; it's a journey you must undertake alone. You see, solitude can sometimes be truly blissful; embrace it and remember that wisdom often emerges from silence. This is the only way to handle loneliness and find inner peace.

"I feel lost," he murmured.

"You always feel lost, brother, right before you find yourself again. The solitary man is not someone who fears loneliness, but someone who contemplates, reflects on, and understands the depth of his true feelings. This serene peace of solitude is about self-awareness, brother, and self-rediscovery." I took a deep breath before continuing. "Don't rush to find someone else to marry. Instead, seek peace, be content with solitude, and remain lonely until you are truly appreciated and someone recognizes your true worth."

"Many of my friends, in their attempt to escape loneliness, change their circumstances by moving to another state, changing jobs, renting a new apartment, traveling aimlessly, or even trying to start dating again. But these efforts only push them further into loneliness."

"Listen, don't do what other guys do! Treat your heartbreak as a valuable experience and release it. Let go, bro, for you alone are enough."

"See, lonely men not only tend to suffer emotionally but their sense of masculinity is also scrutinized. Do you understand what I mean? 'There's a crisis unfolding among men,'" he exclaimed fervently. "Masculinity is in danger. Doesn't it weigh heavily on your heart?"

"It breaks my heart to think of the countless men who carry these burdens silently, unable to find solace or connection in a world that often overlooks their pain," I said and continued, "I believe men are simply expressing masculine qualities in different ways than in the past."

“Do you think women understand or care about how lonely most men feel, especially married men? Do you think women are aware that loneliness affects masculine men the hardest? The manlier a man, the less likely he is to address his loneliness.

“Women feel great loneliness too, brother. While men and women may experience loneliness differently, empathy and understanding bring them together. Listen, buddy,” I continued fervently, “no matter how indifferent the world becomes to men’s strength and loneliness, don’t believe that men are being left behind.” I said firmly, with a steady gaze.

“Masculinity is wonderful, brother, and no man should feel bad for being true to himself,” I continued with conviction. “Real strength is being comfortable with who you are without letting society’s narrow ideas define you. Remember, loneliness doesn’t have to be your destiny; don’t accept it as an inevitable fate.”

“Do you believe it’s easy to change people’s expectations of men or alter societal norms?” he asked.

“It’s never been easy.”

“I feel this ever-changing world expects unrealistic things from men, making them feel worthless and inadequate, complaining constantly that there are no real men left.”

“A lot lies beneath the mask of masculinity,” I exclaimed. Don’t fall short by trying to fit the mold of what others expect from a man. A real man shouldn’t follow the virtues he sees in others because, for many, the most requested virtue is conformity in society.

“Conformity is not a virtue, man, but a compromise of one’s true self, isn’t it? A man must be a nonconformist.”

“True masculinity is about having the courage to choose the right path, even if it’s difficult or unpopular, right? Real strength lies in that.”

“See, the world often demands uniformity from men”

“I believe the real struggle begins when a man is afraid to be different, to challenge the status quo. They act like everyone

else without knowing why or where they're headed. Have you heard the anecdote?"

"About what?" he asked, taken aback by my unexpected question in the midst of our serious talk.

"Well, listen. A man was asked which kind of sex he prefers, single or group. Without thinking, the guy replied, 'Group.' 'Why?' 'It's easier; you can follow the other men and act like them.'"

My friend burst into fits of laughter, "Haha, that's funny, man."

"Yees," I joined in, and the roar around our table grew so loud and intense that it made everyone in the café turn their heads and smile, caught up in our amusement.

Catching his breath, my friend said earnestly, "All sad, uncomfortable truths about life and men have been conveyed in the form of jokes and anecdotes," while looking into my eyes, searching for agreement."

"Some men laugh when they want to cry, or cry when they want to laugh. That's always been the case brother." I agreed, nodding.

An unexplained feeling of guilt, accompanied by unexpected sadness from somewhere, settled between us as our laughter faded, leaving each of us lost in contemplation. My friend first broke the silence, saying, "See, I'm certain that the more a man hides his sadness, neglects empathy, downplays his worth, and disregards his beliefs and traumas, the more inevitably he has fallen into deep loneliness."

"Loneliness emerges when we feel disconnected from others, and it deepens when our relationships lack true depth or break down, brother. Men try to connect with others, but they experience despair and worthlessness when they face rejection. The longer this continues, the more uncontrollable their rage and harm become. Self-harm feels inevitable when there's no escape from the pain of loneliness."

"Most men live lives of quiet desperation, filled with unspoken struggles, and this has always been the case for men."

“I believe our thinking and actions become stiffened, inflexible because of the pain of loneliness. That’s why so many men in society desperately engage in deliberate self-punishment, leading to suicide, driven by their frustration, suppression, and denial of their true selves.”

“One can break free from his inner ache by reconnecting with the suppressed dimensions of his masculine essence.”

“True masculinity involves adaptable thinking. With a deeper self-understanding and trust in our inherent masculine strength, I believe we can more effectively confront life’s challenges, brother.”

“Do you believe we can change our behavior and abandon old social norms?” he asked suspiciously.

“Even the strongest and most independent men experience fears and insecurities, sometimes feeling helpless. A man’s world would not exist without it,” I said firmly, locking eyes with his. “The truth is, these buried parts of his being are eagerly waiting for their moment to shine,” I concluded enthusiastically.

“A man simply can’t endure so many emotional blows while living by the rules society has imposed upon us, especially when you are in the hell of divorce or its aftermath.”

“Divorce always captures the curiosity of those around you,” I said, looking him in the eye. “Stop disclosing your personal life to people and worry about other’s reactions to your divorce, buddy. People believe what they want to believe; everyone knows that. Refrain from baring your soul to those not respecting your heart and feelings.”

He nodded in silent agreement, taking in what I said.

“Listen,” I continued, “you’re smart enough to know that not everyone you trust will be loyal, not everyone you show compassion to will be kind, not everyone you love will stay. There will always be someone who doesn’t care about your feelings or will envy you. And ultimately, your beloved wife chose someone at the Vanity parties in Manhattan or somewhere else, not recognizing your worth.”

I paused, choosing my words carefully to avoid causing

more pain. Taking a deep breath, I added thoughtfully, “That’s life, and as you know, brother, life involves pain.”

“Remember,” I continued firmly, “true masculinity is not only about having your own way of thinking but acting in a way that defines you as a real man. It’s about doing things in a way that sets you apart.” Concluded jag in a calmer voice.

“That’s what makes a man unique,” he replied, nodding thoughtfully.

“Embrace life, embrace your loneliness and masculinity, and never fear it, even though it can be intimidating at times. Never accept ill-treatment from anyone. Understand that life entails pain,” I reminded him firmly again.

“Follow your truth and live by it, brother, despite societal pressures to conform in one way or another. You know you’re staying true to yourself, and you should take pride in how hard you’ve worked for it.” I paused, looking at him with a firm, proud gaze, and continued.

“See, buddy, we often realize a lot about our truth, and the most profound understanding is that a happy life is not built on deception but on honesty.”

He listened to me attentively and then asked thoughtfully, “But how many people do you know who consistently tell the truth and live by it? Everyone seems hypocritical, and you know what the biggest hypocrisy of our times is? Everyone sincerely believes they possess the capacity to comprehend the lives of all humanity and aspire to change the world. Seriously, guys?” A feigned expression of surprise danced across his face, followed by hearty laughter.

“It’s easy and beautiful to say, ‘I understand the lives of all humanity and harbor love for them all,’ yet people struggle to understand even the one they’re married to, the one with whom they share their bed, bread, and life. You might believe you know your spouse and your partner, but you merely think you do. Despite sharing such intimacy, you still haven’t fully grasped her thoughts about you. You trust and love the people closest to you, those you want to be around the most, believing you know them well, but you often don’t know a damn thing

about what they really think about you.

It's frustrating how people can be superficial, claiming to understand humanity while struggling with their own relationships and failing to grasp their partner's true emotions," he concluded irritably.

I felt a bit confused by his statement but I soon realized that his observation about the complexity of human relationships and the uniqueness of everyone's experiences stemmed from his own painful divorce and loneliness.

"You didn't honestly think that, did you?" I asked earnestly.

"Honestly?" he rejoined condescendingly. "Well, perhaps not exactly," he replied vaguely, "but honesty is overrated." He said with conviction, adding, "as well as woman's independence."

I could sense his frustration and disbelief toward others for their duplicity and insincerity in that vagueness.

"See, my friend," I began, "when people claim to understand humanity, they often mirror their own thoughts and feelings onto others. They seek familiarity or try to avoid discomfort. Humans tend to do this because it's deeply rooted in how we see and experience things. We must recognize, buddy, that no two people or families are alike, and no relationship is the same." I concluded carefully.

"Who said that?" he asked defiantly, then added: "Tolstoy?"

I sensed his irony and responded earnestly, "It's not funny, man!"

"I know, sorry!" he replied. "Tolstoy is great."

"Everyone loves Tolstoy," I agreed, reaching across the table for a fist bump.

CHAPTER THREE

HAPPINESS

“Happiness is the absence of pain.”

– Epicurus.

The loud conversation in a foreign language pierced the ambient hum of the café, immediately drawing my attention. Seated at a nearby table, a pair of tourists with cameras slung around their necks were deeply engrossed in a large, colorful map of Manhattan sprawled across their small round table.

As they leaned, tracing routes and landmarks written in vibrant colors, they animatedly circled must-see places and attractions.

Watching their determined efforts to decide—perhaps choosing their next destination or plotting the best route to explore—I noticed animated gestures and sporadic laughter punctuated their discussion, yet it was clearly tinged with confusion.

Their occasional glances around the room betrayed a noticeable awkwardness in engaging with others. Despite their obvious need for help, they hesitated to ask anyone, likely deterred by language barriers and the intimidating task of approaching strangers in such a bustling environment.

At that moment, my friend, who had been quietly observing the same scene, turned to me and said in a thoughtful tone, “You know, I can’t help but think that not long ago, people had a deeper connection to the world and to each other than we do today. They lived richer and more vibrant than today. They seemed happier.”

“We’re not the same anymore. There is no doubt about it. We have changed.”

“What has changed? Why have we become so isolated, avoiding society and each other?” He asked with wonder and concern, his gaze still fixed on the pair at the table.

Reflecting on his words, I said, “I believe that’s where the suffering begins. “See, Carl Jung, if he observed our modern life, might suggest that ‘a society must live in close harmony with its nature to function well.’”

Nodding, my friend remarked, “Having meaningful relationships truly enhances life, making it worth living.”

His words echoed deeply within me. “Indeed, there is little we can do but recognize this profound need within us to connect with others and foster relationships where deep, meaningful bonds can flourish.”

“Above all, we should recognize the power that these connections bring. Yet, paradoxically,” I sighed, frustrated, “we find ourselves doing the very opposite—moving away from our true nature, severing the ties that bind us, and then wondering why we are plagued by loneliness and unhappiness.”

My friend kept quiet, and after a brief pause, he asked me, “Do you know why we suffer?” He continued thoughtfully, “We search for meaning in this insanely competitive world, in life, and often in all the wrong relationships. It all feels incredibly meaningless! The more we compete, the more we suffer, and the further we drift apart.”

“You’re right,” I agreed, nodding. “As long as success and worth are measured by comparing oneself to others, social comparison and the need for validation will inevitably dominate our lives in society.” I paused, then added, “It’s not their choice. People feel pressured to meet external standards rather than pursuing their own goals and happiness.”

“But we know the painful truth: in reality, they struggle to find meaning and justification for their existence without meaningful relationships or contributions to society,” he replied seriously.

“It’s a hard realization about our reality, isn’t it?”

“You see,” my friend said, visibly frustrated, “in this bizarre comparison, people have no self-control. They are constantly

grasping, never knowing when to back off, just like on Wall Street.”

“In today’s hectic world, many overlook the profound joy and enrichment derived from immersing themselves in classic literature.”

“Tolstoy certainly understood the charm of timeless works as a companion when he wrote, ‘A good book is an event in my life.’”

Encouraged by my words, he enthusiastically continued, “Remember our university days. It seemed we had all the answers back then. These classic works delve into life, human experience, morality, and society. They serve as gateways to rediscovering faith and belief, don’t they?” he asked with a voice full of nostalgia.

“Above all, they speak to both the heart and the mind.”

“The classics certainly offer empathy and connection in ways other mediums simply cannot.” After a thoughtful pause, he added, frustrated, “Yet many reject them in favor of self-help books, which often fail to resonate as deeply.”

“Listen, the truth is, we all want to be accepted and loved. We crave attention and empathy from others, but we fear rejection. So, we deceive ourselves into believing we are happy and fulfilled,” I concluded.

“You see, we lose our peace, so we can’t choose either love or loving thoughts. We can’t build happiness on frustration and despair, can we?” he asked.

“Why do you think so?” I replied with a question. “I believe the path to happiness is simple.”

“Really? That’s interesting,” he mused.

“Think like Tolstoy, ‘If you want to be happy, be.’”

“Do you really find it that simple? That’s questionable to me.”

“Not only simple but wise. I totally agree with Tolstoy.”

“If it were so easy, nobody would be unhappy. The entire world has been desperately struggling to find happiness. I can’t figure out how people in the civilized world can be so unhappy.”

“Do you think escaping civilization might help?” I asked

with a smile.

“Maybe fleeing isn’t the answer,” he replied, sounding uncertain, “maybe it’s about finding the right balance in our lives, wherever we are. You see, I’ve always been a believer in balance. Yet, I’m certain we’re right on the edge of losing our balance,” he mused, gazing at me questioningly.

“Oh, man,” I chuckled lightly, eager to lighten the mood. “Understanding the connection between civilization and happiness is an endless subject of philosophical musings and debates. We can’t merely label it as ‘good’ or ‘bad,’” I said and rushed to add, “You might be exaggerating a bit, buddy. Many find joy by simply living their best lives and doing what’s right for them, prioritizing their own happiness, you know?”

“And you?”

“I must put my happiness first, don’t I? It all comes back to the lessons life taught me when I realized that most of my unhappiness resulted from my own choices.”

“Yet, when you really look at what’s going on in our world, you can see clearly—unhappiness, like loneliness, is spreading everywhere,” he said and then asked me, “Why is the world so unhappy? Just thinking about it makes me feel sick.”

“See, people are chasing happiness, as an old song goes; ‘the faster we chase it, the faster it seems to elude us, especially when we’re looking for it in the wrong places.’”

“Happiness originates in the mind, buddy, and you know that. If your thoughts were continually focused on past grievances, you’d remain unhappy. Remembering how your wife was ungrateful and left you, taking everything—that’s tough, no doubt. But that’s just how life affects us,” I began.

Your divorce shouldn’t be the sole determinant of your happiness; *you* should be. In fact, many people have told me that their divorce not only made them happier but, in some cases, even saved their lives.”

“Who says that? Happiness experts?” he asked sarcastically.

I ignored his words and continued, “You can find happiness in just being alive. As Christopher Blue sings, ‘I’m

just happy to be alive.”

“While some may find happiness in being alive, others may struggle, simply enduring a constant battle with their own existence, with a sense of burden or discomfort with being alive.”

“You must find a state of being content enough on your own, buddy.” I began, my tone reflecting years of pondered thoughts.

“Listen, you don’t need to be blissfully happy or have all the answers. I doubt truly happy people ever do. It’s about being sufficiently content, you understand?” I asked and continued excited, “that if you meet someone remarkable, you don’t fear they will take your happiness with them because you possess enough within yourself.”

“What do you mean by ‘happy enough?’” he inquired hesitantly.

“Happy enough, buddy, means that your happiness isn’t contingent on anyone else—not an ex-wife or new love. It’s about having enough happiness on your own that you don’t look to someone else to rescue you from your divorce or any dark place you might find yourself in,” I explained, hoping to make my point clearer.

He looked confused. ‘I’m struggling to follow you,’ he admitted, his expression skeptical.

“Look, I mean that you must stand on your own, brother. Find happiness in your solitude before seeking it in others,” I explained, grounding my words in our shared history and wisdom.

My friend nodded slowly, with a puzzled look on his face. It was obvious that he was deeply reflecting on the implications of my words as I continued to speak.

“The complexity of being is indeed mysterious, buddy. You see,” I said, “unlike others, I’ve lived by this truth, being happy and alive since birth. This wisdom was confirmed last year when I was diagnosed with cancer. Did you know that I’m a cancer survivor?”

He nodded and reached across the table, taking my hands—a gesture filled with deep compassion and love—as he listened

to my story.

“Of course I do! And I know you’ve removed every bit of misery you could from your path and life. You’re an exemplary role model; you fulfilled your responsibilities and duties. And no family or child deserves to be parentless.” As he spoke, he gazed into my eyes, and I could see the sincerity in his expression. Tears welled up in his eyes.

“Everyone has their unique journey, and each journey is enlightening in its own way, my friend,” I told him. “The question is, what do we learn from it? My own journey has taught me so much, especially how to be grateful for all of it.

“So much of our present experiences are influenced by our past,” he said. “We could learn so much from your story.”

“Our past influences the choices we make for ourselves today. Think of the Stock Market, for example,” I said and smiled. “Everybody knows that the Stock Market doesn’t provide lasting happiness. Yet, people continue believing in it and playing a game they’ll never win. Not just the Stock Market, but life in general. There are many things in life that bring us delight, making us believe they bring happiness by providing temporary joy, but we are often unaware that they are short-lived experiences that fade away after a while.”

“So, are you saying it’s impossible to find lasting joy from things outside ourselves?”

“Think about it—how often do we look for happiness in material gains or achievements? Even the saying goes, ‘A rich man is not necessarily happy, and a poor man isn’t necessarily unhappy.’ What’s your take on that?”

He pondered for a moment. “Then who actually is happy?”

“It’s tricky, isn’t it? It’s less about *‘who’* and more about *‘how.’* For instance, did you know a Google search for ‘happiness’ returns almost two billion hits? What does that tell us about our society’s quest for happiness, buddy?”

“Two billion? That’s insane, man! It shows we’re all looking, but not many are finding, huh?” he replied with a smirk and, after a short pause, said, “The happiness paradox, my friend,” he said. “One must imagine Sisyphus happy?” His

sarcastic tone took me aback.

“Have you ever really thought about what Camus was getting at? Imagine being doomed to roll a huge boulder up a hill forever. How could you find happiness in that? Camus believed that even in such a struggle, we can find joy. Maybe there’s a lesson there for us – finding happiness isn’t about escaping struggles but learning to embrace them?”

“Listen, Camus argued that life doesn’t inherently have the meaning we crave. Instead, he suggested finding happiness amidst life’s challenges and appreciating the struggle. Do you think we can apply that in our own lives, or does it sound too abstract?”

“I find life to be meaningless like Camus suggested. Does life even have meaning? Who experiences eternal bliss, who truly finds happiness?”

“Nothing has meaning, but what if we could assign our own meanings? Imagine what that freedom could do for our spirits. Mother Nature is intelligently designed. She functions like a well-crafted clock, which is why everything on Earth has a purpose.

He nodded thoughtfully. “But does anyone ever achieve eternal bliss, or is it just a myth?”

“Great question, man! Eternal bliss sounds more like a spiritual or religious promise, right? It doesn’t exist, buddy; no one experiences it except in Buddhism, which offers eternal bliss in heaven. For most of us, it’s about making choices and finding joy in the everyday.

“There’s a story about Bach that explains this beautifully. Have you heard the story? Despite growing up as an orphan from early childhood, he fathered twenty children over his lifetime and was considered one of the happiest of men.”

“Twenty children? O, man! That sounds overwhelming! How did he manage that?”

“It’s fascinating, isn’t it? His large, happy family gave him a profound sense of meaning and purpose. But more than being surrounded by his family, whom he deeply loved, his passion for music fulfilled him. He poured his happiness and

love into creating incredible musical compositions.”

“When happiness is channeled into passion, it can create something extraordinary.”

“Absolutely. His happiness wasn’t just about the joy from his family; it was about doing what he loved deeply. That’s why his *Toccata and Fugue in D minor* is not just famous but a masterpiece that continues to inspire.

“So, I’ve come to realize that happy men often create masterpieces, not by chance but through passion and enthusiasm. It makes me think – happiness really is about the choices we make. Once you choose what truly matters, your life and happiness seem to align.”

“Something that makes you genuinely happy like that.”

“You know, there have been moments in my life when my perspective on happiness shifted drastically, particularly after my cancer diagnosis,” I shared. “That day, I left behind my old beliefs about happiness and embraced Schopenhauer’s idea that ‘Whenever we’re healthy, everything makes us happy.’ In his view, a healthy beggar will always be happier than a sick king because health so profoundly outweighs all other blessings.”

“Health is indeed the truest form of wealth,” he affirmed instantly. “Without it, even the grandest luxuries can feel empty.”

“The most important thing is to enjoy your life—to be happy. It’s all that matters.’ We’re meant to find happiness,” I concluded.

“The experts often say that ‘we are not designed to be consistently happy, but we are designed to survive and reproduce.’ What do you think about that?” he asked. “They even insist that a good life includes some pain.”

“Listen, why should we follow everyone else’s rules?”

“Absolutely, a man should set his own rules.”

“With two billion definitions of true happiness available, one should choose wisely. The diversity of options seldom leads to conscious decisions. Let those experts with their book knowledge stick to the idea of a painfully good life.

I am deeply convinced that happiness cannot be achieved in sickness, and a painless life is the most magical of all,” I said with a smile. “Epicurus’s view that ‘Painlessness is the greatest possible pleasure’ profoundly resonates with me. His belief that ‘HAPPINESS is just the ABSENCE of PAIN’ should be declared a fundamental truth.

“Every new generation claims, ‘The world is very different now,’ and redefines moral virtues and establishes its own definitions, you know?”

“Exactly, especially when it comes to happiness, we often misunderstand what true joy really means. It’s a paradox that makes happiness seem rare, and thus, it becomes so because we aren’t taught how to attain it,” he noted.

“Sadly, it often takes the threat of death to make us realize and appreciate what happiness is. Much comes from finding contentment with what we have, which is often enough. But I never felt such a profound sense of gratitude and happiness than when doctors declared me safe, “ I shared.

“I’m so sorry for all the pain you’ve endured, brother,” he said, squeezing my hand firmly.

“It’s all behind us now, buddy, thanks to God! But tell me, how can we appreciate happiness without pain and suffering?”

“I guess survival, like any powerful lesson, changes a person’s life. We try to learn from our past unhappiness,” he reflected.

“People’s lives change dramatically when they face survival challenges, painful divorces, regret, or cancer diagnoses. These experiences bring a myriad of emotions and consequences.”

“I believe regret doesn’t solve anything or lead to happiness,” he said. “Change teaches us to appreciate life more and to accept ourselves as we are.”

“I’ve become very aware that life is too short and can be further shortened at a moment’s notice. We are always seeking happiness, striving, waiting, unaware that true happiness is nothing more than enjoying the present. Since that day, I have thought and felt differently. I choose happiness in each moment, aware that happiness is here and now, unlike many

who desperately wait for the future to be happy.

I've learned that our happiness doesn't depend on others. We are responsible for creating happiness, just as we are responsible for our health. If we expect others to make us happy, we'll not only be disappointed but also sometimes never experience happiness at all. Knowing how to be happy without relying on others is the true path to happiness," I concluded.

"I think our idea of happiness has changed over time, hasn't it?" he paused, reflecting on the depth of his words. "And not always for the better. Today, openly expressing happiness is often met with skepticism or disapproval," he concluded sadly.

"Who should approve of your happiness, buddy?" I asked, surprised, adding, "A man cannot be comfortable without his own approval."

"Camus remarked on this phenomenon, likening happiness to a taboo. He said, 'Today, happiness is like a crime—never admit it. Don't say 'I'm happy,' otherwise, you will face condemnation from all around.'"

"Damn it!" he exclaimed, visibly excited after quoting Camus. "Isn't that awfully well said?" My friend's eyes sparkled, and a wide grin spread across his face, eagerly awaiting my response.

"Sadly, many people now immerse themselves in envy and resentment, believing they are treated unfairly and unjustly," I noted. "The prevailing discontent and unhappiness lead them to question why others should experience happiness when they cannot."

"I believe societal attitudes, when reflecting on the nature of happiness, can extend far beyond that," my friend paused, then said firmly, "Trust me, buddy!"

His words struck me deeply, compelling me to acknowledge why genuinely happy people 'never admit it' while so many others wear a mask of happiness, pretending to be happy and fulfilled when they aren't.

"Societal expectations have the power to profoundly shape our perception of happiness. It's important to navigate these

influences wisely, bro.”

“This is the poignant truth about the facades of happiness that many maintain in our society. One might wonder if Tolstoy’s depiction of St. Petersburg resonates with people’s experiences in cities today. The unhappy marriages and relationships that persist in our communities are much like those in Tolstoy’s society,” he observed thoughtfully and said, ‘Karenin keeps Anna tied to their loveless marriage without divorcing her to maintain a proper façade in Petersburg society.’”

“Do you know why?” he asked suddenly, his voice animated. “It’s because nothing is as painfully hurtful as societal judgment, whether in St. Petersburg or New York. When such hurt infiltrates a relationship, we become terrified, fearing that the entire social circle will turn against us and that the pain will be unbearable.

Most of us would rather suffer in silence than admit this to ourselves, as it’s too painful. It’s less painful to hide behind fame, wealth, and status, to be accepted and please everyone, all to maintain a façade.”

“I believe that’s only half the truth,” I said. “Pain persists despite societal pressure to appear content. Many people grapple internally, suffering with feelings of dissatisfaction or unfulfillment. It’s about a painful discordance between outward appearances and inner realities.”

“So, dear friend, it’s not just about Tolstoy’s Saint Petersburg, Camus’s Paris, or our beloved New York; people everywhere, in any culture, always experience authenticity challenges, valuing superficial success over genuine well-being.

“I think it must eventually become our collective nightmare, this incessant demand for approval from others’ opinions. But the real insanity is that we become comfortable with that pain. Many of us know this, yet very few men are strong enough to overcome it.”

I listened to him without interruption, my mind drifting back to our university years, where we reveled in the joyful

vibrancy and intellectual stimulation a prominent university offered us, eager young souls thirsting for knowledge and embracing challenges.

Most of all, we enjoyed discussing classic literature, the timeless gems of world literature, transcending the ages, as our professor loved to describe them. After reading the novel, I remember how my friend passionately defended Anna Karenina during a seminars.

“Her death is the greatest tragedy of my life,” he declared, concluding the discussion and leaving the auditorium to hide his tears.

My friend seemed to calm down a bit as he continued talking.

“Life has a remarkable way of twisting and leading us down paths we could never have imagined or anticipated. How ironic, isn’t it? Who would have thought that everything I would experience in life would mirror Tolstoy’s characters so many years later, based on my own experiences?”

“You mean...?” I asked gently, careful not to hurt his feelings, but he interrupted me. He grasped the implication of my inquiry and said, “Not really.” My friend’s voice resonated with sadness as he spoke:

“After the divorce, she has been trying to socially punish me by severing ties with our mutual friends and cutting off other forms of contact. I’ve acutely felt the weight of societal pressures bearing down on me.”

He took a deep breath, paused to gather his thoughts, and continued.

“She took everything she could from me, more than she could handle,” he paused, reflecting on the pain of their divorce before meeting my gaze with visible frustration.

“It’s quite baffling, buddy,” I said, sighing heavily. “Listen, emotions can indeed surge in the aftermath of a divorce, but this behavior persists even after getting everything she wanted from the settlement. Strange, isn’t it?” I reiterated with bewilderment.

“Isn’t it dreadful that a woman like Anna Karenina, with

the innocent faith of a child, could be so neglected and unfulfilled in her marriage to Karenin?" He said with a pained voice, emphasized his frustration and disbelief and continued, "Suffering from Karenin's indifference and enduring the cold absence of emotional intimacy," he paused again, his voice trembling. Taking a deep breath, he continued irritated, vigorously, almost in one breath, "She was shunned and scorned by society for her naive and hopeful outlook on love and life.

They contemptuously turned away because she dared to love anew, shaming her and driving her to a tragic end." He almost screamed with tears in his throat. "How damn unfair and heartbreaking it is, isn't it?" he exclaimed desperately, looking intently into my eyes for a sign of agreement. I nodded silently, leaning heavily on the table with both elbows.

After a short pause, my friend continued, clearly bewildered, "Yet," he exhaled deeply, almost growling, "today's society not only supports and encourages women like my ex but also grants them all legal rights and privileges, ensuring they live happily ever after with a lucrative divorce settlement, as in our case," he said, his voice rising further.

"And you know what truly drives me mad," my friend said, outraged, "is that the more a woman gains from her man during the divorce process, the more she despises him. Worse yet, modern society celebrates such women as strong, independent, and even as self-made millionaires," he said sarcastically before adding, "While men who have their wealth legally taken from them are labeled as utter failures," he concluded with a scornful laugh.

"Listen," I said, but he held up a hand.

"Please, don't bring up again that all these things are merely material. I know. I am all right". He said, adding, "Don't look at me. I am all right," he repeated, hastening to reassure, "I won't end my life over this, I promise," he smiled crookedly before continuing, "There's a lot of discussion today about women's rights in relationships and society, but few dare to address how men are lost in the world, facing crises of identity.

What does it mean to be a man today? It's not solely about divorce, you understand?"

"I do, bro," I asserted firmly and continued, "Dealing with what it means to be a man in today's twisting world is not easy."

"You mentioned that everyone has fears," he began, steering our talk to deeper waters. "Ever wondered why it's so hard for men to show vulnerability?"

I nodded. "It often feels impossible, fraught with the risk of shame and humiliation."

"True," he acknowledged. "Our culture insists on strength, deeming any display of weakness out of bounds for a man."

Reflecting on closer connections, I added, "I know several bright, single men crushed by loneliness. Just recently, one admitted his struggle—caught between personal pain and societal expectations of masculinity."

He nodded. "It's a hard fight, balancing loneliness with these demanding norms."

"Do you think society has changed?" I asked him, my question more a reflection than an inquiry as I turned my gaze to the window.

"The rules might have shifted, but surprisingly, people haven't. The double standards persist. That's just the way life is, man."

"With each passing year, as I sharpen my intellect, I find myself speaking less and observing more: the world, life, people, and especially human relationships."

"The more we learn, the more valuable our observations become, bro."

"See, I've come to realize that no one has captured the complexity of relationships and the essence of women quite as perfectly and insightfully as Tolstoy," I remarked, appreciation clear in my voice. "His profound understanding shines through his writing, making it as relevant today as it was then."

"Yes, but he also had a deep grasp of men," I added thoughtfully.

“Absolutely,” I continued. “But in my case, I was adrift for a long time, overwhelmed by a sense of emptiness and emotional pain. To fill that void, I moved from one relationship to another, seeking an escape and some semblance of identity. I felt like I had lost my self-worth during the relationship and the subsequent divorce. Sadly, these efforts only deepened my depression and trauma, leaving me profoundly humbled.”

My friend fell silent after quoting Tolstoy and sharing his heartfelt experiences with me. We both sat. I was deeply moved and felt a renewed empathy for Anna Karenina, much like when I first read the novel. It was remarkable how effortlessly, even after all these years, he could recall the novel by heart and seamlessly weave his personal philosophy, experiences, and beliefs into the actions and thoughts of the characters in one of the greatest love stories.

“I can’t understand,” I said, “Why shouldn’t you be happy?”

He looked at me thoughtfully and said, “I always ponder, can highly intelligent people be happy?”

“Happiness is attainable for anyone, buddy, regardless of intelligence. Intelligence is just one aspect of life and can influence how we perceive happiness, but it doesn’t determine our ability to experience it.”

“Happiness in intelligent people is the rarest thing I know,” he said and continued, “You see, intelligence brings a deepened awareness of the complexities and challenges of life, making it more difficult to find lasting happiness. It’s hard for many of us to be happy, to stay happy, and to feel fulfilled.”

“Choosing happiness doesn’t come easy to many. People are too hard on themselves; worse than that, they simply don’t believe they deserve happiness. That is why many of them reject happiness and remain unhappy.

It’s frightening to imagine how that way of thinking destroys people’s lives and dreams, leaving them poor and broken throughout their lives. How sad it is!

“Sometimes, for most of us, life is simply difficult to bear,” he said and kept a long silence after that.

“If you were to ask me what truly makes us happy, I would rank family and relationships right at the top, just after good health. Happiness comes with patience, my friend. I can tell you this: it doesn’t happen overnight. It takes a lot of time.”

“You see, perhaps I’m too conservative, but I believe happiness should be shared in loving relationships. Did you know that Harvard conducted the longest study on human relationships, following people for seventy-five years? They found the secret of happiness is that without loving relationships, you won’t be happy; only good relationships keep us happy and healthy.”

“You shouldn’t be alone; nobody should. A happy, loving relationship is a full-time, hard job. I believe it’s more than just a full-time job. In fact, many compare it to the stock market.” I said this with a laugh and added animatedly, “See, wherever we’ve gone in our conversation, we keep returning to Wall Street.”

He smiled back, “What does a relationship have to do with the stock market?”

“If you have succeeded in your past relationship and feel happy and satisfied, it doesn’t mean that tomorrow you will experience the same feelings and emotions without working on your relationship.

Of all the advice in the world that you can follow, always do your best by putting your whole heart and soul into your relationship and having fun doing your best. Get rid of the myth that fun is not important in a relationship. Notice, my friend, I am talking about a genuine, committed relationship in which you insist on being together.”

“I understand you; well said. You see, without reading about the Harvard study, I always believed deep down that love is the biggest predictor of your happiness in life. You said it perfectly right; we need love to be happy. I remember how happy I felt when I could make her happy.”

“Tolstoy would say, ‘The path to true, genuine happiness in a human love relationship begins with a ceaseless examination of the self.’ I think that captures it simply. The

happiness we seek is in the experience of love. Only by discovering ourselves and others do we become acutely aware of why things happen to us, who we have been, how and why we attracted certain people into our lives, what we did right, what we did wrong in different situations, and how we made people feel. The list goes on, buddy.”

“That’s exactly right! If we know who we really are, we will see things differently and certainly act differently,” he responded.

“Yes, only by understanding ourselves do we start to see the truth about the game of life and the rules for living a meaningful life: being happy, being kind, and being useful.”

“Wall Street taught me that an impressive bank account doesn’t contribute to happiness. After the divorce, I bought a new car, a yellow Lamborghini, from a dealership in Manhattan.”

“Congrats, man!” I said, clapping him firmly on the shoulder. His expression remained unchanged, tempering my enthusiasm. After a brief moment, I released my grip and continued in a steady tone, “Look, buddy, everyone knows you can possess fame, luxury, influential friends, and wealth yet still find happiness elusive. It can indeed be a miserable existence.”

“I’ve met some very rich, powerful men on Wall Street, colleagues of mine, who can buy whatever they want but never find the satisfaction that only true love can bring.”

“Nothing lasts forever, brother, and of all forms of happiness, materialistic love is the shortest-lived. By buying things, no matter how luxurious they are, you are doomed to end on a bitter note, buddy.”

He said nothing but moved his chair closer to me so nobody could overhear.

“I never dare say that to anyone,” he whispered, “but when the pain of loneliness and insufficiency hurts my heart, I feel utterly powerless without love. I feel ashamed without a relationship. The longing for intimacy, the pain of loneliness,

is overwhelming.” His voice faltered, taking on a somber, shameful tone.

“See, buddy, I said calmly, “Loneliness likes to tell us many lies; don’t believe them. Having someone in your bed is not the cure for your solitude. There is loneliness even when you have not only one but many relationships,” I said. “Loneliness is still there if your true intimacy doesn’t involve more than just sharing a physical space.”

“It’s terrible,” he said sadly, “to be physically close to someone in bed and still feel lonely.”

“It’s probably the saddest and most disheartening thing,” I agreed.

“I feel ashamed,” he said flatly, adding, “Loneliness and insufficiency hurt my heart.”

“Come on, man,” I exclaimed encouragingly, “there’s nothing to be ashamed of...”

He interrupted me abruptly, “Oh, there is, buddy,” he exhaled. “There is no confidence in loneliness.”

“See, bro,” I said earnestly, “feelings of shame and confusion arise in a man’s heart not simply from a lack of intimacy, relationships, or loneliness but from the relentless shifts in societal norms and expectations that mercilessly erode his sense of self. Men often feel stripped of their masculinity,” I continued with conviction, “experiencing more shame and less confidence than our fathers and grandfathers.

“And you know what?” I added eagerly. “The more a man adheres to traditional masculinity—abiding by conventional norms, gender roles, and family values—the tougher it becomes for him. Believe it or not, such men are fortunately still more common than you might think. I’m talking about real men, brother, who find navigating through all this chaos increasingly challenging.”

“It’s just as well that most men in the world still embody what we consider ‘real men,’” he said, adding, “Men need each other because acting alone, I don’t suppose we could greatly shape the world.”

“Being a ‘real man’ isn’t solely about possessing emotional

intelligence, empathy, and vulnerability—qualities you’ve certainly been blessed with, buddy! But a ‘real whole man’ transcends these traits. You know that bro. He embraces his authentic self by challenging traditional gender norms and cultivating healthy relationships. I’ve always believed that a man should lead in his relationships and continually strive to push his personal limits, embodying the true essence of manhood.” I said firmly, locking eyes with him. My friend’s expression remained unchanged.

“Listen, unless you acknowledge this, you can never truly understand that genuine masculinity enables men to live with greater fulfillment and purpose. Men can only contribute to a great life and a more compassionate society by freeing themselves from the painful emotions of embarrassment, feelings of loneliness, societal expectations, past personal experiences, and all ingrained beliefs.”

“This means...” I didn’t let him finish his question, cutting him off. “This means,” I leaned forward, elbows on the table, and looked intently into his eyes, “you must have the courage to speak out, brother. Reject the rigid expectations placed on men and allow yourself the freedom to express your true self, regardless of societal conventions or what other guys might think about your choices and your solitary life.” I took a deep breath before continuing with a voice heavy with emotion, “Remember, brother, even in the midst of pain, a real man finds freedom. Do you know how many men today carry hearts heavy with pain yet continue to love? For failing to do so would mean shutting out life itself. Real men keep their hearts open to this profound force, ready to welcome new love and experience the immense joy, energy, and enthusiasm of new endeavors.

“True, bending to fit others’ views is not for a man—it’s exhausting.”

“This is about being vulnerable, man! Embrace fearlessly the unveiling of your sensitive and ambitious traits. I continued, excited, “And this is nothing to feel shame about. That makes real men talk with their hearts,” I kept talking

fervently. “The heart is given to us to feel, love, and care. We can’t hide something so precious that comes from the heart, can we?” I said passionately and continued, “The deep understanding of ourselves and our vulnerability is the way to become aware of one’s masculinity—the only key to unlocking one’s masculine power.” I said intensely and added earnestly, “The essence of masculine power, brother, lies in surpassing conventional norms and playing against societal expectations.”

There was silence for a moment between us at the table, and we could hear the clear voices of new visitors. The music had never stopped, so delicate and haunting, greeting me as I walked in. I was delighted to recognize the magical ‘Petite Fleur’, as if it had followed me from the street, wrapping everyone in a spell of iconic and everlasting enchantment. The café had gotten busier and noisier. The gentle sunlight filtered through the tall windows, casting a warm glow upon the faces of the café visitors, many of whom squinted slightly as they focused on the screens of their laptops and cellphones.

Despite the bustling atmosphere of the cafe, there was an underlying sense of solitude among the guests. Every so often, they would lift their heads, their eyes scanning the room in search of connection, yearning for a moment of warmth and belonging. It appeared that each person hoped to catch someone’s gaze, exchange a few words, or simply share a smile with a stranger.

“See, I don’t like to talk about it,” my friend said, breaching the silence, nervously swirling his empty coffee cup in front of him, “But the uncomfortable truth is, I still can’t understand how I let this happen. My thoughts spun like a carousel as I pondered, leaving me unable to grasp why love is so intertwined with frustration and pain.”

“Because love permeates every fiber of our being, brother, it cannot be easily abandoned, torn up, or thrown away merely because of a divorce agreement. Falling in love often reveals frustrations we didn’t know we had. A loving heart is the biggest one and can bear both the weight of pain and the

lightness of joy. You see, a man's journey is both challenging and rewarding, brother. Only by navigating through his pain and learning from it does he find the courage to embrace love and empathy," I added with encouragement, hastening to say, "Life enriches through the tapestry of these experiences, making a man profoundly courageous even in the face of future trials and pain, staying genuine to oneself.

I often return to Dostoevsky's profound statement as a powerful reminder to stay true to oneself and to be aware of denying the truth, as it marks the end of love: "Above all, don't lie to yourself. The man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to a point where he cannot distinguish the truth within him or around him, and so loses all respect for himself and for others. And having no respect, he ceases to love."

My friend listened intently, then said, "All men should frequently revisit this truth: there is no value in silence when integrity is required." He paused, a blend of sorrow and earnestness marking his expression as he contemplated honesty. "Listen, I believe many men are lost because they cannot speak the truth," he added thoughtfully. "A man cannot be comfortable without. After all, telling the truth is the only path to true love."

"Do you know why? I asked excitedly, "True love does not bring sadness, disappointment, or pain, while self-deception leads away from love."

"Certainly," he said. "Do everything out of love, and you can't go wrong."

He leaned in slightly and said with excitement, "There is certainly mystery and wonder, but love in a committed relationship is all there is to enjoy," he said fervently, adding, "Yes, love feeds me and strengthens me, and I believe what matters can be found in old wisdom, "Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength while loving someone deeply gives you courage."

"You must have loved her very much?" I asked carefully.

He didn't reply. His eyes clouded momentarily from inner, invisible pain, and his face was grinning ruefully. I paused a bit

longer before speaking again. “You are not alone in feeling this way, buddy,” I said. “All men live not by care for themselves but by love, despite their wounded hearts. That’s why true men genuinely choose love over power because love is the key to understanding all the mysteries.” I paused, then added with emotion,

“The beauty of life is that this infinite feeling is not just a fleeting emotion but a powerful force that can blossom and thrive even in wounded hearts, brimming with pain, uplifting and sustaining us through our struggles, brother.”

He said, unable to hide the ache in his heart, “Pain is an outcry from a man’s heart.”

“The beginning of ongoing pain, brother, the pain of loneliness in your heart,” I told him, “Is not because of your loveless marriage or painful divorce. The seed of every pain and struggle you face is sown deeply within your own being,” I continued, “All your efforts—hiding behind the dream car, the successful portfolio on Wall Street, or a home on the beach—will never make you happy or solve your problems. Nobody will melt away your loneliness, buddy. Remember that! Your anger at the circumstances, all the injustices in the world, and your desire to fight come from your unresolved problems, your feeling of being lost, and certainly loneliness, buddy.” I said and continued.

“There is a saying about it that you should remember, ‘Loneliness is feeling not seen, not heard, not understood, but certainly, it’s the highest price you pay when you start to improve yourself.’ But before you improve, you should make peace with your past.

“You will see, perceive, and understand the world and people around you in a different way, and your sense of not being understood by others, what you’re going through, and thinking you’re being difficult only intensifies. Don’t hold grudges or disrespect against the world, and don’t harbor feelings of anger toward ongoing circumstances in the world by lack of inner clarity.

“Listen, why does this bother you, buddy? Create inner freedom and clarity instead. Without that freedom, the world

will always seem like a hostile place. True independence arises from a state of profound clarity and steadfast detachment from external pressures. Remember, bro, nothing limits us more than our own guilt and intolerance of our thoughts and feelings, which we project onto the world," I said firmly.

"Stop fighting against the world's inherent chaos, man. Accepting the world as it is, rather than resisting it, is key to happiness and peace of mind. Entering a situation without understanding its rules will inevitably set you up for failure. Even if you persevere, remember that success is transient and ultimately elusive." I sighed deeply, paused, and then added,

"Wise guys avoid such futile struggles. They recognize the emptiness of these battles, understanding that true victory is a myth. The profound truth about life is that meaning comes from within. Be patient with yourself and show compassion. Our experiences are all we truly own, and what matters is learning from them." My friend remained silent, looking at me intently.

"The world has always been plagued by troubles, inherent uncertainty, embittered problems, and complexity since its inception, and you know that," I said with conviction, locking eyes with him.

"These challenges will continue as the world evolves. There is no question; everybody knows that the world is full of uninformed, stupid people. Our greatest fear should not be their malevolence but their ignorance, as it disrupts life for everyone involved." It was a long pause while I continued to talk.

"Life is inherently difficult, brother, filled with paradoxes. Bertrand Russell captured it well: 'The trouble with the world is that the stupid are cocksure and the intelligent are full of doubt.'

"Overthinking is always considered a huge problem for intelligent people like you, buddy. Searching for the 'right' answer often leads to suffering. Remember, intelligent folks are naturally contemplative," I concluded, watching his expression turn thoughtful.

CHAPTER FOUR

FEAR

“What is it we Fear?”

“Love, “said the Master.

– Anthony de Mello

I glanced around, watching as baristas moved swiftly behind the counter, greeting the new visitors with smiles. The hum of the espresso machine provided a comforting backdrop. Around us, people were engrossed in their screens, occasionally looking up for a fleeting connection. Few guests engaged in conversation; even fewer read a book or gazed out at the bustling life on beautiful Madison Avenue. Breaking the silence, my friend leaned in with a serious expression and earnestly asked, “Do you ever feel fear?”

I took a slow sip of my coffee before answering. “Boldness belongs to the man who fears God more than any other man.” I echoed familiar words thoughtfully.

“Listen, I didn’t mean fear of other men. But doesn’t the universal grief, injustice, and chaos and its impact on our relationships ever get to you?” he asked, gazing into my eyes.

“It’s tough, brother! Everyone hurts. Like everyone else, I have moments of doubt and insecurity. Yet, we must accept that we can’t control everything or maintain things just as we wish. We all know about the world’s injustices and human suffering, but dwelling in sadness solves nothing—it doesn’t help us or the world. As Camus suggested, ‘we must assert justice, against eternal injustice and create happiness, in the face of a universe of grief.’

“To foster happiness, even in the face of unhappiness and fear from others, demands a truly noble nature that cultivates inner joy and peace.”

We sat in contemplative silence for a moment as he refilled his cup.

“See, most people wander through life without direction,” I continued steadily. “I can tell you more: they don’t even know who they are, let alone what they want.”

He agreed quietly, “Everyone seeks security and wishes to have some control over their lives, but the world’s chaos makes it hard to feel anything but powerless.”

“No, buddy, people’s insecurity and fear aren’t just about external chaos. Even those who seem enlightened still battle these emotions, feeling lost and unhappy. Fear has a way of clouding everything.”

“It’s confusing, isn’t it? Every year, fear tightens its grip, stealing peace and perspective.”

“I believe today’s young men experience more fear than ever,” he empathized.

“Entering the world unprepared makes it difficult for them to act confidently. As the Bible says, ‘Be ready to do it whether it is convenient or inconvenient.’”

“They may hesitate to embrace their masculinity for fear of being a victim. Fear of embarrassment and rejection can prevent them from starting a new relationship.”

“Fear takes many forms, but the worst is of others’ reactions. They fear judgment and become overwhelmed with feelings of being lost. Eventually, their fear triggers anger.”

“They are more frustrated and angrier these days.”

“Exactly,” I affirmed, nodding my head. “I’ve always believed in the Dalai Lama’s words, ‘Love brings self-confidence. Anger brings fear. Embracing this can change everything.’”

“It’s true,” he agreed. “It’s no wonder they feel this way. People tend to judge others harshly, regardless of their actions.”

“Overcoming the fear of judgment is especially challenging for young men who are still building their confidence, sense of identity, and self-worth while learning to trust their own judgment.”

“In a society that pressures conformity, trusting oneself

and following one's own path can feel like swimming against the tide."

"Young men need to embrace their individuality and recognize their worth beyond others' opinions."

"The fear of others' opinions is a very real fear, man, and the more we give our power away to fear, the stronger fear becomes."

"Their unawareness of their own vibrancy and passion adds to the confusion and heightens their social fears," I said. "They need guidance. No one teaches them how to navigate the world and conquer these fears and overcome their anger."

"No one teaches them how the world works, how to conquer these fears and anger. They need help."

"Fear is an illusion, yet it keeps them away from their dreams."

"Becoming an adult has never been easy. I believe they are less independent and not fully self-sufficient," I said.

"I suppose people eventually become scared of their own shadow, and they find it difficult, even impossible, to overcome their demons, just as it's impossible to escape from their own shadow."

"Their fear grows so large that they start to believe that the world is a risky place to live."

"That's exactly it," I agreed.

"It's a terrible experience."

"Humans crave security yet feel threatened all the time without any apparent reason for it."

"Ultimately, everyone is afraid—afraid of their own fears, afraid of everything," he said with annoyance. "I used to think the world was built on blame; now I see it's built on fear."

"That's precisely the case. Fear is like a disease, my friend, infecting people, often filling their minds and imaginations without them even understanding the source of their fears," I concluded with a smile.

"There's a reason ancient wisdom continues to captivate us thousands of years later," he reflected, pondering Seneca's observation that we often feel more frightened in our

imagination than in reality.

“Seriously, why do we allow ourselves to be so scared? Can we ever truly rid ourselves of fear?”

“Fear is universal,” I said. “But once you free yourself from fear, you open yourself to love. And focusing on love is another innate tendency.”

“I wish they could choose love over fear.” he mused and continued, “How can we escape this hell? Why do so many still choose fear when they have a choice?”

“It’s because we’re conditioned to make choices, and real love makes us feel vulnerable. People fear showing their vulnerability, not realizing that this openness is the true power of being oneself.”

“Love is a commitment; it’s a brave action, my friend. That’s why so many stick with fear. What do you want in your life? What is required to have more love than fear?” I challenged.

“Marianne Williamson gives us an answer, ‘A miracle is a shift in perception from fear to love.’ That’s the key. By choosing love, you invite more love and less fear into your life. Everyone knows this eternal battle is within us all, but not everyone wants to acknowledge that we have a choice.

“People often feel unworthy of relationships, whether with God or others, choosing fear over love, expecting punishment,” I explained, quoting a Bible passage: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear involves punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”

“It is the paradox of choice, buddy,” I said. “And life, full of paradoxical truths, shows us that even those blessed with abundance and freedom experience insecurities similar to those who have lost everything.”

“It is indeed a paradox,” he agreed. “How can we feel the same fear as those with nothing?”

“Anywhere in the world, it’s easy to manipulate our fears. That’s why many believe that fear is beyond their control that they are conditioned to live with it,” I noted.

Fear

“They say that, like anything else in the world, fear is for sale—and at a good price,” he concluded.

“That’s probably why our fear is valued in the billions.”

CHAPTER FIVE

PAIN

“If you feel pain, you’re alive.

If you feel other people’s pain, you’re a human being.”

– Leo Tolstoy

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee, mingling with the scent of pastries and savory dishes, suddenly intensified. Only then did we notice two young girls had taken the table right next to ours, bringing the delightful smells even closer. Engrossed in our conversation, we hadn’t noticed them at first. From time to time, the girls glanced over at our table and smiled at my friend, seeking his attention and hoping to make eye contact with him.

My friend looked up at the guests in the cafe, then at me again, and said, “I believe people want to be accepted. We need to be connected. However, the pain and fear are so great that the world’s problems cannot even be faced. It’s hard to find peace of mind; it hurts in the mind. Do you understand what I mean?”

“If you’re still pondering this point, realize that harboring internal pain and battling the outside world won’t free you from it,” I told him, pausing for emphasis. “A mind in pain feels isolated, beyond the reach of help from others or the world. We often see the world as unjust and punitive, which is why so many around us suffer from broken spirits, enduring deep pain and sorrow.”

“There is so much I want to share, to ask, and above all, to understand what’s happening to me,” my friend confessed, his voice subdued as he locked eyes with me. “I always thought I could escape my own hell, but I’ve realized that finding the right answers is beyond me. I’m truly lost. It feels like every path leads to nowhere,” he admitted. After a moment of

courageous silence, he continued, “I am utterly lost and in pain. I am in so much pain, brother. Sometimes, when the struggle becomes too much to bear, all I can do is cry.”

“Men can cry, and it’s good to cry brother.”

“The therapist advised, ‘Take your time. The anxiety, stress, and fear that men are suffering from today are probably worse than they have ever been. I am not alone. Men suffer unconsciously, not knowing why they are living. What is it all for?’” he recounted, a grin briefly crossing his face as he turned toward the window, battling to hold back tears.

“See, buddy, in our society today, being needed is an antidote to stress and anxiety for men. This feeling is unparalleled by anything else because it alone provides a strong sense of purpose and self-worth.”

“I feel a constant emptiness, as if a part of me has been torn away,” he said, his face still turned toward the window.

“I understand you, brother. This void often blinds us to anything beyond our pain, inadvertently drawing more chaos into our lives.”

My friend shifted his gaze back from the window, maintaining his grin as he shared, “And chaos breeds creativity, she told me at our last therapy session.”

“Other experts assert that a feminine woman always feels chaotic and complicated. Listen, bro, the world, much like a woman in a troubled relationship, will always confront you with unexpected challenges, and you know that. You must rise above all circumstances and strive to understand your painful divorce, the interactions between yourself and those professionals, and, above all, buddy, your relationship with the world, without giving up.

“Remember, bro, nobody has succeeded in catching the wind in the fields.

“You’re sharp enough to realize that when men feel so important, loved, and appreciated that they have neither the time nor the desire to seek therapy, that’s just the way it is, brother—their sense of necessity becomes overwhelmingly defining.”

The true challenge is that there is more fear in admitting this harsh reality to ourselves than in facing it openly. Only by confronting it can true healing begin. Think about it—change isn't just about thinking, but really changing how we think. I mentioned earlier that we need to find joy and peace even after war and all kinds of breakups and to love the world as it is, love ourselves despite the pain and mistakes of the past. I reminded him, 'The world changes when we change ourselves.'

"Have you found that to be true?" he asked with curiosity and surprise.

"Yes, absolutely! Understanding this will relieve you, as you realize you are not alone in feeling overwhelmed by the world's pain. Many great men before you have discovered this truth: 'To free yourself from the world's pain, you must first be aware enough to understand and embrace it. Men who have lived great lives never waited to become free from pain. They confronted their lives and their pain head-on.'

He continued to remain silent, then said, "This pain and struggle isn't just mine; it's part of a larger human experience."

"Stop feeling trapped by your own pain and the world's pain. Above all, stop waiting for a painless world.

"You can't stop war that way, my friend. The great teachers have always taught that peace is the only way to halt conflict. Love is the only remedy capable of healing the world because, as it's been said, 'There is more hunger for love and appreciation in this world than for bread.' The world and people yearn for authentic kindness. I mean genuine kindness, because even kindness can be feigned."

"A sobering truth about human behavior," he said solemnly, adding, "is something we often overlook."

"That's what it truly means to help the world, brother," I concluded, ignoring his words. "I believe people often don't realize that if love is what the world is starving for, then we should be the ones to offer it," I responded.

"Choosing love makes the world reflect the love you want to see," he suggested.

"Exactly," I replied with a passionate nod. "Love is a choice,

brother,” I added fervently.

“Have you ever wondered where great leaders and good parents originate? These remarkable individuals share a profound mentality characterized by genuine love for others. They radiate love and energy, becoming living proof of its transformative power, making everyone around them feel safe and cherished.”

“That’s what it truly means to love the world and its people.”

“Certainly!” I exclaimed. “Dostoevsky masterfully highlighted the transformative power of love and forgiveness. Reflect on his words: ‘With love, everything is possible, everything is saved. Love is such a priceless treasure that you can buy the whole world with it and redeem not only your own sins but those of others too.’”

“It moved me deeply. That is powerful—arguably the most beautiful testament to the power of love, capturing a universal truth. See, the magical energy of love, enriched with compassion and benevolence, is indeed contagious,” he concluded, smiling.

“Absolutely,” I asserted with clarity. “There’s a unique energy that comes with genuine love—it empowers a man to face any challenge with determination,” I explained, my voice firm and confident. “You know, bro, the more I experience, the more I realize that a true man is shaped by the adversities he navigates and the risks he embraces. Remember, buddy, pushing oneself to the edge is the essence of masculinity. Decoding masculinity means breaking free from outdated stereotypes and embracing vulnerability to forge a more authentic and profound identity.”

I paused, letting my words resonate. “Think about this, buddy: dwelling on sadness, whether your own or someone else’s, only cloud your thoughts and skew your perceptions,” I said, adding, “When you examine this, bro, it’s easy to understand that we unwittingly create the very obstacles we’re trying to avoid.”

“Understanding that it’s not easy,” he murmured, rubbing

his chin in thought.

“It comes after a lot of pain, doubt, and mistakes,” I responded, “but it’s worth it. You gain a realistic outlook on the world, relationships, breakups, and most importantly, on your own heart.”

“We are simply unprepared to face the world or other people,” he admitted. “It’s not for everyone to step into their power in this constantly changing, challenging world.”

“What do you mean we’re not ready to face everyday challenges?” I probed, seeking clarity.

“We often treat each other superficially in our relationships without realizing it, inadvertently causing pain, sometimes unconsciously. We strive to meet others’ expectations without taking a moment to reflect, ask questions, or truly share our lives. As the turbulence of the world increases, so does our longing for deeper connections.”

“A healthy person balances societal demands with personal needs,” I observed, fixing him with an expectant gaze.

“It’s easier said than done, maintaining that balance and enjoying harmony,” he replied, grinning with a finger pressed to his lips.

“We can only achieve that when our feelings are matched with our desires and others. It’s about fostering a sense of belonging and fulfillment, feeling understood and supported,” I said and continued.

“Truth is, buddy,” I began, leaning in slightly, “when we nurture our relationships with kindness, they nurture us back. It makes everything feel more fluid and natural. We become happier, and so do the people around us.”

“I doubt that life works that way,” he mused, slightly shaking his head.

“If you’re aiming to fulfill your destiny,” I continued, “you’ve got to learn to let go of the baggage. As the scripture points out, ‘It is inevitable that offenses will come; but how we handle those disappointments, betrayals, and injustices determines whether we move forward or not.’”

He paused, reflecting for a moment. “So, resilience is the

answer,” he concluded thoughtfully.

“Absolutely,” I affirmed. “No matter how dull, lonely, or unfair life may seem, we must respond with dignity. That’s the real challenge, and guess what? Only a man with a resilient spirit can find healthy solutions and truly face hardships.”

“You know what?” he asked suddenly, leaning forward. “The more I think about human understandings of love, peace, relationships—the whole gamut you’re talking about here—the more I realize nothing has really changed since Tolstoy’s time. We’re even more fearful now than before.” He paused, a reflective frown forming.

“See, buddy, fear, love, and relationships have always been fundamental, unchanged struggles for humans across all eras,” I said.

“For instance,” he exclaimed, locking eyes with me, “a colleague of mine, a wealthy family man, got caught in a scandal with his children’s nanny. His wife uncovered it. Imagine the fear he’s living with now.” My friend sighed deeply, then continued, “You’re right; we truly live in an age of fear, each in our own way.”

“I’m happy you’ve realized that,” I told him, surprised. Then I added, “Tolstoy would advise a family guy, ‘In order to live his life well, a person needs to know what he should and should not do. To know this, he must understand who he is and the world in which he lives.’”

“Yes! We deceive ourselves and others because we often get in our own way. It feels like everything is moving faster than hell—everyone, old and young, seems convinced that time is speeding up more than before.”

“The world is busier than ever,” I continued. “Everyone and everything is challenging our patience, self-confidence, and toughness at work and in our relationships. It’s not easy, buddy, to avoid stress and find tranquility.”

“There are so many responsibilities, concerns, and streams of information bombarding us. And there’s no way to slow it down or simply change anything.

“Change has always been difficult for many, and it’s even

more daunting now in this ever-accelerating world.”

“Listen!” he began. “How can everyone be so foolish to think and believe this nonsense—that he will change the world, humanity, and relationships?” He exclaimed, “So damn naive!” Leaning back in his chair, he looked at me and continued.

“You can’t comprehend the full extent of my anger. I’m so tired of hearing that.” His disillusionment was palpable as he spoke. “People aren’t genuinely interested in changing the world. They’re just swapping roles, constantly seeking pleasure and excitement, using every trick in the book for their own benefit,” he said bitterly.

It was painful to witness how my friend sensed the lack of genuine commitment to real change in people in society.

“In today’s world, there’s a lot of work to be done, bro,” I remarked, stirring my coffee contemplatively.

“People don’t realize that meaningful and lasting change has to start with themselves, do they?” he replied, looking around as if to underscore the point.

“That’s just how it is, my friend,” I agreed, nodding. “But who’s really willing to change? Nowadays, folks are more inclined to bang their heads against the wall rather than admit they need to change. The real irony? They think change is impossible because they’re always pointing the finger elsewhere. In a fit of anger, they lash out, blaming everyone and everything for their pain and failures in all kinds of relationships.”

“You know, I think the only way to get over this madness is to find out what needs to be changed in this world and change.”

“Listen, the problems you keep thinking about, brother, are getting worse every year. It’s obvious that for many countries and for many people, things must get shockingly terrible, regardless of the degree to which they are emotionally involved and invested, but apparently, not many are talking about that. ‘In a time of deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act,’ warns George Orwell.”

CHAPTER SIX

WAR

“War is so unjust and ugly that all who wage it must try to stifle the voice of conscience within themselves.”

– Leo Tolstoy

“**W**hy are we always at war?” he asked suddenly. “Take a close, hard look at the world. People strive to share their lives and histories, seeking comfort, yet they remain blind to the enduring suffering of ordinary people.” He sighed deeply and continued, “Wars rage on, as brutal as in Tolstoy’s era—perhaps now even more barbaric, despite our claims of unprecedented civilization and progress.”

I remained silent, taken aback by his sudden outburst. The silence hung heavily between us, each moment stretching becoming more unbearable. His words conveyed not just the timeless and poignant truth of history brutally repeating itself but also revealed his unconscious, desperate attempt to connect the world’s troubles with the unfolding drama of his own life and the pain of his recent divorce.

“Why are we always at war?” he repeated after a short pause. His voice carried even more pain now, grappling with the turmoil within.

“Will wars ever cease?” he demanded urgently, full of anger.

“Alas, brother, war never ends.” I paused briefly before continuing. “I’m sure we’ve all heard the philosopher’s bitter assertion that ‘Only the dead see the end of war.’”

“As long as humanity inhabits Earth, avoiding war and maintaining peace will always be a formidable challenge. Worse yet,” I continued, “it’s hard to fight when the fight’s not

fair. War Theory suggests that the natural state of mankind is peace, and war should only be waged to protect innocent lives from danger.”

“I never knew that,” he murmured in a barely audible voice.

“Neither did I until I attended a seminar on ‘The Problem of Peace.’ I shared.

“I believe the most dangerous opinion is the belief that war is inevitable because people are inherently too aggressive, and war is a permanent condition for them.”

“In Tolstoy’s view, war is an inherent part of human nature, and humanity will never completely get rid of it,” I said.

“Every time I witness the recruitment of wonderful young men to join the Army, it’s heart-wrenching,” he said with a heavy, emotion-laden voice.

“Do you believe in Forster’s prophetic vision: “I am sure that if the mothers of various nations could meet, there would be no more wars.”

“This speaks powerfully to our need for hope because nobody loves their sons so deeply and would do anything to protect them, to spare them from facing possible death or mutilation, more than mothers do without hesitation.”

“Endless money forms the sinews of war,” I said, referencing the famous saying.

“Do you believe the world profits from war?”

“This is an unbearable part of the truth and deeply unethical,” Dostoevsky emphasizes. “It’s not worth the tears of that one tortured child.”

“Who cares about ethics and morals, about the unatoned suffering of the innocent child? Less than that, who cares what we think? Wars go on without our permission.”

“People often say that war is also about power.”

“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” I said.

“Why does power tend to corrupt?”

“Kant believed that if you give a person power and

everything he desires, he will always feel that there is more to be had.”

“Oh, yes,” he said thoughtfully. “I have often felt the same. Sometimes, it seems we are in an age of darkness, an era where people fear the truth and despise it.”

“You see, the truth about life, war, and nations at conflict is that they mirror the interactions between two people in a relationship—each holds their truth, and often, one resents the other’s truths,” I observed. However, my friend seemed to overlook the subtle point of my observation and mused thoughtfully, “I wonder what Tolstoy would say or how he would react upon witnessing a modern war unfolding on the other side of the planet, where moral structures seem to be collapsing.”

“I believe the same as Tolstoy said one hundred years ago.”

“In all history, there is no war that was not hatched by the governments, the governments alone, that have billions of money and millions of troops at their disposal, to whom war is always pernicious even when successful. We have only one, but the most powerful tool in the world—the truth”

“This is a powerful, timeless reminder. Tolstoy was enlightened.”

“He inspired people but not governments.”

“The world does not always listen to the words of enlightenment.”

“I believe Tolstoy would likely feel a deep sorrow and disillusionment when observing modern wars and for...

“For all men at war,” he interrupted me, then said, “You will die in war, brother if you go at it long enough.” Hemingway would tell the bitterest truth.” My friend concluded with a somber tone in his voice.

“It’s so sad. Every man needs a battle to fight.”

“Again, it seems to be all about men.”

“Men win wars, brother,” I said, “brave ones.” Across the ages, societies have entrusted men with the roles of protectors and warriors.”

“What is interesting,” he said with bitter sarcasm, “is that

men are entrusted in wartime, fighting, dying, triumphing in war, but question their existence in peacetime. A real man shouldn't seek to fight if he's not on the battlefield. We can't achieve true harmony if society and the people around us turn men and women into rivals constantly competing," he stated somberly. "He doesn't need another battle to fight; a man needs peace to build a house," he asserted firmly. His words were full of desire for understanding and harmony.

"And a woman to make a house a home." I hastened to add.

"Exactly," he exclaimed immediately and added with excitement, "A peaceful home—that's what a man yearns for. He wants to come home knowing it's a sanctuary of peace. Amidst life's turbulence and a chaotic world, there is nothing he appreciates more than this tranquility at home," he explained.

I was moved by his deep longing for peace and harmony. His words challenged the common stereotypes that often depict men as inherently violent, overlooking their capacity for moral integrity, kindness, and a gentle spirit.

"We are crafted with a purpose," he stated passionately, "as providers and protectors of our homes, which are sanctuaries for true men. The return of a man from war, from the battles of the outside world to the loving embrace of his wife and children, isn't merely a homecoming; it's a profound reaffirmation of man's inherent, sacred role in his family's love and security."

"I believe, and it's a sad truth, brother, that many of us have lost this sense of security and belonging," I stated regretfully.

"Can any of us truly choose our duties any more than we can choose our birthplace or our parents?" he mused, recalling George Eliot's words to emphasize his point.

"Her insight into our responsibilities and the inevitable duties that come our way is as precise as it is poignant," I replied thoughtfully.

"It means we are denying ourselves and those around us the essence of true commitment, like in marriage," he noted with sadness."

“Life devoid of authenticity feels soulless and empty,” I contended. “Authenticity is everything—the very essence of life and love. Without it, neither can truly flourish.”

“Most people are other people, buddy, and their thoughts are someone else’s opinions.’

“Oscar Wilde captured it well,” I agreed excitedly. “That’s exactly how many of us construct our identities and lead our lives, striving to meet someone else’s expectations under societal pressures.”

He continued, stating, “The prevalent lack of authenticity in the world.”

“Listen, knowing what we do about human nature, why do we find it so hard to be genuine and truthful?” He paused, looking across the table to gauge my reaction, then asked, “You don’t really mean that. Do you?”

“Mean what?”

“That the opposite of authenticity is the imitation of life,” he said in the same painful voice he used when he asked me, ‘Why are we always at war?’

“The saddest thing, buddy, is witnessing someone’s life performed rather than lived. But that’s life, and as we know, life is about choices, isn’t it?”

“More painful than that is when children are deeply affected by their parents’ neglect of their inherent duties, never fully understanding who they really are.”

“It’s a sorrowful sight to witness a house that never becomes a home and parents who never become examples to their kids.”

“You see, buddy,” I said, “living authentically in a world that often favors conformity has never been easy, but there’s no real point or meaning to a life lived without authenticity. It’s not just about being honest with the world; it’s about being honest with yourself,” I stated.

“Living insincerely is always evokes a sense of sadness,” he affirmed, adding, “The pain arises for everybody, from finding oneself amidst uncertainty and chaos.”

He looked at me with a trusting gaze and asked, ‘What do

you think should be done, bro?

“The greatest thing in the world is to be who you are?” I responded with conviction, “Let’s follow George Eliot’s teachings, buddy. ‘The only way out is through,’ for a man to be a man and a woman to be a woman.”

“These thoughts hearten me,” he agreed fervently and asked me, “Do you think that women should work?” Without waiting for my response, he continued excitedly, “I have always held the traditional belief that married women shouldn’t work.”

“I believe,” I responded, “that behind all the aspirations and talents women are blessed with, a married woman should prioritize her family as a mother and wife.”

“That’s great!” he exclaimed. “Listen, do you truly mean it?” He asked eagerly and continued, “I’ve always said that. Isn’t it awfully lovely for a woman to be a homemaker, to create a loving and nurturing home, bringing herself a sense of fulfillment, joy, and contentment by caring about the happiness and well-being of her loved ones?”

I smiled warmly at him, glad for his enthusiasm.

“Don’t you think that’s great?” he asked eagerly, passionately.

“Not everyone shares your enthusiasm, buddy, and finds fulfillment solely in embracing traditional family roles,” I replied. “Taking care of a man and kids is a full-time job.”

“Listen, what is bad in this?” he asked, stunned and bewildered.

“Nothing is bad, man,” I assured him. “I know I might dampen your excitement, buddy, but not everyone feels comfortable. Many women are pursuing other aspirations and endeavors.”

“Do they never regret it?” he asked earnestly. “I mean, feel remorse for that.”

“Remorse is long gone,” I said.

“Remorse with repent will come back to them later, in the child therapists’ offices, when there aren’t many more moves to make,” he insisted.

“Don’t talk about remorse,” I interjected. “They don’t do it consciously.”

He made an apologetic gesture with his hand. “Listen carefully to the saying,” he said with a serious tone in his voice, and added, “Then you can remember: ‘Until they become conscious, they will never regret; and until after they have regretted, they cannot become conscious.’”

For a moment, he was seized by a kind of quiet contemplation. Then, with sudden zeal, he spoke again: “You know,” he said fervently, “a real man intensely desires to have a feminine woman by his side. Someone to love, protect, enjoy, and cherish for the rest of his days.” His voice grew more and more passionate as he spoke, emphasizing each word with genuine love.

“Because,” he continued with eagerness, “nothing melts a man’s heart like a real soft, feminine woman who fully embraces her femininity. Someone who feels herself empowered in her femininity,” he spoke passionately, “someone with a sexy yet very calm aura, you know, who radiates with softness and grace. When a woman shines her feminine light, her brilliance captivates. And the brighter she shines, the more he is driven to madness by her gentle presence. How can a man resist such a woman?”

“Honestly, he can’t. Sexiness and serenity is a powerful, unique blend all wrapped in self-respect and integrity—that’s quite admirable.”

“A man who recognizes a feminine woman’s worth and values genuine connections won’t resist; he’ll want to be part of her world and rise to meet her standards.”

“Some men find a mature, self-assured woman intimidating, you know? They might appreciate maturity in themselves, yet it challenges them. It requires a man to be completely honest with himself and secure in his own identity.”

“It’s not only secure but also mature and respectful. Someone who appreciates and cherishes her for all that she is,

rather than feel challenged or threatened by her integrity and strength. A feminine woman challenges a man to be his best self, while also creating a home filled with warmth and love.”

“Yes, bro, a truly feminine woman with integrity is a remarkable presence in a man’s life, his home, and his bed”

“That’s the kind of relationship that all men dream of having—one that can weather any storm.”

As he spoke, I could feel his longing for something pure and timeless, a desire to build a meaningful and balanced relationship, a connection that transcended the ordinary—a yearning for a true love that would endure through the ages.

“Women today have forgotten this art.” I said wistfully. “That’s why a truly feminine woman is a rare gem to find nowadays, but when you encounter it, you should feel blessed.”

“We must create peace for man,” he spoke with fervor again. “Craft a space where his vulnerabilities are embraced, and his emotions and aspirations understood without judgment, especially when he is uncertain. Never turn away from him when he is failing. Empower him, value his strength, and celebrate his unique qualities. Encourage him to pursue his passions, admire him, and he will strive to reach the stars and conquer life’s challenges for the women he loves wholeheartedly, simply knowing that he is appreciated and needed. Surround a man with genuine love and loyalty; allow him to feel accepted and valued for who he is, without any pressure to conform to the expectations and standards imposed by this often-tragicomic society.”

“A man thrives, bro, only in the presence of love and loyalty, free from the fear of betrayal,” I stated firmly.

My friend stopped talking, drifting his gaze to the window, lost in thought. The café buzzed with quiet conversation, and the clinking of cups, yet our table was shrouded in profound silence.

“You’re right,” I said, breaking the silence. “It’s about finding and creating those sanctuaries where genuine

connections thrive,” I said, raising my coffee cup in a silent toast. “To create peace for man and for each other.”

“In a world that often overlooks such needs,” my friend added with a smile, picking up his own cup.

As we clinked our cups, the sound caught the attention of a young woman sitting next to our table, who turned and smiled. In her observant glance, I could see that she had unwittingly witnessed my friend’s heartfelt monologue—a desire for a soft, feminine presence.

I smiled back at her, a silent affirmation of our shared moment.

“You see, buddy, to feel needed is not something all women naturally embrace. One must first embark on a journey of understanding, empathy, and empowerment.”

“What is striking to me,” he continued, “Is how they can question the value of men, the contributions we make to the lives of others and to the world. Men transform the world around us, man! We see this all around us, don’t we? Tell me, who built these skyscrapers?” He paused, then answered himself, gesturing toward the Madison Avenue Bridge arching over the Harlem River, visible through the large café window, “Men did,” he affirmed firmly.

We watched the bridge as the afternoon sun streamed in through the window. It was only then that I realized it was unusually warm inside. However, I couldn’t tell if the heat emanated from his angry energy or the afternoon sun.

He turned his gaze away from the window and pressed me again, “Who responds to the crises facing our world, who responds to disasters at sea, in the air, on land?”

“Men,” I replied.

“Who shapes America?”

“Men,” I answered again and asked timidly with a smile, “Who created Anna Karenina?” hoping to diffuse his anger.

He ignored my attempt to lighten the mood and pressed on angrily, “Who works on an oil rig?” he demanded, then immediately added, “Do they even know what it is? Send those who wish to compete with men to the North Sea.” He took a

deep breath and said, “There aren’t many women at the oil camps.”

“It’s definitely a man’s job, a challenging task, not for a woman,” I said, nodding in agreement.

“Exactly,” he exclaimed immediately, his voice filled with conviction and a tremor of emotion. “Real men,” he declared, “are the unsung heroes who work themselves to death.” He continued, “Yes, they are all heroes, powering the world forward, unrecognized for their sacrifice. Must I list all the countless contributions men have made to the world throughout history and keep making every day?”

“If you go on too long, I will bring you back,” I joked, again trying to lighten the mood, but he ignored me and continued to recount men’s achievements.

“Yes, men all over have shaped our world, and this has always been the case,” he affirmed passionately. “Masculinity is a divine gift to humanity, isn’t it?” my friend declared fervently. “True men handle it with dignity, sharing their strength and generously enriching the world.”

“It’s the driving force that keeps the world going round brother,” I affirmed, dignifying my friend’s passionate statement.

“Knowing all of that,” my friend continued with anger, “What the hell, how could anyone even suggest, prompt such a question, ‘Wouldn’t the world be better without men?’ That’s the most outrageous thing to say, and men have no defense against it,” he cried out angrily.

“The cost of that insane saying about men is high. We pay for it now. It strips away an integral part of their identity. Every time a man hears it, he sacrifices a part of his sense of self, you understand. Men feel lost,” he concluded, falling silent momentarily before continuing to speak.

“It’s utterly disgusting to say that about men,” he exclaimed loudly, flush with anger and looking at me with a questioning gaze that made me uncomfortable in front of those in the café. His pupils dilated, and his expression contorted, resembling someone experiencing physical disgust. Those around us

turned and glanced in our direction with dissatisfied looks, full of indignation and condemnation, convinced that his words were directed at me. It wasn't even funny. I felt myself blush. It was a terribly awkward moment. I hung my head, peering at him from beneath my brows, and calmly said, "Easy, easy, bro. Please, just take it easy."

"Sorry, it's not easy. I mean, all this insanity around men, society's expectations, and rules—telling men what being a man is—it's hard," he stated, following up.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have been so heated."

"It's not easy to be a man, bro, I understand,"

"Holding one's ground against all of them is not easy," he placed his hand over mine. "That was a terrible thing to say about men, and men have no defense against these false accusations," he exhaled. His face was heartbreaking.

"I've never seen you lose your temper."

"I've changed," he said with a toneless voice and continued excited and defiant. "Sometimes I get insufferable, and I hate this side of me. Imagine," he exclaimed with anger, "If we still had not the courage to approach the truth. "I am trying to puzzle it out. What can men do to combat these fallacies or continue shaping the world for everyone's benefit? I can't comprehend it. Can you?"

"Don't dare do that," I said firmly.

"Don't dare do what?"

"You don't have to tear yourself apart to prove something to someone," I said seriously and smiled.

"That's right, why should I?" he smiled with his disarming grin.

"Don't give a damn!"

"We can't let this happen!"

"Keep shaping the world instead, for everyone's benefit."

"That's good advice," he said. "I am glad someone appreciates what men do."

We laughed, and then he got serious and spoke to me again, "You see, talking about men in that way is like living in opposition to nature."

“Nature always guides us in the right direction,” I said confidently.

“It’s akin to saying, ‘Wouldn’t the world be better without water?’”

I smiled as my mind drifted back many years to the Metropolitan Museum, when we both viewed the exhibition of Rubens’ art. He had lingered, captivated, for an extended period in front of the magnificent painting, ‘Union of Earth and Water.’ He explained that the artwork embodied everything in beautiful harmony: a woman symbolizing the Earth and a man symbolizing water.

“How amazing it is!” he declared exhilarated. He closed his eyes and beckoned me to do the same. Then, almost whispering, he asked, “Can you recognize the divine spark and inner light within them—the exploration of the emotional intensity of intimacy between two unique energies? This is so beautiful, can you sense it? They are two different powers, can you feel the grandeur of their souls? Both have them.” Almost desperate, he spoke with a voice choked with emotion, as if my agreement was the lifeline he needed. I kept smiling, captivated, gazing at the iconic painting. “Can you not sense it as well?” he pleaded again, searching for understanding in my eyes.

I laughed and said that the union symbolizes fertility and prosperity but to no avail. He was convinced that the famous painting honors the harmony between the Goddess Woman as Earth and God Man as Water, with the angelic children symbolizing family.

“It’s wonderful,” he enthused excitedly, “and they are truly happy. Everyone can see that clarity,” he said cheerfully and, looking at me expectantly, he asked. “Won’t you try it once more to see that, the divine union of two different powers, I mean, a true intimacy of man and woman.”

I looked into his trusting eyes, at his enlivened face, and smiled.

Encouraged by my smile, he asked, “Do you know where

their power resides?”

“I believe it lies within their sacred union, in the merging of their unique, different energies,” I said emphatically.

“Exactly,” my friend exclaimed, visibly happy over my affirmation. “The true intimacy between a man and a woman, as envisioned in biblical teachings, is designed to reflect harmony and unity,” stated my friend, looking triumphantly at the painting.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONTENTMENT

*“A contented mind is the greatest blessing
a man can enjoy in this world.”*

– Joseph Addison

The café had gotten busier, so I felt compelled to speak a little louder.

“I understand you,” I said, “but please try...”

“Try what?” he interrupted me, unsatisfied. “Try what?”

“Please,” I pleaded, drawing myself closer to him, “Know and understand that what you’ve just said doesn’t represent the feelings of all women. Fortunately, many women value and appreciate men in their lives.”

“I believe,” he said in a more peaceful tone, “we shouldn’t underestimate the power of the media speaking to the souls of these women, who feel hostile towards men.”

“This is our world now, buddy,” I said. “Bad ideas are contagious.”

“And they spread faster than good ones,” he said. “They have only just started. The most outrageous voices that are brainwashing young guys and young women are always the loudest in modern society,” he remarked with a hint of frustration. “Sometimes I just want to yell to their faces, ‘Get the hell away from them,’” he exclaimed, irritated, unable to hide a great sadness in his angry voice.

“See,” I said, “it’s not only about young guys, but many women are burdened with insecurities and fears, carrying deep-seated resentment within, and it surfaces through expressions like the one you mentioned.”

“It’s strange,” he said, shaking his head. “It is very strange. Why is it that my ex-wife and her female friends don’t seem

afraid of men, while others do?”

“They weren’t nurtured and treated as a princess in safety, like your ex. Many of these fears among women revolve around men. There are bad guys out there, you know.”

“That’s too bad,” he said with a somber tone.

“You don’t need to tell me, that’s terrible.”

“Let them get a dog,” he said, refilling his coffee.

“Who gets dogs?”

“Those who feel scared.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“No, I’m not being silly,” he retorted, looking at me intently. “Why not? Dogs sense bad guys,” he concluded with a toneless voice.

The conversation halted as the waitress approached, balancing a tray with steaming cups of coffee. With a gentle clink, she set them on the table and smiled at my friend. The aroma filled the air around us. Noticing the worn edges of a small paperback peeking out from her apron’s big deep pocket, my friend asked her with surprise,

“Do you have time to read in such a busy café house?”

“Whenever I can steal a moment,” she confessed with a guilty smile, lowering her gaze and adding, “I love to read.”

“That’s wonderful,” my friend said sincerely.

She looked at him and blushed, charmed by his genuine interest.

“Do you read *Anna Karenina*?” my friend asked gently.

“Tolstoy?” The waitress’s eyes lit up with recognition and excitement, broadening with smile.

“Tolstoy is brilliant!”

“I love Tolstoy, but I haven’t read all of his books. Should I read *Anna Karenina*?”

“Yes, it’s quite a remarkable read,” my friend asserted with enthusiasm, encouraged by her curiosity and excitement.

The waitress paused to think. “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” She eyed my friend flirtatiously as she quoted, then added, “19th-century aristocracy in Imperial Russia, isn’t it? Did I remember right?”

“Yes, you have a good memory,” my friend responded with a smile. “And despite being set in 19th-century Saint Petersburg, it still has plenty to say to us modern New Yorkers,” he added with a playful wink, by emphasizing the word ‘us.’

“Really?” she smiled back playfully, her eyes twinkling.

Just as my friend wanted to say something more about Tolstoy’s masterpiece, someone, apparently one of her colleagues, called her, reminding her that her shift for the day was ending. She apologized for the interruption and went away.

“You will benefit from reading *Anna Karenina*,” said my friend after the departing waitress. She turned to us, gracefully making her way out, and with a farewell wave and a charming smile, left the café.

“I think she likes you, and I am not surprised,” I remarked to my friend with a smile.

“I am quite the regular here; this is my favorite café in Manhattan.” Then, with a sudden burst of enthusiasm, he leaned forward and said, “Listen, I believe she’s smitten.”

“What makes you think so?”

“You didn’t see her eyes? They shone so beautifully; she must be in love.”

“Are you suggesting she’s in love with you or someone else?”

He continued without acknowledging my jest.

“Do you remember how Anna’s eyes shined when she was in love?” he asked me passionately. Without waiting for a reply, he quoted with his deep masculine baritone, “She deliberately extinguished the light in her eyes, but it shone against her will in a barely noticeable smile.”

Suddenly, he fell silent, lost in memories of love and loss. After a long pause, he spoke again, barely above a whisper, as if he were revealing a secret. “I believe only a true woman can love unconditionally as deeply and fervently as Anna. Someone who can’t extinguish the light in her eyes from the purity of emotions, experiencing intense, deep passion for

him, despite how hard she tries”.

After my friend’s words, full of longing and reflection, we immersed ourselves in a long silence, lost in our thoughts. The air felt heavy with unspoken emotions, despite the gentle aroma of freshly brewed coffee providing a comforting backdrop to our silent contemplation.

He broke the silence first, gazing fixedly at the coffee cup before him. “It’s ironic and tragic,” he murmured with painful wistfulness and melancholy as he attempted to refill my coffee mug. I moved my hand to cover it.

“Do you always drink this much coffee? I don’t remember you doing so before,” I remarked.

“I’ve changed,” he responded with a shrug.

“Why?” I asked.

“You are right, I am drinking a lot, but that’s fine,” he tried to joke. Then, getting serious, he added, “Since she moved out, I’ve struggled with sleeping. So, I started drinking a lot of coffee to stay alert and focused on my job.” He became quiet for a moment and then said, “Coffee is good,” he smiled and took another sip from his cup.

“I’m afraid it couldn’t possibly be as good as you believe it to be,” I replied with concern. “Contentment is the cure, my friend,” I said. “It’s something many haven’t grasped.”

“How so?”

“Men often wrestle with finding contentment within themselves.”

“I understand, and the inability to do so is painful.”

“It’s a universal experience.”

“Especially for married men.”

“That’s understandable.”

“These times are incredibly confusing.”

“How can one find relief from the pain?” he asked.

“Cease the struggle to prove oneself as a man. Unless a man refrains from it, this struggle will always be a source of pain and suffering for him.”

“I believe men are discontent with being who they truly are.”

“There’s a lot of discussion about the traditional

stereotypes that often link masculinity solely to physical strength, ignoring the deeper drives that compel men to seek meaning beyond life's superficial layers."

"Nobody truly cares about a man's internal struggles or his aspirations for a richer, more connected life."

"See, I believe what a man truly needs is passion. It's not just physical or material desires but a spiritual emptiness and inner hunger that drive many men to fight. This quest for meaning propels us forward, you know?" I paused, locking eyes with him to ensure the weight of my words sank in.

"When we feel empty inside, we're compelled to seek something greater that resonates with our soul and brings contentment. We engage in struggles, push our limits, and sometimes take risks—all to fill that void. Do you understand?" I asked, watching him closely.

My friend nodded, his expression reflecting a quiet acknowledgment.

"Moreover," I continued with conviction, "the passion that emerges goes beyond mere survival. It's about forging a profound connection to life itself. It's about discovering our place in the universe, understanding our purpose, feeling truly content, and forging deep connections with others. Through this journey, we aim to transform our inner emptiness into a wellspring of spiritual richness and meaningful engagement with the world and our own manhood."

"I am convinced that we've become disconnected from past generations," he said with frustration.

"What do you mean?"

"In the past, men embodied a more genuine form of masculinity than we do now."

"I agree."

"Look," he said, exhilarated by my understanding and sitting up straighter, "Just a couple of decades ago, men focused on meaningful actions and didn't feel this insane, intense, constant pressure to prove themselves to Instagram society. They didn't feel compelled to cry out for attention, proudly exhibit themselves surrounded by a harem of half-

naked girls, flaunt their supercars, trains, and airplanes, swim in chocolate fountains with naked girls, and bathe in champagne indulging in caviar.”

I burst into laughter.

“You don’t believe I’m attempting to be a hero rescuing all these lost men, especially the young ones?” he asked.

“Certainly not. I admire the way you describe it.”

“You may not, but many people nowadays consider it foolish and outdated to think like that,” he said, his eye lowered.

“There are many things in the world that don’t add up now, buddy,” I replied, frowning. “How can you explain happy women who feel loved, heard, and validated still leaving their husbands, tearing families apart, and making children fatherless?”

“It’s insanely dangerous to witness that, man,” he responded clearly troubled. Then, with a thoughtful frown, he asked seriously, “Listen, do you know what women need these days?”

“These days, bro, amidst the many strange things we struggle to understand,” I said, then hesitated before adding, “everyone seems to have their own truth.”

“But the enduring truth is what King Solomon would say: ‘Every wise woman builds her house, but a foolish one tears it down with her own hands,’ my friend cited Proverbs 14:1, gazing at me earnestly.

“I believe many of us feel lost and uncertain in the chaos and confusion of our days. People struggle with their roles and identities, unable to find contentment. What’s worse, they often don’t even know what they truly believe in,” he said and continued, exhilarated, “You see, there were men for whom the word ‘contentment’ scarcely conveyed the genuine joy they found in their authentic masculinity. By examining and understanding past generations, we can see the privileges of patriarchy. We must have the courage to acknowledge it.”

“Acknowledge what?”

“That awareness could help us avoid the hopeless chaos in

which we find ourselves—both men and women—desperately searching for answers about what it means to be a man,” he elaborated. “We’ve lost it,” he sighed. “Isn’t it evident that the absence of this genuine form of manliness, I mean stability above all, is now echoing with pain and chaos, especially for young, disoriented men?”

“Yes, we not only lose connection with past generations,” I said, nodding along, “but we also lose sight of our purpose and responsibilities. This forgetfulness compromises our happiness in relationships, leaving us feeling hopeless.”

“I often wonder why men can’t return to a simpler, more authentic form of masculinity—one unburdened by the societal expectations that breed pain and confusion,” my friend said thoughtfully and continued, “To live a life true to one’s nature and the inherent laws of nature, right?”

“You see, there has always been a form of headship in families, traditionally reserved for men. This role, rooted in ancient beliefs, is often referred to as patriarchy, or as some prefer, the rule of the father, embodies sacrifice. It isn’t about exerting control or asserting dominance, nor is it focused solely on the father, do you agree?” I nodded in silent agreement, and my friend continued.

“It’s about love, courage, responsibility, and protection. A father leads his home with love and dedication and safeguards his home and family at any cost. Should any threat arise over his family, he stands as their steadfast protector, defending them without hesitation or regret. A father embraces this duty until his final breath,” he said with fervor and continued.

“The true essence of being a man in such a role isn’t about personal suffering or unmet needs; it rises above them. His leadership is giving and self-sacrificing despite the merciless challenges life throws a man’s way.

“And the truth is, brother, that deep down, all true women yearn to be guided by such a father and man, and this is a timeless truth, even if not everyone wants to admit it.”

“Women want men who are leaders,” he stated firmly, then added, “Nobody wants a weak man, do they?”

“Absolutely,” I responded at once. “And for good reason. A woman is never as authentic and feminine as when she is in the presence of a strong man; her spirit flourishes in the assurance of safety,” I concluded, and looked intently at my friend.

“Did you hear the ancient Indian wisdom? It’s one of my favorites: ‘Never leave a woman alone. When she is a little girl, her father loves and protects her. When she is a young woman, she is loved and cared for by her husband. When she reaches a respectable old age, her son loves and protects her.’”

He swallowed hard and continued, “I heard it when I was a young boy, and I remember how these words touched me deeply—they just got into my soul,” he said thoughtfully, falling into silence.

“Wow!” I exclaimed, leaning forward over the table. “Wise Indians know what they’re talking about, man!” Still excited about these ancient wisdoms, I continued with a wide smile, “It’s a beautiful, poetic way of seeing it, isn’t it? It’s almost as if they were divinely ordained, reflecting how God created woman.” I mused.

He nodded in agreement. “That’s exactly how God created woman,” he confirmed. Out of all the wisdom imparted, the most profound is probably this, “The antidote to chaos is not just order, but also love,” I noted with a smile.

He said nothing, sipped his coffee, and reflected on the thought.

“The value of traditional wisdom lies in this truth, and it has always been so,” he asserted, then added with reflective intensity, “Such wisdom must not only be remembered but deeply cherished, especially by those who have wandered from these age-old teachings, their roots, and values.” He concluded in a contemplative tone.

While he spoke, I shifted in my seat, attempting to cross one leg over the other in the cramped, bustling café. It was then that I noticed a large, elegant black bag adorned with the timeless logo of Chanel near my chair. The owner, a beautiful woman sitting alone at the next table, gave a guilty smile and

murmured an apology as she reached to move it. I responded with a reassuring gesture, indicating that it was fine, returned her smile, carefully adjusted my foot, and continued to watch her discreetly.

Her gaze occasionally drifted towards the coffee shop door as if expecting someone. She placed her bag protectively close to her and occasionally touched it absentmindedly. Her nails, polished in a striking red, caught the light of the afternoon sun, gently streaming through the cafe's large windows, every time she drifted towards the bag, trying to adjust it slightly with the tentative movement of her well-groomed hands.

A worn book lay open in front of her. Her hunched shoulders and downcast eyes suggested she was more pretending to be absorbed than genuinely interested in reading. Every so often, she offered a forced smile to passersby who ventured too close, a facade of engagement that barely masked her solitude. In that instant, I became keenly aware of how lonely we are, even in a crowd.

Turning back to my friend, I shared a thought. "It's striking how often we find ourselves surrounded by others, yet we remain locked in our own separate worlds," I mused aloud, genuinely frustrated.

He nodded in silent agreement. "It's tough to come to terms with our desire to make new friendships or connect deeply with someone, whether you're in a café or a museum."

"We push people away because we are scared of being hurt or rejected, dear friend," I said, meeting his gaze.

"I think most of them are truly at peace with being alone, aren't they?" he asked hesitantly, gazing around the cafe.

"People have simply found a way to coexist quietly with their solitude," I said. My friend looked at me suspiciously.

"Listen, do you ever ponder this? How can people experiencing such solitude find true contentment? From what place or state does it arise?"

I shook my head, leaned forward, and said thoughtfully, "It's not that simple, buddy. It's not just about the solitude itself," I added. "As I age, I find more and more that true

contentment comes not from mastering the complexities of life but from embracing its inevitable uncertainties.”

“That’s a profound observation,” he said firmly. “It’s true.”

“Isn’t it?” I asked, slightly raising my voice. “No matter how much we plan or try to control things, there’s always uncertainty. ‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future,’ That’s Jeremiah 29:11,” I named the Bible quote and continued, “Many among us fail to understand that despite God’s assurance, we are responsible for how we treat each as a man and woman, how we nurture our relationships.

“We frequently fall short,” he said, “neglecting to learn from our mistakes, which leads to feelings of shame as we recognize that we’re trapped in a cycle of repetition, which ultimately undermines our happiness. Meanwhile, it’s common to hear, ‘Everything happens for a reason.’”

“That’s a keen observation. Recognizing our repetitive struggles could indeed be key. Do you think uncovering their deeper meanings might guide us forward?”

“It’s easy for people to utter these words, but do they truly understand what they mean? What causes these events? Who or what is responsible?” he continued, visibly irritated. “Are dark forces at play, or is it divine intervention? How can people maintain such steadfast faith in this saying? What exactly do they mean when they say, ‘It’s all good’?” he asked, his tone tinged with anger.

“See, buddy,” I said, “living on this Earth, people grapple with existential burdens as they strive to discover life’s meaning and seek answers to the events around them. Sometimes, they gain awareness, while other times, they remain oblivious. However, they often neglect to question why something can occur seemingly without purpose.”

“We often accept things without questioning,” he replied thoughtfully. “Seeking deeper answers could shift our perspective while still leaving some mysteries unsolved.”

“The truth is, understanding why events happen enables us

to accept and cope with them. Conversely, ignorance of the reasons can make our suffering unbearable. Believe me, bro, before I discovered the reasons behind my battle with cancer, coping was incredibly challenging. Understanding that it wasn't meaningless certainly didn't free me from pain, but..."

He interrupted me, "Of course not. I wish it had never happened to you," he said.

"It was challenging to explain why it happens and what causes it to happen, and at the very end of my search process, I could accept that it should happen. Eventually, just finding that meaning helps us manage the situation and the pain by encouraging us to fight and survive."

"To find meaning requires a very noble and brave spirit, one that dares to seek understanding amidst life's painful challenges and accepts them."

"You know, regardless of the paralyzing hardships people face—emotionally, spiritually, and physically—they firmly believe that whatever becomes of their lives has been predestined. Many imply that everything happens to create something good for the person."

"If this is true, which I don't believe it is, how could such tragedies like the death of an innocent child be considered good?" he asked. "What will they say now? Some things happen for a reason, while others happen for no reason. This aspect of human nature is deeply maddening to me," he said, irritated and continued, "Listen, if we don't know why all these things happen, who knows what else can happen, right? And yet, people still believe that everything happens to create something good. Do you understand this?"

"We are born with an innate tendency to focus on the good and seek connections with the world through that goodness. We long to connect with other people," I told him.

"Not only good but evil as well, meaning we are all born with all sorts of natural tendencies," my friend said. "Look around, see what has happened? Where has innate goodness gone? The way we think of others, look, and react to the things around us simplifies who we are. My friend, the world we

know now doesn't reflect much of humans' innate goodness.

"You see, it is quite ambiguous, sometimes even arguable. It is a matter of personal belief and perspective. I believe God never closes one door without opening another. Once we are clear about this wisdom, we learn to look at things in a different light," I said.

"Why do we keep making the same mistakes?" he asked, leaning back in his chair. "Is it a habit, or are we just wired to repeat them, stuck in some kind of loop?" He paused briefly before continuing, "It seems our past mistakes trap us if we keep repeating them, even without realizing it. What does that mean, though?" he asked earnestly, locking eyes with me.

"Admitting failure is tough, buddy, especially when the feelings of failure are intense. It stings. It's really about owning up to it," I responded thoughtfully.

"Tolstoy had it right, 'The meaning of life is what we choose to give it.' It always deeply resonated with me," he continued with conviction. "Your first responsibility in life is to understand yourself, your purpose, your own meaning. By striving to understand yourself and others, you can live your life to the fullest."

"Nobody's wisdom provides me with as much inner peace, strength, and happiness as Tolstoy's," he said with a voice reflecting deep admiration.

"You are not alone, my friend. His wisdom can reshape the world, guiding us with profound clarity," I affirmed, nodding.

"We all need to grapple with what's real."

"And what is reality?" he asked.

"To live from the inside out. Everything external to us is an illusion, not reality."

"How practical is it to live from the inside out?"

"It's not simple; it's a challenging journey, buddy. That's why very few of us muster the courage to confront things exactly as they are by breaking free from our past.

"Today's reality is essentially a reflection of our past beliefs."

"Exactly. If we don't face and release these early wounds,

moving forward, we lose connection with our true selves and continue living without remembering who we truly are. Refusing to forgive our parents and those from failed relationships is not effortless; true peace requires a wise, forgiving spirit and avoiding assigning blame to others and circumstances for those beliefs.”

“So, do we tend to believe what we’ve been conditioned to believe? Are these core beliefs the principles that govern how we live?” he asked.

“Not really,” I said, “Well, core beliefs are simply beliefs, not necessarily aligned with your true self or true values.”

“I believe they often aren’t based on truth.”

“That’s right. Listen, many years ago, I came across a profoundly moving article in a magazine that stirred deep emotions I will never forget.”

“Indeed, a truly powerful article can challenge our views,” I remarked, encouraging him to continue the conversation.

“During an interview, a journalist asked a woman, “Do you know that people consider you the most beautiful woman in the world?” Sincerely astonished by the question, the woman responded, “Really? No one ever told me I was pretty when I was a little girl, not even my mother. All little girls should be told they’re pretty, even if they aren’t.” Can you guess who that woman was?” I asked.

“Who?”

“It was Marilyn Monroe.”

“Beautifully poignant,” he said, nodding.

“More than that, what saddens me is that there are still countless beautiful girls out there who never hear from their own mothers that they are beautiful, even if they truly are. Their mothers not only refrain from calling them pretty but continually criticize them and even hurtfully label them as ugly. I have been observing young girls for quite some time and noticed how their mothers’ attitudes have taken a toll on them. This hinders communication and often leads daughters to turn against themselves.”

“It’s so sad. I find it painful because nothing is as influential

as the messages we receive during our childhood. I think mothers who act this way are simply monsters.”

“They aren’t, my friend. Most of them love their children in their own way, but they don’t realize the importance of the bond between them and their daughters and don’t value it enough. Unconsciously, they make their daughters deeply miserable by not taking responsibility for their feelings, engaging in emotional abuse, and making hurtful statements.

“The world has changed since Marilyn Monroe’s time, but the only unchangeable relationship is between a mother and daughter, son and dad. It’s so sad because all relationships need honest communication, no matter how painful it can be.” The sadness in his voice deepened as he continued, “The opposite of that is emotional and mental distancing. At that point, there would be no hope for repairing their broken hearts,” he concluded, clearly disappointed. “A child’s heart is like a flawless, radiant crystal. Once broken, repairing it is an arduous task, and it will never shine with the same brilliance again.”

“Yes, it’s hard. Girls often isolate themselves emotionally, and the seeds of unhappiness and fear take root in their hearts from an early age, sometimes lingering for a lifetime,” I said.

“I believe that when we are starved of encouraging, loving words from our parents in our early years, we become desperate. A mother should set an example, as daughters often derive their image of femininity from their mothers.”

“The father is just as indispensable for boys,” I said. “Parents who fail to acknowledge their children’s feelings often forget that when children lack encouraging, loving words in their early years, they feel desperate and face a bleak future. This truth applies to boys as well.” He nodded sadly as I spoke. “Every time I meet young men, I feel deeply touched, knowing how these great guys find joy in the little things that don’t usually cost a lot of money. It’s painful yet important to listen to their childhood experiences.”

We were losing track of time and unaware that the other visitors to the café had gradually, one by one, bid their farewells and departed into the night, leaving behind a

tranquil atmosphere. Without paying attention to the passage of time or the gradual fading of chatter and clinking glasses as the café emptied, we found peace in the quieting of our surroundings and solace and reassurance in each other's presence, cherishing the bond forged through the years.

Suddenly, a thought struck me, and I exclaimed excitedly to him, "Listen! I just remembered something very important: you are not tired, do you have time?" I asked.

"I always have time for you, my friend."

"I am happy to know it. You wouldn't mind, truly?" I asked again, glancing at the watch on the wall, its Roman numerals indicating it was time to go home.

He smiled encouragingly, extended his hand to me as a sign of approval and readiness, and then sat back comfortably, indicating that he was totally ready to listen to the story I would tell him.

"Great," I exclaimed, rubbing my hands in anticipation and smiling at the waitress who had just appeared nearby to clean the next table. "I have a unique story to share with you, one I heard not long ago."

"Everyone's story is unique," he said.

"Certainly," I agreed eagerly, "but this one simply stands out."

CHAPTER EIGHT

(Based on a True story)

ABANDONMENT

“How could you live and have no story to tell?”

– F.M. Dostoevsky

One winter’s day, as I returned from Sweden to New York, I found myself stranded at Arlanda airport by an inclement snowstorm. The vast hall was abuzz with the subdued drone of stranded passengers and intermittent announcements. Amidst this backdrop of chaotic stillness, there’s hardly anything more tedious than being confined within the impersonal expanse of an airport lounge.

By sheer chance, I encountered a man in the business lounge, a solitary figure in the bustling space. He was seated comfortably with a cup of steaming coffee in one hand and a worn book in the other.

When he noticed me looking for a seat, he closed his book with a gentle thud and gave me a friendly nod, gesturing to the empty chair beside him. It didn’t take long to realize he was the perfect companion to help me pass the indeterminate wait.

After exchanging polite introductions, the conversation soon deepened. The man shared with me that his father had never spoken to him as a child. It wasn’t merely a lack of conversation; it was a complete denial of verbal exchange, a void of paternal connection.

This, he began, was his *story*:

“When a man drinks, half of the house is on fire, but when his wife drinks, the whole house and yard are on fire.”

– Russian Proverb

I remember that every time I returned home from school, my mother would greet me at the door, pressing her fingers to her lips, always conveying one message: "Please, don't speak. Be quiet, your father is sleeping." To me, it signaled that he had been drinking.

He would come home constantly drunk and sleep until morning when he must go to his miserable job. No one dared to touch him or talk to him. Waking him felt like unleashing a violent storm that would tear through our home, leaving us both bruised and terrified. Even my mother lived in constant fear, always walking on eggshells.

He never helped me with anything or taught me anything. All I learned was fear, and fear, as we know, does not promote learning.

I never felt safe when he was around. He was convinced that a child needed to fear his dad to behave. That fear burdened me with a sense of weakness and unworthy love, accompanied by suffering. As painful as it is to hear, I was never allowed to talk to him, and one day our conversation simply ceased to exist.

As far as I remember, he was always drunk and angry, surrounded by empty vodka bottles and cigarettes strewn. He would often mumble something incomprehensible under his mustache, losing control over what he was saying or doing.

He hated me and held contempt for me when he was drunk, but during those brief moments of sobriety, he mellowed.

Nevertheless, I still felt intimidated because, at any moment, for any reason, he could give me a disapproving look. My true suffering began when he ridiculed me, an emotionally stunted boy, labeling me a coward.

It seemed that he hated everyone and everything when he drank, including his boss and his job. His hatred intensified when he talked about the country and its system, the cycle of poverty that trapped him in a miserable job and with vodka.

After cursing them all, he wept like a vulnerable, helpless child in pain. I sensed more than just his anger and pain; I genuinely sympathized with him. I pitied him but was unable

to comfort him. It seemed to me that he carried so much inner pain that, despite all the empty vodka bottles around him, he couldn't drink away the pain or drown his anguish in alcohol.

Our home wasn't the only thing broken; our whole community was stuck in a flawed system that caused violence, addiction, and hopelessness. Later in my life, I realized that this made me rebel not just against him but against everything holding us captive.

The only lesson I learned from my father, the one thing he ever taught me, was not to be like him. My fear wasn't just that he was always drunk but that anything I did, whatever grades I got in school, would make him angry, leading him to routinely spank me with a belt.

I can't forget my mother's eyes, usually so dull from resignation, becoming wide and fearful, darting between him and me as if deciding whether to shield me with her frail body or flee.

None of my teachers or schoolmates knew what my life looked like at home. I felt too ashamed to tell.

Realizing that I would always be punished, I indeed became wild and unruly, no longer heeding my mother's words, 'Wait until your father gets home,' as they failed to deter or frighten me.

Gradually, I started to care less and less, so much so that I was a rebel in my early teenage years and became a gang leader. Then, one day, my father never came home, without saying anything or warning anybody.

Our neighbor, a kind widow whose husband had succumbed to the allure of cheaper vodka, informed us that my father had packed his belongings and departed, muttering obscenities just as he always did.

We never saw him again or received any communication from him.

They say every child carries the sounds and smells of their childhood. For me, it was the tense air, thick with the stench of stale vodka and cheap tobacco, filtering through the flickering dim light in our cramped living room, looming over

us with long shadows like ghosts, and the mournful clatter of empty bottles echoing as he stumbled around.

Suddenly, at twelve, I became the man of the house, forced to mature. I grew increasingly rebellious and aggressive, mirroring the behavior of not only my peers in class but also the entire neighborhood, where violence, poverty, and alcoholism were on the rise.

I lived a life similar to other boys my age, alongside my schoolmates and the guys from my neighborhood. However, it always felt like I was somehow different from the rest, and perhaps that very difference led me to become their leader.

We shared many common experiences that bound us together like a large, close-knit family. Yet, our group's most defining characteristic was that each of us came from a fatherless, broken family.

Our already challenging existence took a turn for the worse at school when the teachers, lacking any effective means of discipline, labeled us as clueless and worthless, stupid idiots.

It infuriated me whenever the girls in my class teased me based on the harsh words of our teachers.

As an adult, upon reading Plato's insightful words, 'Of all the animals, the boy is the most unmanageable,' I couldn't help but reflect on the wisdom embedded within it. I yearned to convey this wisdom to all the other teachers, unlike those in my own life, who failed to comprehend our upbringing as boys with wounded souls and shattered hearts, along with the unique ways we thought and behaved.

They couldn't grasp the simple truth that 'it is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.'

The more they called us names, insulting us, the harder and the more desperately we fought to keep it together, supporting each other in our battle against not just the mockery, bullying, and isolation but also the guilt and shame we felt for our fathers.

It's hard to say what we longed for most, what we craved more—attention, our absent fathers, or simply the feeling of being understood by someone. But the truth is, the more

uncontrollable we became at school, the more the teachers ruined our lives, contributing to our misery, and nobody knew how to help us seek a way out of that hell.

One of the teachers, an old bitter woman who always complained to us about how she would survive on her pension, once demanded that I bring my father with me to school. I mumbled under my breath that I couldn't. The class burst into laughter. A girl told the teacher my father had abandoned us, provoking even more laughter in the classroom.

Upon hearing this, the teacher turned bright red with anger. She was furious with me for being the leader of the boys' gang and labeled me a dangerous monster.

"I can't understand why you were ever brought into this world," she shouted, seizing my red tie, which all pioneers were required to wear, and shaking me vigorously. "You are as much a coward as your dad!" she screamed hysterically in my face. "You can't deny it. Nobody can! You understand?" she yelled, delivering a stinging slap to my cheek. "Your father never took responsibility. Like father, like son – the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. I distinctly remember that unruly rascal at your age when he was my student, making my life a living hell along with the other undisciplined rascals in the same class. And all of this during my first year as a teacher. I swear by God, I endured so much from all of them, and all for such a meager salary and the promise of a future pension." Her voice suddenly quivered as she uttered the word 'pension,' and her once red, distorted face from screaming now appeared haggard before our eyes.

One day, as I aimlessly wandered around the schoolyard with nothing to do, I noticed two teachers engaged in a conversation. The closer I got to them, the clearer I could hear my name. Suddenly, I felt threatened and fearful.

I began to wonder what they were planning to do now. Were they going to report me to the authorities or even contact the police?

The mere thought of involving the police made me feel nauseous. Instinctively, I sought refuge behind a large linden

tree. With a heart pounding from fear, I eavesdropped on their conversation. ‘Where is our society headed with all these fatherless households? Where have the fathers gone? Where have all the real men disappeared to?’ I heard one teacher say.

“All the good men never returned from the war, my dear; they stayed on the battlefield. This is a different kind of war—the ongoing battle of fatherless boys. The life they lead is nothing but an ongoing struggle for survival,’ replied the other teacher.

“I can’t comprehend what drives them to act this way. We also grew up without fathers, but our behavior was different. They seem consumed by so much anger, resentment, and rage. Sometimes, I find myself despising all of them.’

“What a generation! Their escalating aggressiveness is truly frightening. Just imagine them in high school—wild, chaotic, and undisciplined. I fear they might even harm a teacher. It’s truly terrifying,’ they continued.

“That’s because they didn’t have the same guidance that we did. They didn’t learn the difference between right and wrong, as our fathers taught us.’

“I firmly believe that a father is a child’s first teacher, guiding them to acquire knowledge and virtues while maintaining discipline within the family.’

“They instilled in us the right path to follow, and as we grew up, we held on to those teachings.’

“I recall how our fathers were true caretakers.’

“They were men of duty with a sense of moral obligation.’

“Yes, they were truly honorable men who protected and provided for their wives and children but prioritized their needs above their own.’

“That’s right. A real man takes responsibility by providing for and supporting his family, a virtue that many men seem to lack these days.’

“But how can an alcoholic and abusive father take responsibility? Look at them; they’re all heavy drinkers.’

“Our fathers never became alcoholics like theirs, and that makes all the difference in the world.’

“In some families, even the mothers are alcoholics. What can you expect? Remember the old Russian proverb, “When a man drinks, half of the house is on fire, but when his wife drinks, the whole house and yard are on fire.” It’s an unfortunate reality. The result is always an unhappy home and a miserable life for the children.’

“All these boys are deprived of care, warmth, love, empathy, and security from their parents. I don’t know who can help them, at least not you or me. It’s incredibly hard for us to make a difference for forty students in just forty-five minutes.’

Suddenly, she became unkind. ‘Why should we care? Nobody else does.’

“The boys needed their fathers, and their fathers didn’t care. With no man to guide them, the boys are likely to lose their way and become like their alcoholic fathers.’

“Every human being deserves love, especially children, I understand. But I think all these kids are simply unwanted and neglected. I can’t figure out why these unloved kids were ever born,’ she concluded with her nefarious voice and then hushed.

I could barely believe what I heard. My pain ran deep like never before. The teacher’s keen and sharp words painfully struck me. I felt an ache in my heart. The same unceasing pain surged through me again, the same ache I felt when I lost my friends.

I moved silently away from the tree and wept. I wept for a long time, quietly and bitterly, due to my helplessness, for my terrible loneliness and being unloved.

I can’t fully express the depth of my emotions, guilt, and shame whenever people describe me as an undesirable, unloved child, the son of an abusive father who abandoned me. Worst of all was the shame—the relentless shame of being unloved—that tightened in my chest and always weighed heavily on me.

However, the shame I carried suddenly became unbearable after the teacher’s words. Even worse was my unmet longing

to be seen by everyone, to be somebody, which got lost again as I hid from fear. It felt as if I had lost something very precious to me.

I felt a powerful rush of rage, an intense desire to punch holes in walls again, as I did when I got mad from unbearable pain. But I was in the schoolyard, with only a single bench along the fence where those two teachers had sat and a large linden tree behind which I was hiding.

I wished I could punch the teachers instead and send them to hell like all the other people who had constantly told me why I had been born. I felt like I was falling downhill to hell again, with no way to escape. I felt sorry for myself, and the more I pitied myself, the more I constantly wanted to die.

As an adult man, I still can't comprehend how our teachers, who grew up themselves as fatherless war orphans, having lost their fathers in WWII like so many other children in the country, couldn't grasp our pain. They seemed unwilling and unable to help a vulnerable child trying to break the cycle of poverty and abuse and establish an identity for himself instead of being labeled as clueless bastards.

Today, many people in society lament that children seem to lack respect and common sense for their parents and teachers, causing innumerable troubles. The adults struggle to find a way out of this crisis but are often unsuccessful. "Doesn't anybody fully grasp the importance of the transformative influence of love in nurturing children into wisdom?" the man exclaimed.

"I believe Astrid Lindgren had a greater understanding of the shame and pain experienced by unloved children when she wrote her famous words of wisdom: 'Give the children love, more love, and still more love - and common sense will come by itself.'" He quoted with admiration and a hint of sadness, reflecting the depth of emotion stirred by her words.

"An amazingly beautiful truth about love to live by. It should be made into a slogan and hung on every door in homes, schools, libraries, and local places where our children go to learn," the man said with an admirable voice and

continued. “Sometimes, I think it was precisely my old teacher’s inability and lack of willingness that made them despise their jobs and their students, not just their meager salaries or the shortage of energy and resources.

You see, enduring mockery from old teachers, I wished for a male teacher. Having one could have filled the void, serving as a role model. They could have taught us about manhood by example. Unfortunately, we were deprived of this influence. Not because ‘good men didn’t return from war,’ but because society attempts to emasculate male teachers in schools even now.

After a humiliating incident with my teacher, I rushed from the classroom, heart pounding with rage and shame. I was fleeing more than just her—I was escaping a school that saw me not as a child in need but as the only problem.

The schoolyard battles persisted, as did my silent defiance against imposed expectations. With every taunt, my resolve strengthened; I was determined to prove them wrong. Deep down, I knew I was more than my father’s mistakes, yet refusing to go to school.

My mom said that if I stopped going to school, she would take her own life. I loved my mom, so I was compelled to return to the same hell day after day. Our impoverished circumstances left us with few options, and we had to stay at the same school where I had recently moved. It was the only school in our community, located near the most affordable housing in town, where we lived.

I was still the new kid in school; as you might expect, everyone was curious. Unfortunately, rumors of my terrible reputation always reached them before they had a chance to meet me. This didn’t surprise me, as these rumors had been circulating in my small town for a long time, and I felt powerless to do anything about it.

Just imagine it: I had attended five different elementary schools, and each time I arrived, I was met with a hostile exclamation: “Oh, he’s back again!”

I distinctly recall that after changing schools, I would always

tell myself not to repeat the mistakes I had made in the previous school.

I refrained from expressing my intense feelings of anger and frustration at home because I didn't want to burden my mom. I cherished the idea of protecting her. However, I would vent my pent-up emotions on the streets with my gang, not realizing that my actions outside the home only added to her pain.

Yes, enduring the chastening was unbearably hard and I returned to school with an unwavering intention to end my life. Two of my closest friends had already taken that path.

We fought a lot, sustaining many injuries and wounds, sometimes excruciatingly painful ones, but we never cried. Physical pain comes and goes, but the inner pain never leaves.

This constant venting of rage and hurt over my fatherless life, our shameful poverty, the mockery from teachers, and bullying by classmates eventually led me to the police station more than once.

Many years later, reflecting on these painful memories, I am reminded of Jonathan Kozol's statement, 'We are going to build a lot more prisons if we do not deal with the schools and their inequalities.'

Being seriously neglected, they had always been inclined towards suicide. I had never felt so shocked, sad, frustrated, and lonely in my entire life, and no one ever knew how I felt about it. My friends tragically died by suicide, feeling lost, isolated and unloved, and no one tried to prevent it, or ensure that children were kept safe and secure.

Death is a strange thing, but I never understood it until the day the boys died. It was the first tragedy of my life, my first loss, and I didn't know how to cope with the unexpected death of my friends. I was heartbroken.

I continue to love them, but I struggle to express it. My chest ached with emptiness. I felt like there was a deep hole in my heart. The pain of loss was overwhelming, yet I never found support from adults who were willing to listen and even

cry with me.

No one seemed to notice my devastation, heartbreak, or grief. My pain went unrecognized. Mourning my loss made life incredibly difficult.

For the first time in my life, I cried, despite the saying that ‘boys don’t cry,’ although I was a gang leader.

Even after so many years of reflecting on these bitter memories from my youth, the expectation that boys and men should be less emotional and never show their feelings persists.

It wasn’t just crying; later, I burst into tears, but even crying didn’t help. I fell to the floor, howling like a wounded animal, screaming wordlessly. My screams reached no one. I screamed louder, but it was still in vain.

I carried an unbearable pain and anger ever since my father left. This turmoil only intensified with the tragic deaths of my friends, hitting me like a tsunami triggered by an earthquake.

Longing for compassion yet receiving none, I gradually learned to mask my pain. The pain never truly vanishes; it merely fades to a dull ache over time,” he murmured.

“Some grief never really goes away,” I replied, my voice low and heavy with understanding.

“I directed my anger not only towards teachers and adults but also against everyone and the entire world, struggling against the insults of the adult world.

As a young boy, my first and most painful impression of life was that we were doomed to grow up in a culture in a country filled with other fatherless boys prone to anger.

However, it made no difference to anyone, least of all to me. I, too, harbored anger, but it was a different kind, mixed with bitterness and resentment—a quiet anger growing in my heart.

Nothing changed after the deaths of my friends. The world had taken away my best friends and my will to live, yet it continued to move forward perfectly with all the teachers, schoolmates, and people around me, unaffected by the absence of those boys.

My isolated inner world suffered even more, becoming acutely aware of this reality. Constantly feeling insecure, my childhood desire for an orderly and fruitful life, yearning for the benevolent presence of a loving father and his protection and encouragement, resurfaced in my heart. Yet, I held grudges against him, struggling to manage my resentment.

Most of all, I was angry at him for our unstable life. I always wished for a stable home where I could feel safe without fearing being thrown out onto the street due to his inability to pay rent. I can't recall how many times we moved from one apartment to another, but at every house we left, the landlord would claim something from our already meager belongings as compensation for unpaid debts.

I remember the last time we had to give away my new jacket, which would have kept me warm during the harsh winter in one of the snowiest countries in the world. I don't remember how many days my mom cried after that, but I can never forget the shame I felt for our poverty, which quickly turned into hatred and helplessness over our misery.

I despised everything and everyone who made her cry. That day, I vowed to become wealthy at any cost, not for money, but to never see my mom so sad again.

I never confided in anyone, but deep within me, I always nurtured the dream of seeing my father as a brave and courageous man in my imaginative world. I yearned for his courage, much like my friends expressed similar desires for their own fathers.

I envisioned him attending my imaginative sports events, placing his hand on my shoulder, my head, and telling me how proud he was of me. I simply couldn't understand why he left us, but what haunted and tormented me the most was the lack of understanding of why he had abandoned me. Everyone said he had always wanted a son. Why wasn't I enough for him? The deeper I sense the feeling of being unloved and fatherless, the heavier and greater the burden of shame becomes for me to bear. Why was I unworthy of his love? This question has haunted me since my childhood.

Years later, John Steinbeck answered my poignant childhood question: ‘Why do men like him want sons?’ he wondered. ‘It must be because they hope in their poor beaten souls that these new men, who are their blood, will do the things they were not strong, wise, or brave enough to do. It is rather like another chance at life, like a new bag of coins at a table of luck after your fortune is gone.’

What hurt me the most was when that old teacher publicly called my father a coward in front of the entire class. I had never experienced such intense shame and embarrassment in my entire life. Her words dripped with contempt and disgust. I remember blushing deeply, feeling everyone’s eyes on me in the classroom, struggling to hold back tears. I cried the entire night and couldn’t stop dwelling on it.

I was astounded to discover that all these feelings for my father still lingered within me. Why is this? How is it possible to continue yearning for an abusive alcoholic father with whom normal conversation was nearly impossible? Why do I constantly seek his approval and validation, despite the harm he caused us?

These memories, stored with pain, are hurting me deeply once again. I should feel hatred, or at the very least, sorrow, and hardly long for him, but I don’t feel that way.

I simply loved him, unable to understand how I could continue to love him and keep alive the hope to earn his love and approval despite the abandonment and abuse.

From the beginning, when he left us, I clung to the belief that if I continued to love and support him, he would eventually come back, recognize his mistakes, and become a good father.

He also left me with a small, cherished memory—a tiny bit of kindness that I believe, in my idealized childhood world, could change a person. Every time I recall it with excitement, I wonder if it might be the reason behind my unfulfilled desire to see him again.

Yes, I always held on to the hope that my father would change or at least seek forgiveness. It was probably my desire

for validation that made me feel a deep emotional connection to him, even when I realized that it was not reciprocated. I wasn't entirely sure.

What I did know was that I had struggled for a long time and had put in great effort to suppress all memories of him that incessantly resurfaced within me. Only now did I painfully realize that they had always remained there, no matter how fiercely I fought to bury them.

Ultimately, I came to understand that it was me who had attempted to bury my feelings as deeply as possible, concealing them beneath the layers of my broken heart.

More than anything else, I struggled to reconcile his image as a loving dad with the reality of his abusive actions. I yearned to feel loved, understood, and valued, to have a sense of importance without enduring neglect from the adult world.

Meanwhile, the old teacher who had dedicated her entire life to disciplining us, referring to us as 'dangerous, clueless bastards,' retired, filled with fear about her life as a pensioner. We were assigned a new teacher to replace her.

However, nothing changed in my life; the same teasing and ridicule continued at school, and I remained entangled in endless fights with the boys who were not part of our group.

"'Why do you behave this way?' she asked me once.

"'I don't know,' I replied evasively.

"'You should know because you are not an idiot, despite what all these people may think of you,' she asserted.

Her words left me even more bewildered.

"'I believe you're not unintelligent, and if you want, you can become somebody and lead a better life,' she said to me. 'Why do you do all of this?' she asked again, swiftly gathering our notebooks from the table. It suddenly occurred to me that she didn't expect an answer and was preparing to leave the classroom.

Instead of replying, I burst into tears because there was no answer, and there couldn't be one. I didn't know how to respond to her. Meanwhile, the teacher slowly approached the door, her heavy bag laden with notebooks.

Abandonment

A sense of panic overwhelmed me, a strange feeling that if I didn't explain myself, she might retract all the kind words she had just spoken.

“Because nobody loves me, nobody understands me!” Tears welled up in my eyes. Just before she opened the door, she turned back to me. Her words seemed to cut through the air with clarity and authority.

“Boys make excuses. Men take responsibility. Be a man,” she said, and walked away, closing the door behind her.”

CHAPTER NINE

THE UNRULED

*“The youth who do not feel the love of the village
will burn it to feel it’s warmth.”*

– African proverb

I looked across the table in the quietening café at my friend, he was still enthralled.

“Shall I continue?” I asked him.

“Please.”

I continued with the man’s story, “I was just a fourteen-year-old boy when she told me that, and it has stuck with me ever since. We didn’t intentionally break the rules to challenge the authority of teachers or to harm them or others around us; our actions were quite inadvertent. We were simply starving for someone to listen to us. We yearned for purpose, belonging, love, and connection. All we had was each other. The gang became a home for us.

Our actions were rooted in unspoken resentment and anger, driven by a longing to feel less neglected and emasculated.

As boys, we were aware of our inherent masculinity and sought to mitigate the sense of being lost, particularly to ease the pain of growing up without fathers.

The labels of ‘cowards’ and ‘monsters’ wounded us deeply, to the point where we couldn’t find solace. We began pursuing satisfaction in any form that made us feel victorious, brave, like winners, and true men, not cowards.

We genuinely believed that this was the path to becoming men. The only way to deter us was for the adults and individuals around us to comprehend that we would persist in our actions, turning away from them unless we felt loved and

understood. But who cared?

Adults, particularly teachers, often possess an innate understanding of how to manipulate children's emotions, even to hurt them. The most detrimental action they can take is to shame children and make them feel guilty. As I grew older, I recognized this as a form of abuse of power.

I vividly remember how every time I tried to ask a question, the old teacher would shout at me, saying, 'Enough with these stupid questions!' This would invariably elicit laughter from the rest of the class.

The more I was labeled a 'stupid idiot' for daring to ask 'stupid questions,' the more I withdrew and grew anxious, avoiding conversations in class altogether.

Then, one day, while overseeing the class, the teacher encouraged everyone to ask questions. Cowed by the fear of being ridiculed as a 'stupid idiot with stupid questions' once again, I initially hesitated to ask anything. However, under her persistent prodding and amid the laughter of my classmates, I reluctantly mustered the courage to pose a question. After the class, she asked me to stay behind for a private conversation once everyone else had left. This request filled me with panic, akin to a trained dog dreading its next command.

"I believe the question you asked today was sincere,' she commented. 'Dig deep into the core of your desires and true passions, and live your life guided by them. Be honest with yourself and define your beliefs about your identity. Everyone harbors a hidden belief about themselves, so take charge and define who you truly are. Consider this: if you can't find the answers within yourself, dear boy, turn to many good books. They will serve as reminders of your identity. Just for a moment, envision how you might approach tomorrow differently if you were someone else. Remember, you possess the power to craft your own identity. Keep that in mind, young man.'

The teacher spoke softly, in hushed tones, yet her words carried profound significance. They resonated deeply with me. You know what? I can still hear her voice saying, "You are

the creator of your own identity because we ultimately shape who we become. Remember, boy, you will only create who you are.”

Emotionally neglected by the adult world, I not only felt disconnected from them but also from my own emotions. I struggled to properly understand myself, unsure of how to even begin. I had no interests or dreams; how could I develop a passion for something? I found it challenging to trust the teacher’s words, struggling to fully grasp the depth of her message. I was uncertain about which truths I needed to uncover, what beliefs I should hold about myself and my circumstances. Her mention of “hidden beliefs” left me even more perplexed, as I had no beliefs of my own except those imposed on me by others.

In truth, I had no self-belief whatsoever. My perception was that I fell short in every aspect, lacking intelligence and wealth.

I remember shaking my head, pondering how it could be possible, after all these years, to continue feeling so limited and unworthy, living life under the weight of the shameful labels others had assigned to me. Emotionally stunted, I was uncertain how to initiate change, but the teacher’s encouraging words acted as a soothing balm for my wounds. It felt like a massive wave of refreshment had washed over me, gradually erasing the victim mentality and the “loser” image I had long held of myself. Something deep within me began to shift. Her words ignited a journey of self-discovery. Believing in myself and witnessing this transformation filled me with hope and courage. It’s a feeling I can’t quite describe but immensely powerful and joyful.

Have you ever been inspired to change, pursue something passionately, and achieve it? I have. As I once said, “I cannot make you understand. I cannot make anyone understand what is happening inside me. I cannot even explain it to myself.” I found that I no longer needed to fear the opinions of others.

I started searching for a role model but couldn’t find anyone within my community to look up to. Unexpectedly,

and to the surprise and ridicule of many, I dared to visit the library to study the great writers, delve into philosophies of success, love, and happiness, and gain an understanding of what it means to be a true man, the opposite of a coward.

Above all, I was obsessed. I aspired to uncover the secret to wealth and become genuinely prosperous, much like I had witnessed in an American movie. It was a conscious decision I made on my own. I simply felt it, and I couldn't ignore my feelings.

The more I immersed myself in reading, the more I felt valued in the company of my new literary companions, becoming my new friends. As I deepened my friendships, my trust, courage, and confidence blossomed.

What a blessing! I had found my best friends. That was what I called these great books, which inspired and captivated me for hours, weeks, and months—my entire life, helping me to discover my heroes within the pages of books.

It's challenging to put into words, but the joy of immersing myself in the library was immeasurable. It felt like magic. The more I read, the more I unearthed about myself and the world surrounding me. The more I realized that books affected me in ways that surpassed any teacher in school, the greater my appreciation and love for books grew, providing me with comfort and an avenue for escapism. It brought me an indescribable joy.

Ultimately, I had to begin by recognizing my worthiness and inherent deserving nature, which I believed was lost. Above all, I became willing to believe in myself and the potential within me to be a genuine man.

Reveling in the richness of life, I grasped the true essence of the teacher's words, "You will only create who you are." My love for knowledge and learning deepened—an insatiable drive to seek and absorb more awareness, fresh insights, and wisdom spanning millennia, like a parched sponge absorbing water.

What joy it was to lose myself in the library. Could anyone else have achieved the same effect on me? No! Only great books and constant reading could profoundly impact my

awareness and provide experiences for the mind, heart, and soul.

Later in life, when someone asks how I became prosperous and what the secret to becoming a genuine man is, my response remains consistent, “It’s simple: just read books.” Many who hear this believe it’s a joke, thinking I haven’t disclosed my ‘secret code.’

I was already grown when I first encountered Buddha’s wisdom, “True love is born from understanding.” It moved me so deeply that tears welled up in my eyes. Reflecting on my past life and childhood, I came to realize just how accurate and scientifically precise Buddha’s wisdom was.

Being understood has always been my most profound desire. I believe that understanding is even more crucial than love for a child. Children can truly thrive only when they feel loved, and understanding them is the essential prerequisite for that love.

Many people, including parents and teachers, often underestimate the profound impact of spoken words on a child or young person. People tend to forget that words can uplift you from life’s challenges, shape your entire existence, or, conversely, devastate you and your future. Ironically, I encountered both types of teachers and gleaned valuable lessons from that struggle. The daily battle many teachers face, grappling with job burnout, transforms into a health concern and a financial one.

If someone chooses a teaching profession solely for financial gain, devoid of a deeper calling, it will inevitably become evident. Children and students possess a keen sense when there’s no genuine commitment to the teaching process. It’s a disheartening realization.

You should infuse every creation with the profound emotions you harbor for it. I refer to this as passion, or in the words of Kevin Hall, “A willingness to endure for what you love.”

It’s about engaging in activities that bring you happiness and joy, and isn’t happiness the ultimate aspiration for all of us? Every child has the potential for significant growth,

regardless of the number of lessons they've missed. All they require is a compassionate and nurturing teacher who can guide their exuberance and channel their audacity, molding their character and purpose as they transition into adulthood.

I'm talking about a genuine virtue, the ability to ignite these young, innocent hearts for greatness. A teacher who dedicates themselves to nurturing a new generation of responsible men. One thing I know for certain is that life consistently rewards passion. As a testament to the encouragement I received from my teachers, later in my prosperous life, I undertook the construction of a new school building equipped with modern technology for the benefit of the students. In my view, this was the finest way to honor my teacher, achieving my dreams, and becoming a successful individual.

Aside from the birth of my sons, few things have filled me with as much happiness and gratitude toward God as the act of building a new school for the teacher who saved my life and gave me the hope to dream. He became quiet for a minute before continued speaking.

"Recognizing that a teacher's salary and pension often remain unchanged in this rapidly evolving world, I personally granted her an honorary pension to ensure a well-deserved, carefree, and happy life for her."

Just as the man finished speaking, the tranquil silence of the wintry night was abruptly interrupted by the announcement of the airport's attendants: 'Attention passengers flying from Stockholm to New York, this is an update from Arlanda International Airport. We regret to inform you that there is an additional delay for Scandinavian Airlines Flight 573 due to ongoing inclement weather conditions in the area. Your safety and comfort remain our utmost priority, and we sincerely appreciate your continued patience and understanding.'

After the new concerning announcement of airport attendance, silence reigned once more at the airport. We exchanged a knowing glance with my fellow traveler and

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silently agreed to head to the bar. With whiskies in hand, I asked the man to continue with his story.

CHAPTER TEN

ENCOURAGEMENT

*“We are lost because we convince ourselves
that we are lost.”*

– Leo Tolstoy

The man paused, deep in thought, before continuing his story. “See, the older I get, the more I realize that there are a lot of things that are totally bewildering about people, but out of all the confusion, one thing that always shocks me about the human race is blame,” he exclaimed, deeply frustrated. “And there is nothing you can do about it.” He took pause before speaking, visibly angry, “Sometimes I wonder if only all were convinced of it,” he mused, contemplating Dostoevsky’s profound insight, “We are all to blame, we are all to blame...”

I nodded in understanding and smiled.

“Yes, this is absolutely true!” The man said passionately, “I get the impression that the world is built on blame,” he affirmed and continued. “Many people today believe that respect for teachers has waned in schools, and I comprehend why students might not show as much respect for the teaching profession. Everyone tends to place blame on one another, often collectively blaming society. “One must first learn to live with oneself before blaming others,” He returned to Dostoevsky’s wisdom again.

I do not underestimate the remarkable efforts made by exceptional teachers today, who willingly sacrifice their personal time, energy, and resources to help their students succeed. Many of these brave and selfless educators are even willing to risk their lives for the sake of their students.

I often contemplate that, just as families reflect the children

within society, outstanding teachers are as rare and invaluable as good wives and mothers in contemporary times. It is disheartening to witness that so many teachers are unkind and harsh with children, failing to recognize and cultivate even a fraction of their capacity for learning and understanding.

This issue cannot be solely attributed to teachers being undervalued and underpaid by the system, as with my teachers. It demands a genuinely enthusiastic, courageous educator with a big heart and endless patience. Such an educator values their students and believes in the practical application of real-world learning.

All exceptional teachers comprehend that without trust and respect for their students, they cannot effectively stimulate their intellect and imagination, which are crucial for preparing them for life, right? As we all know, “Imagination is more important than knowledge.”

A teacher who finds joy in teaching becomes a true inspiration to their students, genuinely aspiring to make a positive impact on the community and the lives of their students. They do so by nurturing a lifelong love for learning and reading.

Such a teacher deeply cares about their students’ happiness and genuinely loves them. Take a moment to consider what great teachers can achieve and imagine how the world could be if we all had such teachers during our formative years. We could become outstanding citizens, and our world would be transformed.

I have always believed that exceptional teachers, who invest their hearts and souls into their profession, are a divine gift to humanity. This universal truth applies across all eras, nations, educational systems, and cultural backgrounds, from the dawn of civilization to today’s schools.”

“Life presents formidable challenges for fatherless boys, and navigating the complexities of life has always been a daunting task, particularly for single mothers or teachers,” I said.

“Certainly, but do you understand the essence of being a genuine father? What responsibilities does a man bear as a

father?” He asked me.

“To love, protect, provide undivided attention, impart wisdom.” I answered with firm confidence.

“A father doesn’t have to do anything extraordinary. The fundamental truth is quite simple.”

“So, what is required then?” I asked eagerly.

“All a father needs to do is sincerely offer words of encouragement to his children, especially his son, from the depths of his heart. ‘It is not flesh and blood, but the heart which makes us fathers and sons.’ Most importantly, he must genuinely believe in his words, regardless of the physical distance that may separate him from his son. Believing in your son gives him a valuable opportunity for a better life.

Do you know why? Because a father’s words of encouragement to his son are profoundly meaningful. One lesson that life has taught me is this: When a young man yearns for his father’s words of encouragement and does not receive them, he becomes desperate. There is no one as shattered, resentful, and potentially dangerous as these abandoned, fatherless, desperate boys.

When opportunities for encouragement are missed, and these words remain unheard, it leads people to question each other’s integrity, leaving them to wonder where the real men are and why there seem to be so many feeble men instead. What kind of life do men lead today? What is the genuine essence of manhood? What are they striving for? Many men grapple with uncertainties about their masculinity.

In a world where many young men often perceive masculinity negatively, it is easy to become lost. Changing this way of thinking requires teaching boys how to break these norms. No matter the era or social system—feudalism, socialism, or capitalism—men have consistently sought to understand the true essence of manhood.

Growing up with the dream of becoming what I believed to be a ‘real man,’ I often found myself adrift in uncertainty, lacking a father figure to guide me. One thing I am certain of is that a boy must first learn to be a boy before maturing into

a man, a good man. I was steadfast in my belief that a genuine man must inherently be a good man—a conviction I reached on my own.

My discovery of Marcus Aurelius, who penned his thoughts nearly two millennia ago, profoundly shaped my understanding. His admonition to “Waste no more time arguing about what a good man should be. Be one,” dispelled my doubts and soothed the pain of my past.

For years, I grappled with the definition of a good man, feeling trapped by the limited choices my country and the world seemed to offer. It was liberating to realize that being a good man was as simple as deciding to be one—a conscious choice, like any other.

I used to wonder if Marcus Aurelius was the happiest of men, possessing such wisdom. Perhaps, like me, he stumbled upon it unexpectedly, navigating life’s myriad choices. My younger years were plagued by hesitation; I was reluctant to make decisions unless I was sure of successful execution. Gradually, I learned the truth that all wise men come to know genuine goodness, guided by integrity, wisdom, empathy, and authenticity, is not dictated by time, environment, or circumstance.

As I diligently worked to mold my character into that of a good man, there were moments of despair when progress seemed too slow. Yet, I did not understand then that building a strong character is not an overnight achievement—it is a lifelong endeavor shaped day by day. Inspired by Seneca’s words, “There is no easy way from the earth to the stars,” I learned that everything worthwhile takes time and requires discipline, spiritual strength, and physical endurance. Being patient entails waiting, even when it feels like you are waiting on fate.

Reflecting on modern youth, it appears many are overly concerned with appearances, seeking external validation rather than cultivating their virtues. I’ve come to realize that true dignity is rooted not in one’s reflection in the mirror but in the depth of one’s actions and the kindness one extends to

others. We must remind the young that while appearances fade, character endures and steers us through life's tumultuous seas.

With age, my conviction deepens: character shapes destiny, anchored in love—the transformative power that elevates a man's soul and enriches his character. This kind of love is selfless, involving a profound giving of oneself. A true man—a man of character—gives without thought of return; in giving, we receive, and in caring, we find strength. It may seem paradoxical, but it is our existence's profound truth.

“Yes, love illuminates our path,” he shared with a smile, adding, “it has the power to elevate our soul out of the darkness of ignorance and lead it into the light of knowledge. Such growth in character doesn't merely transform a young boy into a man; it turns him into a beacon of hope and strength for those around him. Through love, a man not only transforms his own life but also profoundly impacts the lives of others, leaving a legacy of true character—a legacy of love that endures.

Alongside the growth in character and love, a commitment to truthfulness lays a solid foundation for a young man's maturity. Truthfulness builds integrity. Without it, one cannot truly be a man.

As I grow older, I recognize that it is not just adverse circumstances that forge strong, virtuous men but also life's challenges, imperfect systems, and the individuals around us. “You cannot have an easy life and a strong character,” he asserted, with a voice carrying the weight of experience, and then he asked me.

“Do you know why? It's simple,” he said. “I have come to understand that a man confronts trials, and the world frequently presents unforeseen challenges, often unintended, unconscious, and unjust, particularly in the country where I grew up.

All you need to do is embrace these challenges and, most importantly, take responsibility by acknowledging your flaws and shortcomings. Yes, it's acceptable to engage in battles, and

it's acceptable to suffer defeats. I cannot even begin to count how many times I've experienced loss—countless times, in fact. Through the agony of defeat, a man matures and becomes more enduring. I'm not the first to say this, but it holds true that loss and failure fortify a person. You will also encounter failure, and it may be quite profound. It's essential to realize that this moment comes to every boy's life. When you fail, the world remains indifferent. No one's coming to save you. You must pick yourself up and rejoin the fray. No one will wait for you to regain your footing before you resume.

Indeed, just like that, come back, and if you're genuinely committed and willing, you can work on yourself to become a winner, growing more truthful and compassionate. That's when he becomes a man.

'Victory belongs to the most persevering,' Napoleon Bonaparte famously stated. In case you've forgotten, I can assure you that this is one of his most renowned quotations.

Please don't misconstrue my words; I am not advocating for young men to emulate my experiences as a young boy. On the contrary, those were different times, with distinct societal norms and rules for masculinity and manhood, where men often asserted their freedom through intimidation. A true man instinctively understands the need to compete in the world, a remarkable masculine quality that we were deprived of in the socialist system, unlike in capitalism, which is replete with opportunities and blessings. I've always held this belief deep within me, and I firmly remain convinced that being born into a capitalist system is a great privilege.

Whenever I witness my business colleagues taking this advantage for granted, I'm reminded of a quote by the great storyteller Hans Christian Andersen, 'The whole world is a series of miracles, but we're so accustomed to them that we call them ordinary things.'

Having experienced socialism, I realized that capitalism is indeed a miracle, the driving force in human history that fosters growth, prosperity, and wealth, all within a framework of healthy, honest competition." He emphasized these last

words and smiled.

“You see, the truth is, a true man should compete in life choices, from business decisions to dating, despite society’s sometimes unhealthy opinions. I refer to this as the freedom of choice, and nothing brings more joy and satisfaction to a genuine man than freedom.

I’ve accomplished a lot, and I owe it to healthy, honest competition, which allowed me to explore my talents, skills, and abilities.

You see, in a large business environment with substantial money at stake and fierce competition, you sometimes come across individuals who engage in dishonest practices, leading to unpleasant situations. However, it never escalates to violence, unlike in my younger days.

A true man isn’t defined by physical strength or unchecked aggression. He understands and manages his inner struggles with courage. Those who can’t accept this still have much to learn about what it truly means to be a man.”

It holds more power to triumph over your competitors through your success while maintaining your integrity. Success and achievement in high-level business don’t always guarantee kindness, empathy, and integrity in interactions with other successful men around me. Many of these high achievers with whom I do business internationally possess a quick temper, and that’s just a fact. They may use their aggressiveness at any time and in any situation.

As you gain confidence and strength, those around you will notice it even before you do, making it more challenging for them to challenge you.

To master your inherent dangerous side, which should exist in every masculine man, is akin to a great achievement in business. You must be able to handle it adeptly. If you fail to manage your massive business success effectively, it’s game over—you’ve lost. No one wants to be a loser, right? Least of all a truly masculine man.

Violence does not bring pride to a man, nor does it earn him honor. Responsibility is a fundamental aspect of a man’s

life; where privilege exists, so must responsibility. It's never a simple task, and it has never been easy. We are all accountable for our actions, especially when facing difficulties in life. If you aspire to be a great, successful businessman, or responsible family man, you must always take charge of problems and not expect someone else to handle them. All a man should do is take action.

Ultimately, we must face the consequences of our choices because, 'The price of greatness is responsibility.' This principle has played a significant role in shaping my character. You know, life itself isn't inherently complicated; it's the people who make it hard. The rules are simple and clear: be responsible. Pausing, he took a sip of his whisky then continued.

You see, in our times, many men have focused on age, wealth, sex, and appearance as the primary attributes of masculinity. At times, we may be inclined to believe this, not because it represents an objective truth about masculinity and being a true man, but because we have struggled to embrace our innate and authentic masculinity.

This is where we often find ourselves at a crossroads, as it can be challenging to grasp that masculinity isn't solely defined by external attributes but by your internal sense of self as a man and your understanding of manhood.

True manliness emanates from within. It stems from the awareness of how much happiness and positive impact you bring to your family, community, country, and the world. It's about being a committed, genuine man capable of profound love.

Have you heard the saying, 'No man deserves to be called a man if he refuses to fight rather than accept dishonor or witness those he holds dear suffer injustice.' These profound words strike a chord with boys raised in fatherless homes.

I remember that, as a young boy, I ended up crying uncontrollably and suffering after becoming friends with books. I was in my teens, enchanted by the myths, legends, and history of Ancient Greece and Rome, like nothing else.

Exploring the captivating, magical world of mythical creatures and real men, I experienced something truly extraordinary.

I could feel the energy. I could sense the essence of these mighty, illustrious figures, powerful, glorious men reaching across the millennium. A spark ignited in my vivid imagination. I often daydreamed about what it would be like to be one of these fearless, robust soldiers, standing strong on the battlefield, willing to face danger, engaging in fierce competition, and seeking to embody strength. I was enthralled by these images of real men.

These strong, brave, courageous, magnificently built men, athletes representing the epitome of ancient Greek masculinity, made me unconditionally believe and accept them as the only one and correct standard of manliness throughout the millennium.

As I delved into history one day, I stumbled upon the tale of the Spartan King Agesilaus II, a figure considered one of the most prominent kings in Spartan history.

When Agesilaus set sail for Egypt, the Egyptians, having heard countless tales of the king's extraordinary courage, fearless chivalry, exceptional leadership, and moral character, gathered along the banks of the Nile to greet him with the honors befitting a triumphant king.

The people of Egypt, accustomed to opulent and extravagant Persian overlords and kings who epitomized ideal masculinity with their impressive physiques and extravagant attire, were deeply disappointed and bewildered upon seeing the greatest king of Sparta.

Before them stood an unassuming elderly man of modest stature, reclining on the grass by the seashore in a simple cloak. They could not contain their amusement and began to mock him, declaring that 'the mountain had given birth to a mouse.'

In response to this mockery, Agesilaus remained composed and calmly declared, "This mouse will show you how a lion fights."

Imagine this remarkable hero's background. He was born with a physical disability, a condition in Sparta that typically

spelled certain death for infants—deformed babies were often cast into chasms. Despite his initial handicap, Agesilaus ascended to kingship and became the most significant king in Spartan history, embodying masculinity and courage in a truly exceptional manner.

Sparta reached its zenith of power thanks to Agesilaus's self-discipline and sense of responsibility as both a man and a king. This once-disabled child of Sparta grew into a renowned Spartan king and a revered Greek hero. How did he achieve such greatness? It was through mentorship, strict discipline, and rigorous training. Agesilaus chose to become a man among men from a tender age, commencing at the age of seven.

An adage aptly captures this transformation: "The chicken is recognized in the egg." Agesilaus was unquestionably a force of nature. It may be difficult to believe, but during the expedition, Agesilaus was an octogenarian, yet he displayed a lion's ferocity in battle.

It's easy to comprehend why Plutarch hailed Agesilaus as the greatest. I have always believed, and this conviction has only deepened over time, that the legendary tale of Agesilaus should be shared with young men worldwide across generations. It imparts ancient wisdom about heroes to contemporary men and serves as the ultimate truth regarding the path to manhood.

I was awestruck by discovering, reading, and repeatedly revisiting this narrative. This triumphant figure resonated deeply within me. I spent numerous sleepless nights contemplating his legacy, unable to conceive of any other individual—commander, king, or hero—quite like Agesilaus, a figure seemingly plucked from the pages of legend.

Later in life, while perusing the Bible, I encountered a verse that left me astonished: 'Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness; let him rebuke me—it is oil for my head; let my head not refuse it.' This wisdom resonated with me, further enlightening me about what I had already gleaned and internalized during my teenage years. In this context, I recognized that the 'righteous man' was my hero, someone

with an incredible capacity to ignite the imagination with hope and illumination.

I couldn't help but reflect on the profound notion that the greatest gift bestowed upon men in Ancient Greece by the gods was the ability to exercise control, effect change, and instill discipline within their minds.

This realization underscored the profound connection between masculinity and virtues such as courage, discipline, provider, responsibility, and freedom. My heart swelled with exhilaration as I understood that these eminent men were not taught that freedom and manliness were founded on selfishness.

Years later, as I reflect on the emotional impact and profound influence these figures had on me during my teenage years, it remains a challenge for me to reconcile my current identity as a businessman with the image of a general or commander. Whenever friends or family playfully suggest that I could have pursued such a path, I can't help but chuckle.

I often contemplate the moral values that contemporary men have embraced and how they perceive their masculinity. How do today's views of masculinity differ from those of the ancient world, where manliness was synonymous with courage and the readiness to act on one's words?

What I've come to understand is that many of us grapple with feelings of being lost, depressed, and lonely. Regrettably, our culture often teaches men to suppress and deny these painful emotions.

What's truly important is to be authentic, vulnerable, and real. Access the emotions within yourself, and don't be afraid to acknowledge your need for validation, love, appreciation, praise, and, above all, understanding.

Resist the pull of fear. Fear often creeps into a man's heart when he believes he's simply not measuring up. The pain can be overwhelming, particularly when it comes from someone you care about, reinforcing the belief that you're worthless. If you allow fear to take control and paralyze you, you'll lose self-respect and miss out on the opportunity to live a life that's true

to yourself.

We must first acknowledge our fears and recognize ourselves as courageous individuals to conquer them. If you hold a different view of yourself, challenge that belief. By acknowledging your own courage, you empower yourself to act courageously.

Every man has his own courage, but not everyone is aware of their unique strengths. Many look for courage in others, not realizing that this will only mislead them.

Many men feel lost because they struggle to find their purpose, often feeling inadequate and powerless. No one understands these adrift men as well as Tolstoy, who wrote: 'We are lost because we convince ourselves that we are lost,' without realizing that the map out of the wilderness lies within our grasp. A wise man takes charge of his own decisions.

Have you ever wondered why Frederick Douglass wrote his renowned essay 'Self-Made Men'? It was driven by his deep belief in the innate potential of individuals to transcend their circumstances. His sincere conviction that 'We all have the freedom and responsibility to bring forth our best selves by understanding the significance of each moment in every situation' is truly captivating. All that's required is freedom, 'because when a man's freedom is honored, he can shape himself into something exceptional and unique.'

Educated men have always held a strong influence in a free society, just as he believed. A man who works hard, masters his mind, and embraces life's opportunities can achieve anything. Great men are endowed with unique qualities and an exceptional capacity to shape history, guiding others with genuine wisdom.

People will always cherish and hold dear these wonderful individuals. Throughout my life, I've held the belief that our aspirations for our children, the creation of family wealth, and the establishment of a legacy, should encompass more than mere material possessions.

A library should constitute an integral part of this legacy. Having emerged from a humble background and persevered

through hardships to become the man I aspired to be; I attribute much of my success to the remarkable books I encountered along the way.

Eventually, I became a reflection of everything I had immersed myself in. My wish for my children is to empower them to read independently, foster a deep affinity for books and make them their lifelong companions, the most wondrous things in the world. I believe I have contributed to their flourishing by immersing them in captivating stories.

The joy that fills me when I recall those moments of my children engrossed in reading, so absorbed that they didn't even notice my entrance into the room, continues to warm my heart." He chuckled, fondly reminiscing.

"The world has impressively shown me that without these great books, we find ourselves in darkness. These books possess a magical power, sustaining us, fortifying our inner strength, and enabling us to survive and thrive amidst life's inevitable uncertainties and chaos. While we anticipate a kinder and more stable world, envisioning a potent future for us and our children, it is essential to bear in mind an age-old, sagacious proverb: 'A child who reads will become an adult who thinks.'

Conversely, as challenging as it may be to acknowledge, a child who neglects reading condemns themselves to ignorance, intolerance, and a deficiency of empathy. Such individuals struggle to discover joy, excitement, and purpose in life, ultimately depriving themselves of the opportunity to live life to its fullest.

In my observations of young men, I've come to recognize that the sole distinction between youth, between those who emerge as winners and those who find themselves as losers, lies in their perception of life – whether they perceive it as vibrant or mundane, their commitment to uncovering truths about themselves, and their fervent desire to comprehend the world they inhabit.

The most profound gift we can bestow upon our children is to nurture and sustain the excitement and enchantment of

reading books. Only through the embrace of good books can we illuminate a path for our children and instill the capacity for deep contemplation.

What could be more fulfilling and marvelous in life than realizing that a child, “The only thing that he absolutely has to know, is the library’s location,” who matures amidst this reservoir of wisdom can radiate with brilliance and illuminate the journey for others?

It took me numerous years to amass a substantial library teeming with the creations of the greatest poets, philosophers, writers, and thinkers. These luminaries have authored masterpieces that define and embody the essence of greatness. Indeed, there exists far more to absorb than mere implication. Genuine knowledge undeniably augments wisdom, but its transformative potential remains untapped without practical application. As Epicurus sagely articulated, “The art of living well and the art of dying well are one.”

My profound passion for my library leads me to continuously enrich my collection with valuable books. If you were to glimpse my library, it would likely leave you impressed. I intend to bequeath it to my children and grandchildren as a cherished legacy, a form of heirloom. Yes, it’s a library that occupies my thoughts, not money, as many often assume.

As the insightful Asian proverb wisely declares, “Giving your son a skill is better than giving him one thousand pieces of gold.” These books will impart knowledge and empower my children to earn a livelihood. From a very young age, I’ve instilled in them the principle, “If boys don’t learn, men won’t know.” The wisdom in the world’s knowledge and human experiences, encapsulated in these great books, far transcends the fleeting enjoyment offered by social media or computer games.

Nothing can replace the sheer delight of reading and the manner in which it ignites their imagination.

Everything revolves around discipline and balance, like striking the right equilibrium between computer games and

reading books for a child or young man. After all, boys will be boys.

There is an ongoing discourse about discipline, a topic that many young men who are ensnared in their comfort zones tend to evade. They frequently grumble about the uncertainties of modern life and are unsure about their next steps.

Blaming life's instability and surrounding injustices is never a prudent approach. Playing the victim card has the potential to ensnare anyone and anything, often serving as an excuse to avoid taking responsibility. Many men grapple with these thoughts, often oblivious that no one can impose their rules upon you unless you acquiesce. Once you surrender to them, you find yourself trapped. Only by recognizing our inner strength, freedom, and latent potential can we assert control over our actions.

Andrew Carnegie underscored the incredible potential of the mind when he declared, "The man who acquires the ability to take full possession of his mind may take possession of anything else to which he is justly entitled."

Acknowledge that you are a good man, regardless of past mistakes, and allow yourself to grow and evolve. As the adage goes, "True nobility is being superior to your former self." Once you commit to embracing reality and becoming cognizant of your own thoughts, a transformation is inevitable, as challenging as it may be.

Great men possess the capacity to surmount adversity, societal expectations, and the opinions of others, even if they grew up without a father. Do not allow the pain from the past to overshadow your present. If you did grow up without a father, do not assume that people will offer care or sympathy for your fatherless upbringing. Refrain from displaying anger towards your fatherless life, and do not harbor hostility towards society for any perceived indifference or neglect. I can tell you more: continuously discussing your fatherless background might inadvertently irritate people and raise questions about your integrity. It is prudent not to test their

patience. Recognize and that you are not alone in experiencing a fatherless upbringing and embrace it as an essential part of your journey toward manhood. This isn't about being dishonest but acknowledging and accepting your growth into adulthood.

While there is no strict rule about being honest with yourself, it is intrinsic for a courageous man to always speak the truth. Only by staying truthful and drawing upon the courage within can you assume the role of the head of the household and safeguard your family. Reinventing yourself for this role entails fully embracing the responsibilities, even in the presence of your emotional vulnerabilities. In the process of crafting your new identity, your task is to forgive everyone for their absence during your times of need.

Nothing fortifies a man's character and integrity more than becoming a master within his own home and in projecting a sterling image while upholding impeccable moral standards.

Benjamin Disraeli eloquently encapsulated this belief: "Man is never so manly as when he feels deeply, acts boldly, and expresses himself with frankness and fervor."

Growing up fatherless has taught me valuable lessons about manhood, particularly that people frequently do not give a damn about other people's troubles and misfortunes. Never blame life for treating you unfairly, for your fatherless life, for suffering, shame, fear, loneliness, violence, aggressiveness, and despair, or any other hardships that come with an absent father.

Do not blame yourself or indulge in self-pity even when the pain is deep. Nobody cares. That's life, and life involves pain. Acknowledge the inevitability of challenges in life. The indifference of others and the act of blaming life or yourself for that pain will make your life even more poignant, depriving you of inner peace.

Do not waste your time concerning yourself with understanding human nature and others' expectations of you. Instead, act boldly, even if it goes against prevailing societal norms. Blaze your unique path, remembering that paths are

forged by walking them. A real man maintains the ability to create and move forward by avoiding blame and focusing on inner peace.

As you learn to protect your self-worth from the world's challenges, you will realize few things are more frustrating than seeing a young man with little experience from 'anywhere' trying to outshine the average in the game of life. Stand tall and acknowledge that you may need to exert more effort than other men. Keep in mind that a real man's strength is heightened when he is aware of his self-worth.

Always strive to do what is right, even when it's challenging to assert yourself or you lack the knowledge or courage to see things through.

A man renowned for his integrity and fairness, "Do what you can, with what you have, where you are." By following this advice, you are already halfway toward achieving success.

The journey to becoming a good man revolves around trusting yourself. Always remember that a man's passions steer his life when coupled with freedom.

The real question is how to maintain the discipline of your mind, enabling you to make something unique and special of yourself, as the absence of this discipline stands as a barrier to accomplishment in life.

"A disciplined mind leads to happiness, and an undisciplined mind leads to suffering." Dalai Lama's wisdom has always been a source of inspiration to me. Men should embrace self-discipline because a chaotic mind often fails to provide perspective when facing life's most hardest challenges. Only by wholeheartedly cultivating self-discipline can one infuse their life with greater meaning and derive the joy and fulfillment from conquering obstacles.

In ancient Greek mythology, the gods not only bestowed upon men the precious gift of self-discipline but also imparted the wisdom that traditional notions of masculinity hinge heavily on the concept of responsibility. It was a man's duty to care for his family and always ensure a secure and harmonious life within his home.

Even after two millennia, this ancient wisdom remains relevant. The highest identity of a real man will always center around living for others, shouldering responsibility, and validating his manhood.

I firmly believe that responsibility can be regarded as a divine gift to men, much like it was in the ancient world. We owe a great deal to this concept, as it was a responsibility that defined masculinity and courage, underscoring duty as the essence of manhood. Before a man contemplates his freedom, he must acknowledge that liberty is intricately tied to responsibility, not a means of escaping it. Responsibility is the only path to true freedom.

A powerful man is not solely defined by power and wealth but by his willingness to assume responsibility for himself and show care and respect to those around him. I've always believed that it is through the prism of responsibility that a man begins to glimpse the truth about himself.

Viktor Frankl would concur with me, saying, "A man who becomes aware of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who lovingly awaits him, or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life. He comprehends the 'why' of his existence and can endure almost any 'how.'" And who is 'lovingly awaiting him' if not a child and family?

Responsibility is the loftiest calling for a real man, imparting meaning to life. The dictionary defines 'responsibility' as a moral obligation to act or assist and take care of someone because of one's job or position. Imagine what the world would be like without responsibility.

Neglecting our responsibilities will inevitably lead all aspects of our lives and even our own selves on a gradual descent into chaos, resulting in misery. The formula is quite straightforward: every element, including ourselves, faces doom if we fail to honor our obligations. It is important for a man to exemplify bravery and strength rather than adopting a victim mentality.

He should be perceived as dependable and trustworthy, steering clear of being labeled a 'wallflower,' all while

Encouragement

harboring the inner fortitude of a lion.

The contrast between how others perceive us and our inner strength often creates a deep sense of uncertainty for many men who grapple with it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

STATURE

“Man is what he believes.”

– Anton Chekhov

The café was decidedly quieter now, but my friend was still listening attentively, so I decided to finish my story with a conversation I had with this man at the airport.

“Several years ago,” the man said, “I entered a partnership with a new businessman, a young man with a youthful countenance, keen intellect, and the distinction of being the youngest CEO I had ever collaborated with. He was exceptionally well-suited for his role.

Beyond his intellectual prowess, he possessed a pleasing appearance, complete with a straight nose and luxuriant, wavy hair that evoked images of a Greek profile, which I remembered seeing so many of in illustrated books during my teens. He was well-liked by everyone. However, an intriguing pattern emerged. Whenever he visited our offices to finalize a new deal, despite our courteous and respectful demeanor, he seemed eager to withdraw as soon as the deal was sealed.

When he was in a group large enough and saw a lot of men gathered in the office, he became different. He appeared confounded and even distressed. It took us a while to grasp why, and it was almost unbelievable. Despite his attractive appearance and enviable position, this young man harbored shame about his height, particularly in the presence of taller men.

“Listen! People always judge based on appearances, and you know that. Nobody sits there and tries to figure out who the youngest successful CEO is, isn’t it? Being a shorter man isn’t easy, ‘he once confided to me at a bar during a conversation.

“Come on, those are just superficial things,” I replied. “Remember the scripture, my friend, in the Old Testament: ‘Men looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.’ God values inner qualities and character over superficial appearances, and so should we.”

“Yeah, if only the Bible caught up to people’s judgments.”

“People need to catch up to the Bible. Live to impress God, not people. God has blessed you with numerous reasons to find happiness,” I reassured him.

“Please, don’t attempt to console me,” he responded firmly. “Let’s be brutally honest, man to man. Nobody ever discusses short men in a positive light. Why should you? It’s perpetually regarded as a negative trait, and it’s making me unhappy with who I am,” he confided.

“We all harbor our insecurities and imperfections. There’s no need to allow them to bring unhappiness. It truly doesn’t carry as much weight as society would have us believe. It has no bearing on the true essence of a man within,” I reassured him. “You are a victor; your height should not hinder your progress in life. You must distance yourself from these thoughts and cease feeling unhappy.”

“But what about women? Is their preference for taller men simply a creation of Hollywood?” he asked.

“The prevalent belief that women exclusively favor taller men is also not entirely accurate. It’s a misleading association perpetuated by the media and societal standards. Listen, it’s universally acknowledged that a man’s destiny and masculinity aren’t determined by height, weight, vanity, clothing, physique, appearance, or wealth. These factors genuinely don’t hold much significance,” I told him.

“But people frequently judge men based on their height, and regrettably, few assess shorter men based on their intrinsic worth or accomplishments, unless they possess immense wealth like Crassus.”

“You might not be Crassus,” I said, but you possess adequate resources to enjoy freedom, and every man values freedom – that’s beyond dispute. Regarding achievements,

intelligent women and perceptive individuals appreciate a man for his accomplishments and character, rather than superficial characteristics.”

It astounded me that someone of his caliber would anchor his self-esteem on the opinions of others.

“In time, you’ll come to understand that the external world, with its influences, norms, and the countless ‘facts’ and viewpoints promoted by the media about standards of manhood, are fleeting,” I said, “That’s life – it’s temporary and not the ultimate reality.”

“But what is genuine and enduring?” he asked me.

“Dare to inquire within yourself,” I told him. “It’s your inner fortitude, your unique attributes, that provide you an advantage, regardless of any perceived limitations in your height.”

Before this conversation, I hadn’t fully comprehended how severely many men assess themselves based on their physical appearance and conceptions of masculinity.

Picture a world where all men could simply embrace themselves as they are. What’s not to appreciate? What more could one ask for? Like anyone else, men have the right to define their own self-image, liberated from external pressures and stereotypes.

The reality is none of us are flawless. Embrace your imperfections and continue discovering your true self without losing touch with your genuine emotions. The more you learn about the man within, the more feasible it becomes to evolve into the man you’ve always aspired to be.

This journey can be challenging; there’s no denying that. Finding the courage to confront the inner aspects of your masculinity can be challenging, especially when you might feel less masculine. It’s essential to set aside your insecurities and instead commit to the internal journey of self-liberation. I view this as the path of a real man.

Above all, never resort to overcompensating for being physically smaller or shorter. The last thing I want to convey to you, my friend, is to emulate Agesilaus: ‘remain unfazed not

only by luxury but, more importantly, by other people's opinions.'

Did you know that Agesilaus was feared by his enemies for his simplicity of life and his words?

He consistently conveyed that being preoccupied with what other men think and say about you concerns weak men; a real man should not be bothered by that. He is said to have been a little man with a humble appearance, but his good humor, constant cheerfulness, and even-tempered disposition, free from anything morose or haughty, made him more appealing, even in his old age, than the most beautiful and youthful men of the nation.

It's well-known that this splendid 'youthful man' from Antiquity was not the sole exemplar among the greatest men in history. For example, few individuals have inspired humanity, like the unmatched Napoleon Bonaparte, renowned for his military and political genius. Yet, he was also susceptible to the trials of life, just like any legendary conqueror.

He once remarked, 'I could receive news of the death of my wife, my son, or my entire family without a change in expression. Not the slightest emotion or alteration in my countenance would be visible. Everything would appear indifferent and calm. But when alone in my chamber, then I suffer. Then the feelings of the man burst forth.'

Just because a man does not outwardly display his emotions or feelings does not mean he lacks them. "It requires more courage to endure than to die," Napoleon stated, and as painful and challenging as that may sound, it is a natural state for a courageous man. Embrace vulnerability.

It's about mustering the courage to allow yourself to be seen by others for who you genuinely are. I can honestly tell you it's not easy; it's arduous and even frightening, but I assure you, it's worth it.

Over the years, people have used the term 'Napoleon complex,' often linking his name with aggressiveness due to his shorter stature.

In my opinion, the Napoleon complex is not a fair assessment. It doesn't seem justifiable to label a man who ascended from being a short, slender boy to a brilliant, genius human being as 'the idol of common men in the world, because he had in transcendent degree the qualities and powers of common men.'

It may not be seen favorably by everyone, and I understand that some may not regard him as a hero worthy of celebration or emulation. When a man is ranked second only to Jesus Christ as the most influential person in history, as per a study published by Cambridge University Press, he is bound to be perceived and valued differently by various people.

Praise him or condemn him, but Napoleon also hated being depicted as short. And his men truly loved him because not only was he a military genius, but he cared about them and championed responsibility as a true man for his dedication to his family, which befits true men.

In the business world, we use the term 'Like Napoleon' to refer to having grandiose plans and ambitions. We do not contemplate any complexity when we invoke his name alongside his brilliant entrepreneurial mind and seek to learn his secrets of success. Real men do not judge others based on height; we do not judge people at all, even in jest.

Men are not defined by their height but by their value and contributions to the world's greatness, as well as the happiness and well-being of those around them.

Andrew Carnegie, another 'short giant' and one of the five legendary figures who helped build America, would certainly refute the notion that a man's masculinity is gauged by his height. He said, "I shall argue that strong men know when to compromise and that all principles can be compromised to serve a greater principle."

Extremely wealthy Americans like him were responsible for using their wealth for the greater good. Words only hold significance when they translate into actions, and the righteousness of these profound words remains unquestionable.

Think about how many unarmed heroes have stood as tall

as Mahatma Gandhi, an epitome of man virtue. Inspired by Tolstoy, with whom he even corresponded, Gandhi embraced wisdom that favored courage over cowardice, advocating for the “non-violence of the strong.” I believe any intelligent man, a genuine achiever who learns from such luminaries, will never dwell on his height.

These remarkable individuals, often not physically tall, reshaped the world with their profound love, ideas, judicious decisions, tireless efforts, and indomitable characters. Despite hailing from different eras and regions, they shared a common trait: their love and dedication to their families and countries, which befits true men.

The admirable adjectives used to describe them – father, protector, friend, giver, loving, virtuous, comrade – are just a few that honor men in any epoch. These enduring truths about masculinity and real men, championed by heroes throughout history, remain timeless, much like life itself.

Do you think these great men never experienced fear? Of course, they did—many times. Indeed, even those heroes admired for their strength, courage, and leadership encounter fear.

However, what truly makes a man strong, what kept them going, was their profound love. This love not only strengthens a man but also motivates them, driven by a deep affection for their soldiers on the battlefield, their people, and their country. They hold deep regard for their families, faith, diligent work, and personal sacrifices.

They are willing to lay down their lives at any moment. Love compels a man to fight at any age. Even if you appear small and insignificant, like Agesilaus, your love can empower you to stand your ground and fight like a lion.

As a fatherless man, I comprehend the deep yearning and hunger for the father love these words of encouragement, especially among young men who regard these great figures as their heroes, providing them with the guidance to lead purposeful lives.

I firmly believe that wisdom will continue to shape the

values and beliefs of future generations and the next generation of heroes, because, 'A great man does not create historical reality himself, but only uncovers the inevitable future.' Even after hundreds and thousands of years, these remarkable men continue to hold relevance, and who cares about their height?

They attributed a real man's success in life to his ability to love profoundly. If a man carries the power and glory of history, his value and influence should never be questioned. When I reflect on my father's weaknesses, which always repelled me, I believe they fueled my uncontrolled violence as a child. When boys become wild and unruly, it is often an attempt to rebel against their fathers' masculinity and flaws, a desperate effort to avoid becoming like them.

Having been left fatherless at the tender age of four, Nietzsche spoke from painful experience, "When one has not had a good father, one must create one."

There is no denying that men cherish freedom, yet many, even those who become fathers, they continue to prefer freedom in the sense of being exempt from responsibilities.

I want to stress that the number of fatherless homes is steadily increasing, surpassing all conceivable figures. Within our society, there exists a persistent discontent, with individuals casting blame upon each other, akin to the situation I described involving education, teachers, and students.

A constant dissatisfaction arises among people in society, indignantly blaming each other. This dissatisfaction stems from evading the consequences of our actions, related to the famous saying, "As a father goes, so goes the household. And as the household goes, so goes society."

Every time I hear this saying, I can't help but think of Dostoevsky's words to the world, as no one represents this sentiment better than the great thinker himself, "There is only one way to salvation, and that is to make yourself responsible for all men's sins."

Once you sincerely take responsibility for everything and

everyone, you will immediately realize the truth, recognizing that you are indeed accountable for everyone and everything.

In society, people are truly united in only one aspect: they all pay a heavy price for it, often unaware that the children pay the highest price. This is because, “The greatest burden a child must bear is the un-lived life of its parents.”

This was one of the most poignant quotes of Carl Jung I’d ever heard. It has profoundly impacted me, causing immense pain. And who can alleviate this burden? No one will pick up the burden or take responsibility for it.

The truth is when you teach your son, you teach your son’s son. When men no longer observe and uphold the traditions and morality of their fathers’ society, can there be a civilized society anymore? You can’t pour from an empty cup.

People are fervently discussing war in this day, unaware of the battles faced by fatherless boys, steeped in uncertainty, immersed in loneliness and depression. It’s heart-wrenching to witness so many young men leaving their lives to chance, abandoning their dreams and aspirations. Who knows how many generals and heroes could emerge from these boys? We distance ourselves from these boys and await their transformation into heroes, unaware that how we nurture them is pivotal for all.

As the famous saying goes, “We give our children two things, roots and wings. Roots to know where home is, wings to fly away and exercise what they have been taught.” To me, this is simply the ultimate way to raise a child right and cannot be argued with.

If you cannot build a physical home for them, at the very least equip them, give your sons wings, and teach them to reach the sky. Boys will never realize how high they can soar without wings. Just as the majestic flight of falcons or eagles is not a given, boys must be granted the freedom to test their wings.

I’ve encountered various trials in my life, but nothing shatters my heart or brings me as much pain as witnessing the decline and downfall of young men, where hope is supplanted

by despair, and despair inevitably turns to tragedy into their death.

The world will always move forward, but it will be less healed, less enriched, and less kind without these dear boys. Whether we like it or not, no one will wait.'

A shadow of despair crossed his face. The same anguish welled up in his eyes as when he spoke of his friends' deaths.

In that silence, I pondered, "Why can't men cry?" The answer seemed to reverberate in the quiet, echoing the somber words of a profound humanist, "Pain and suffering are always inevitable for a large intelligence and a deep heart. The great men must, I think, have great sadness on earth."

The silence wrapped around us, letting us contemplate the weight in our hearts.

"Throughout my life on this Earth," the man spoke with a toneless voice, "I've come to realize that few things are as genuinely dramatic and poignant as the journey of fatherless boys striving to become genuine men, yearning to be a part of something larger than themselves. These young souls, so dear to us, have the potential for greatness, but when you look at reality, these aspirations get plowed out of them early on.

As Nietzsche so aptly posits, each of these boys carries within them the essence of innocence, the spirit of renewal, the allure of a new game, the momentum of self-propulsion, the impulse of a first motion, and the sacred affirmation of "Yes."

The man sighed heavily and paused, seemingly wrestling with his inner turmoil, gathering his thoughts.

"And what they ask for is very little, yes, not much at all. Their needs are indeed meager, and their wants are modest," he confessed in a pained voice filled with sorrow. As he continued, the pain deepened. "In truth, the only thing they deeply desire is a simple one - to become good men, yearning for guidance, just another good man to show them the road.

As Walter M. Schirra, Sr., a shining testament of manliness, astutely observed, 'You don't raise heroes, you raise sons. And if you treat them like sons, they'll become heroes, even if it's

just in your own eyes.’ The man made a short pause, exhaled, before continuing.

“See, there is a wealth of depth to explore and unravel about boys, sons, and men. In Psalm 127:3-5, we encounter the beautiful sentiment, “Behold, sons are a gift from the Lord. Happy is the man whose quiver is filled with them.”

The true essence of manhood is often disregarded; there is so much about sons and men that people fail to understand. You should appreciate men and their intrinsic nature and inherent qualities. You should love men enough to grasp and understand the profound truths they embody. Throughout life’s journey, there are responsible and vulnerable men who tirelessly strive to enrich the world and enhance the lives of everyone as long as life continues.

CHAPTER TWELVE

EMBRACING FREEDOM

*“You can choose to be free,
but it’s the last decision you’ll ever make.”*

– Franz Kafka

“That was a powerful, truly remarkable story, man!” my friend said with awe.

“Meeting a billionaire with such an incredible life story really highlights the richness and complexity of life; it’s certainly not an everyday occurrence,” I agreed.

Moved by the depth of the narrative, my friend noted with amazement, “When Dostoevsky wrote his famous words, ‘How could you live and have no story to tell?’, he must have had someone like this man in mind.” He smiled, and I nodded in agreement, feeling a deep connection to the truth of those words.

“It’s astonishing,” he continued, impressed, “how immense the potential within young men is, and yet, how painfully obvious it becomes that they need so little to unleash that power.”

“Yes, you can stretch out your hand and touch the heavens.”

“This man’s story reminds me of Anton Chekhov, who, poverty-stricken as a child, suffered terrible, brutal beatings from his abusive, alcoholic father. Chekhov rose to become a great writer.”

“What makes these two extraordinary men from different epochs great is that they never held a grudge or harbored hatred towards their abusive fathers for their crippled childhoods; instead, they felt pity.

Knowing these stories, it will become easier for us to insist

that everyone, regardless of the complexity of their circumstances from early childhood, has a reason for who they have become, mastering themselves in a very deep way,” I said.

“The billionaire was lucky enough to have a great teacher. Teachers often label students with all sorts of adjectives, categorizing them with various descriptors, but the only label a truly exceptional educator should bestow upon a child in school is ‘star’—indeed, a ‘bright star,’ and nothing less.”

“She didn’t even call him a star. It was enough for him to receive a little help from someone who made him feel validated from within, who denied that he was an idiot and assured him that he could do it. How amazing that simple act was.”

“A life-altering day comes once in everyone’s lifetime, turning your life around and showing the light behind the darkness,” my friend said. “But not everyone takes it seriously or even embraces it.”

“Kafka said, ‘You can choose to be free, but it’s the last decision you’ll ever make.’”

“Many men believe that challenges, hunger, pain, lack of freedom, and fatherlessness make life worthwhile. Meanwhile, others succumb to despair.”

“Do you also believe that a father is the first teacher for his son?” he asked, and added, “As you mentioned in that story?”

“I believe that parents are children’s first and most important teachers. However, I also understand that a father often provides his son with unique experiences,” I answered, mindful of my friend’s fatherless upbringing.

“A single mother’s love and dedication are immeasurable, but she cannot entirely replace a father’s influence in guiding her son toward masculinity. Even the most devoted single mothers, heroes for their sacrifices, cannot mold their sons into men alone.”

It’s not a matter of capability but rather the unique influence that only a father figure brings to a young boy’s life, and you know that.

“Similarly, a good single father can teach his daughter the

rules of civility but not embrace her femininity. It's not the same, my friend. Teaching womanhood is something only a mother can truly do."

"In today's world, we encounter an overwhelming abundance of information and opinions regarding fatherlessness, which delve into painful and devastating realities that can be quite distressing," he added.

"It's hard to dispute this, my friend. We are not supposed to live in a single-family household."

"Young boys seek and desire a father figure in their lives."

"Everyone needs a father figure, my friend, especially boys, who inherently crave and require a father. The truth is that the path of superior manhood is paved by fathers, by real, responsible men. This truth has remained constant throughout the history of humankind. Anything else is hypocrisy and ignorance. If someone tries to deny or question these truths, they need to learn more about life.

This longing for a paternal role model is universal, not only for young boys, but I also vividly remember how often my old dad talked about longing to have his own father alive.

As Nietzsche suggested, without a biological father, one should seek a father figure in someone else, even if they are not personally acquainted."

"I find it challenging to believe in the possibility of encountering a genuine father figure."

"History seems to repeat itself, and there is great satisfaction in observing many young people who study the lives and legacies of great men, spanning from ancient times to the present, and select them as influential, father-like figures."

"I believe there is a valid reason for this."

"In the absence of a father figure, the bonds of brotherhoods mean everything," I said. "Brothers' unique experiences, family traditions, values, and memories grant them a sense of identity and belonging."

"Yes," he nodded, "Boys feel lost and lonely without a father. I know many young men who try to build camaraderie with male friends, even forming a brotherhood, supporting

and encouraging each other.”

“Most of these young men today find themselves in superficial relationships with peers, mistakenly assuming these are true friendship or camaraderie,” I added. “Confusion and fears arise later in life when they feel hopelessly insecure and misunderstood by others, not finding support in times of need. A man should...”

“Choose male friends who are living at their edge, facing their fears and living just beyond them,” he said, cutting in with a quote from David Deida and interrupting me.

“Yes, certainly. In a painfully uncertain world, we realize that only authentic men forge lasting and genuine bonds of brotherhood, challenging themselves. This makes all men feel strong and sincere, especially during hard times.”

“Everything good in the man’s world comes down to responsibility and action, brother. Even though they often come at a high price, they’re worth it. Like Robert Kennedy poignantly emphasized, ‘Brotherhood is the very price and condition of a man’s survival.’ It really shows the uniqueness and importance of these bonds.”

“I believe,” I said, “That men need each other more than anything else.”

“Yes, they need to be together; it’s the only way out of these wounds,” he said emphatically. Then, he asked me earnestly, “Do you think women understand what it’s like to be a man?” and continued, “Many men have sunk so deeply into the depths of despair that they could see no way out and took their own lives.”

“How sad is that?” I said, feeling pained. “This is absolutely crushing to hear!”

“Really painful,” he said sadly, adding, “That’s what I’m saying. Nobody has an interest in distressed men, nobody cares about men’s struggles or value his feelings, those who aren’t allowed to express their innermost feelings, to talk about their fears without being judged as weak.”

“I believe,” I said, “while many women may not fully comprehend the entirety of the male experience, I regard men as equally emotional beings, probably the more genuine of all

emotional and vulnerable creatures.”

“Friendships and brotherhoods among men tend to be strong and authentic because they stem from the recognition that our lives are interconnected, and every life entails solidarity in vulnerability and, perhaps, responsibility because only these virtues nurture integrity and unity.”

“You know, I have always wondered why a boy or a young man would forget the pain and idealize an absent father as a hero,” my friend said.

“Children, especially young sons, often develop fantasies about absent fathers, dissolving their absence in various ways. Life is complex for these young men, my friend, and it is best to recognize that they don’t always view their fathers as courageous heroes or their biggest fans.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, furrowing his brow.

“Anyone who reads Dostoevsky should remember Ivan Karamazov’s ominous statement during the trial, “Who doesn’t desire his father’s death?”

“Absent fathers can indeed spark creative fantasies in their abandoned children,” he concurred, “and not only abandoned, as seen in cases such as the brothers Karamazov. I have always grappled with finding father figures outside the family or home. Where is masculinity learned - from books, movies, perhaps the internet? To me, these external portrayals of men often don’t feel genuine because nobody can offer as much positive influence to their children as biological fathers. Yeah, these images of men are not real.”

“What do you mean by ‘not genuine’? Are you suggesting that boys often believe their own fathers could have offered them a better life?” I inquired.

“What I mean is, real man is a real dad, that the saying ‘masculinity is learned through imitation and starts with your biological father’ holds a lot of truth. I’m skeptical that a young man can attain manhood solely by reading books or emulating great heroes. Even as ideas of manhood evolve, the path to achieving it remains consistent. Manhood is truly experienced through imitation.”

“I understand your point, my friend, but think about how many young men naturally resist their fathers and instead seek mentors or guides. These young men often find it easier to trust and learn from someone unrelated to them than a family member. This tendency fits perfectly with today’s society struggling with absent fathers.

“Real men are tangible and exist beyond the pages of books. I’m talking about well-crafted fictional father figures. You can’t connect to fictional emotions, can you? I always believe that home is the only place where you can truly express your feelings.”

“It’s not about fictional father figures,” I said, “but about how vulnerable and authentic you are in opening yourself up to these great men from different epochs of history, living through their profound legacies in books. They can certainly become ‘father figures’ to you as well. ‘If the literature we are reading does not wake us, why do we read it?’ Do you still argue with Kafka?” I asked, and then, with a reflective pause, I continued, “Life is beautiful buddy, because of the remarkable legacies left to humanity as a source of joy, including those from complete families. Being part of such a family means being part of something truly wonderful.”

My friend remained silent, listening thoughtfully. Sensing his emotions, I continued.

“It’s important, my friend, to recognize that incomplete families are not limited to just one parent but also encompass those where love is absent. ‘In family life, love is the oil that eases friction, the cement that binds closer together, and the music that brings harmony.’”

“Such a beautiful observation of Nietzsche!” said my friend, adding, “Nothing is as meaningful, engaging, and exciting to our minds as when someone shares their personal story, speaking from their own experiences and connecting with you, don’t you think?”

“Certainly,” I agreed. “This perception reveals a profound truth about the nature of children and childhood, especially boys growing up in families with single, loving mothers who

choose to welcome only LOVE into their homes, always attuned to what a child doesn't say."

"You see," my friend said, "I've often mused about how many become parents, and while some never abandon their children, not all guide them with profound love—those who understand and alleviate others' suffering, those destined to change the world, to make the world a better place by spreading love, kindness, and compassion." My friend stopped talking. Sighing deeply, he cast a contemplative gaze around the cafe, observing the quiet interactions of those nearby. Then, turning back to me, and after a thoughtful pause, he continued with a firm voice, "Yes, true nurturing occurs only within homes brimming with love, not merely from the physical presence of a parent. Within these sanctuaries of secure affection, children are raised to become adults empowered to enhance the world and the people around them." My friend concluded with a resonant voice and asked earnestly, "Do you see the truth in it as well?"

"I do," I agreed immediately and hastened to add, "and this is the only profound truth. Like the sun, love makes miracles in a child's life and across everything it touches."

Locking eyes with me, my friend nodded slowly as a silent testament to our shared understanding and said, "Where love shines, buddy, life thrives."

"Listen," I said, leaning forward and putting my elbows on the table. "Do you remember the saying that every experience in your life happens for a reason."

"As I told you, I have always had a problem with it. Do you believe it?" he asked, expressing both astonishment and inquisitiveness.

"Yes, I do believe it, but I understand your doubt. It's not easy. It's hard to think that way, and embracing or believing in that idea can be challenging, especially during tough times. Marcus Aurelius offers comfort with his words, 'Nothing happens to anybody which they are not fitted by nature to bear.'"

"I've been contemplating whether people come into your

life for a reason, especially those who enter your life and then depart,” he said.

“Yes, they are,” I said and continued.

“Amidst our interactions with these people, we often find ourselves pondering who deserves our friendship and love, what sets them apart from others, and who is the right person to be a part of our lives.

We tend to worry excessively about these people, actively trying to ‘fix’ them, attempting to change them, criticizing them, and expecting them to conform to our expectations, leading us to express negativity and distance ourselves from them. The truth is, brother, that very few people enter our lives and remain there for us for a lifetime, unconditionally. Nothing warms our hearts more than the fond memories we share with these wonderful people who love us with the openness and sincerity of a child.”

“I have learned that being a good person will not guarantee you happy, healthy relationships, and people will come into your life and then leave.” My friend confessed.

That’s why buddy, ‘If you find someone who makes you smile, who checks up on you often to see if you’re okay, who watches out for you and wants the very best for you, don’t let them go. Keep them close, and don’t take them for granted. People like that are hard to find.’”

“Kafka understood this well,” agreed my friend. “We forget people we meet, but some people you can’t forget, only...”

I interrupted him, “Only those who enter your life and help you experience it in the most beautiful way, who bring more light into your life, will always remain in your heart, even after they’ve left,” I said, hoping to convey the profound truth we both recognized.

“Like the teacher in your story,” he observed.

“She, just as much as her student, is the man in this remarkable story. The one who made all the difference in the world,” I said. “The more we learn about life and the people who enter it, the more we realize that one of the most difficult things in human life is letting go of someone you love, whether

it's your first teacher who gave you a new lease on life or your first innocent love.”

We stopped talking. It was late afternoon, and we were still sitting in the café, observing the reflection of the setting sun over the Harlem River, knowing that we were the absolute last two guests in the cafe, with the barista behind the desk locked in her cellphone and unaware of our presence. My friend turned his gaze to me and smiled, lightly touching his forehead.

I noticed an unusual flicker in his eyes. He appeared different, as if he were on the verge of sharing something profound or unexpected, but hesitated, as if he was gathering his courage. I smiled, extending an invitation to talk.

“You know, I haven't mentioned this, and you might find it hard to believe, given my well-known agnosticism, but I've been to church.”

“What? Really?” I asked, feeling suddenly happy.

“I know you might think I'm hallucinating,” he said with a smile. “The pain was so overwhelming that, lost in my desperation, I decided to talk to a priest.”

I was astonished by his revelation but genuinely happy for my friend. I let out a sigh of relief. My excitement was apparent. He looked at me and smiled.

“Why are you so excited? You haven't even asked what we discussed,” he said.

“I didn't inquire, but deep down, I believe that visiting the church always carries a sense of hope. I understand that conversations with a priest are confidential, but if you ever wish to share, I'm here to listen to you. Go on, brother.”

With that, there was another pause in our conversation. It lingered until he spoke again, his voice calm and gentle, as if we were within the sacred walls of a church.

“I reached out for help, and the priest responded to my pain. I never realized before that a visit to a church and a sincere talk with a priest can provide solace, offering a sense of spiritual connection. I think I will return and continue our conversations. I mean it sincerely.”

Upon hearing these words, a profound sense of serenity washed over me. My friend fell silent again momentarily before resuming with a faint smile.

“Guess what? The priest had a message like yours. If we deny and question the world, convincing ourselves that people can’t be trusted, and those around us believe the same, it will eventually become our reality of shared misery because people respond similarly to our feelings

The cost of our blindness is dear. That is the price we have paid for holding on to the past. We cannot lose sight of God’s righteousness,” he concluded.

“Don’t ever let pain destroy you,” the priest said. “There are many paths to escape the hell you feel you’re in, but the right one is the the path of surrender—just let it go. This is the highest choice we can make to free ourselves from pain.”

“I agree. We must embrace understanding and compassion, with one another and just let it go,” I said, feeling exhilarated, as another immense wave of joyful relief washed over me while I listened to my friend.

“The priest emphasized the word ‘just,’ as if it were the simplest thing in the world.” He said, frustrated and longing.

“Who said it’s simple?” I countered. “It’s far from easy, buddy. Many spend years entrenched in their defenses. But once they recognize this, they commit to a deeper surrender. Most find God through surrender. Those who truly value their peace and freedom often choose this path of surrender.”

“I don’t call it finding God, nor did I say that I found God,” he stated earnestly.

“Finding and believing in God is a profoundly personal experience, my friend. To believe in God is to commit your entire life; that’s the essence of true belief,” I replied, then cited the Biblical passage: “Not everyone who says ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven.”

“Mere words are not enough, my friend; only genuine faith manifests in actions,” I added thoughtfully, then continued, “Surrendering to God requires a profound sense of

trust and faith.”

“And in God’s plan for us, that’s what you would say,” he interjected, completing my thought with a smile.

“Yes, and it’s ultimately for our highest good, even if we may not understand it at the time,” I told my friend. “This isn’t merely a belief; it’s assurance. I know for sure—and I’m not trying to convince you.”

“I’m not sure that I believe in God,” he said earnestly, then continued, “People probably do manage it, but I still have many doubts about whether I can simply let it go.” My friend fell silent, twirling an empty cup of coffee in front of him with noticeable excitement. He let out a sigh before speaking again,

“See, I don’t think I’m ready.” He confessed in a calm voice, then after a short pause, admitted, “It’s too challenging for me right now.” His gaze was questioning as he looked at me, filled with uncertainty.

“Some tomorrows never come, brother. Life is precious but fleeting; don’t waste it. We must be willing to surrender to life’s flow. Surrendering the heavy burdens on our hearts always yields a rewarding outcome.”

“I find it impossible; to me, surrender is an inability to rise above challenges,” he said sincerely. Then he paused, a hint of determination in his gaze. “See, I think all I need is more time. It’s enough for me to take responsibility,” he stated, looking at me firmly.

“Remember, buddy, the beauty of letting go is that once you surrender, your pain ceases, and you experience profound liberation.” My friend’s face remained unchanged. “Listen, a man...” I began, but he interrupted me, continuing, “who is happy is free from the past. That’s what Tolstoy would say if he were here.” He looked at me thoughtfully and smiled.

“This is a timeless truth, bro, and you know that. True happiness comes from releasing regrets and judgments and finding freedom in surrender.

A true mark of strength is a man’s choice to embrace freedom, releasing all resentments and troubles caused by others. What, then, could be more precious than freedom? In

its purest form, freedom is indeed the most precious gift a man can attain,” I said excitedly and continued,

“Release these burdens by following a path of love and surrender, and the world will unfold before you, welcoming love back into your liberated and serene heart,” I said solemnly, locking eyes with him.

My friend remained silent for a moment before he spoke. “I don’t believe in returning to love, and even less so in finding love within marriage,” he confessed sadly, yet smiled.

I saw the same familiar, kind, broad smile I had seen when I met him as a quiet, shy, sensitive young guy on our first day on campus so many years ago that I can’t even remember now. We drank the last cup of coffee, and then he put some money on the table and called the waitress to pay.

He slipped his wallet into his pocket and, turning to me, he said, “We must go.” Standing up, he awkwardly balanced his books and an umbrella in one arm, hugged me with the other, and said, “You do look extraordinarily well, my good friend.”

I replied, “I’m not sure how I could go through this day without your compliments.” We laughed again.

He grew serious, looking at me kindly, and said, “I had a great time with you.”

“Really?” I asked.

“It truly meant a lot,” he replied instantly, with a heartfelt tone.

“I think you should have called me earlier,” I said gladly.

“You’re right,” he acknowledged.

“You know that I am always here for you.”

“You will always do anything for your friends.

“I am so happy I met you,” I beamed.

“Take good care of yourself; you are a great friend.”

“Sometimes you need an old friend to remind you who you are.”

My words seemed to touch my friend deeply. His eyes filled with tears, and in a voice choked with emotion, he murmured, “I love you, brother,” placing his hand over mine as a sign of our bond, struggling with inner turmoil.

Feeling the emotion myself, I teased, “I can sense there’s more on your mind. Don’t hold back, buddy. Let it all out now.”

My friend paused and looked at me intently, placing his finger on his lip as if trying to recall something important. He then asked, “What would Tolstoy say about me being here now?” With that, he burst into laughter. I laughed back, admiring my dear friend’s brilliant sense of humor as it shone brightly. Even amid his profound anguish, his ability to joke—a testament to his genuinely indomitable and amazing nature—revealed the extraordinary, noble spirit he always embodied, his eyes glistening subtly with emotion.”

But at that moment, my thoughts didn’t turn to Tolstoy. Instead, I was reminded of the words of another great teacher, which seemed to aptly describe my disheartened friend who appeared unaware that all judgment is self-judgment and his life’s bitterness and sarcasm stemmed from an inability to forgive himself. “Judge nothing, and you will be happy. Forgive everything, and you will be happier. Love everything, and you will be happiest.” I concluded, sharing a heartfelt smile with Sri Chinmoy’s words.

My friend smiled broadly, then turned onto the busy sidewalk. He moved to near the road and gestured for an empty yellow cab to stop for him across Madison Avenue.

“Wait for me,” I called out before hurrying back to the coffee shop to retrieve my forgotten cellphone from the table. Suddenly, the sky rumbled, and I wasn’t sure if he had heard me.

The café had closed and locked the door behind us, so I knocked on the door, and the waitress opened it.

She looked at me curiously, wondering if I had forgotten something, and then invited me in. There was no one in the café except her.

As I went to pick up my phone, I noticed a small booklet resting on a brown napkin next to my coffee cup, where his books were placed. Realizing it must have fallen from his books, I picked it up and hurried outside, but it was too late.

The yellow cab carrying my friend had already moved far down Madison Avenue.

Then sudden downpour erupted, with large raindrops seemingly appearing out of nowhere, striking the ground and shattering upon impact. The howling wind whipped the fragmented droplets into a fine spray.

I shielded the booklet with my coat and examined it. Within the pages of this elegantly printed little book adorned with beautiful calligraphy, I read the words, “In this unbelieving world, you will face troubles and sorrows, distress and suffering. But you must be courageous, confident, undaunted, and filled with joy, for I have conquered the world!” - John 16:33

The rain intensified over Manhattan, pelting the sidewalks, roofs, and the umbrellas of hurried pedestrians. It added a pulsating, rhythmic energy to the cityscape.

Caught in the rain, I welcomed the blessing that the intensifying downpour veiled the tears streaming down my cheeks.

END