

Who are you?



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Global Wave



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A Journey to a new beginning

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It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad.

C. S. Lewis

Those who search for the truth and meaning in life, practically speaking, they are searching for who they are.

I opened my eyes to find myself neither in my bed nor in my bedroom. I was not even in my home. I was in a place that I had never seen before. I was surrounded with strange white and green trees. It seemed like I was in some sort of garden where I had been sleeping on the ground on something like grass—but it was white. “Where am I? What is this place?” I wondered. I stood up and walked towards the house in front of me, the only building in sight. It was one story and built on white pillars that also formed part of the walls. The parts of the wall that were between the pillars were made of dark green reflective glass, so I couldn’t see anything inside the building. Nobody was around me. There were no voices, no birds, no cars, just complete silence. So much silence that I could, for once, clearly hear my own thoughts. The door of the building was made of thick white glass, and it opened automatically when I approached it. Then it closed behind me without a sound. Inside, the building was one

spacious, airy, circular room with no dividing walls. The floor was covered with a thick white rug like polar bear's fur, so fluffy and plush that my feet sank in up to the ankle. The circular room was similar to a large—huge actually- reception area in a really nice office. Everything in it was white, the sofas, the cushions, the beautiful scattered pieces of furniture, the ceiling; even the glass walls that had seemed to be green from outside were white and transparent from the inside. In the center of the room I faced a big, semi-circular desk and a strange computer screen, not like any I had seen before. Its screen was a meter high; however, it wasn't flat, but, like the desk, it was semi-circular and concave. It occurred to me that if I were sitting at the desk the screen would surround me, almost hug me. I walked towards the huge desk staring and pondering the back of the huge computer monitor. Then I moved around it to see the front.

- "Who are you?"

I froze. The voice came from a man dressed all in white: white suit, white shirt, white tie. Although his

hair was white and he had a neatly, trimmed white goatee, he seemed young. He was at the desk in a soft, comfortable looking, white leather chair, and since he was completely hidden by the monitor, I hadn't seen him when I entered the room

- "Who are you?" he repeated.

- "I'm ..." I didn't know what to say. Groping for words, I kept repeating "I ... I ...I..." I didn't know what was happening to me. It was like I was trying to remember a movie I had seen lots of times; I knew the plot and the characters very well, but I couldn't remember the name of the film or who was in it.

- Oh! "So, you came to *find out* who you are..." He said it without looking at me and kept typing whatever he was working on. At first I hadn't realized he was typing because the keyboard was on a touch screen that was actually part of the desk, so it didn't even look like there was a keyboard, and it didn't make any noise at all.

- "I know who I am," I shot back, annoyed by the confidence in his voice.

- "Really? Then tell me, who are you?" His tone was almost sarcastic, and I didn't like it.

- "I don't even know you. Why should I talk to you about myself?" I said, still striving to find the name of this movie in my memory.

- "You came to me, to my room; I didn't go to you. Why wouldn't I ask who you are?" He was having a conversation with me, but he hadn't even looked at me; he just typed away.

- "I didn't come here," I responded defensively. Then I thought how stupid that sounded and added, "I mean, I don't know how I got here. As a matter of fact, I have no idea where I even am, so I couldn't have come here if I'd wanted to," I answered him, but my mind was still reeling, trying to understand or remember what had happened, how I got here.

- "Well, this is really strange. To hear you talk, no one would believe that for two years you haven't thought of anything else except getting to this place. You practically performed a miracle just so you could get here." He was leaning forward, as if he

was reading what he said to me, while pointing at the screen. He still hadn't looked at me even once.

I was about to open my mouth to respond, but I started to remember something. I suddenly felt like I knew exactly where I was, and I remembered that a feeling of comfort and relief had nearly overwhelmed me in the garden and that I had headed towards the building without hesitation, like I knew where I was and just why I needed to be there. My entrance, my movement towards the desk, all these seemed like perfectly natural steps that I was used to taking. In a way, I felt almost like I was there to fill out some important, but routine forms for the government or something. The only problem was that I wasn't sure what I was applying for. In spite of all that, I felt compelled to complete the forms and get whatever I had come for, and I wasn't going to leave without it. But what was it? I had no clue.

- "Look, I'm sorry I came in without permission, but I'm confused and irritated, and I don't know how to answer my own questions much less yours. Please

excuse me. Honestly, I don't know where I am or how I got here."

- "You came spiritually," said the man, as he finally finished his work on the computer and turned to face me.

- "What do you mean? Is this a dream?"

- "No."

- "I don't understand. Is it ...is it...?" The words stopped in my throat, but a disturbing question had suddenly popped into my head. Am I dead? I felt cold, trembling all over, and didn't dare utter a word.

- "No, you did not die," he responded, as if he heard my thoughts. He smiled for the first time.

- "Then what do you mean by saying I came 'spiritually'?"

- "I didn't say that your spirit departed your body or that you died. I only meant that your spiritual search brought you here."

- "I don't remember doing any spiritual search. I don't even know the meaning of spiritual search," I said, looking in doubt at the man.

- “Really? Then what exactly did you start two years ago?”

- “I don’t remember starting anything two years ago, and I’m pretty sure I haven’t done much at all these last two years, at least nothing of value,” I said. I was starting to feel impatient, but at the same time I noticed that jumbled memories and pictures and situations began flowing in my memory like waterfalls, sweeping through me, out of my control to arrange them in sequence or make a coherent story out of them.

- “That’s not what this says.” He pointed at the computer screen, interrupting my flow of memories.

- “What do you mean?”

- “Check it out yourself” he said, rising and allowing me to sit in his place. “Sit here and be sure to let the screen wrap around you.”

I did what he said. I put my face right into the screen space so that it wrapped around both sides of my head. Even peripherally, I saw only what was on the screen. I began looking at the image, searching from right to left, and suddenly I wasn’t in the white

room anymore. I was home. I couldn't believe it. Actually, I was looking at a scene at my home, as if I were looking through an unseen window in the wall or through an angle in the ceiling overlooking our small living room, which was cluttered with furniture. How I hated this small cramped place! It was full of junk and crowded with too many people. Seven of us lived there: me, my parents, two brothers and two sisters, all in a three bedroom apartment of less than 70 square meters. My younger brother slept on the couch in the living room because there was no room for him in the bedrooms. Nevertheless, my mom thought we were lucky and was certain that the neighbors were jealous. Every week, she carefully performed all rituals she knew to protect us from their evil eyes. On the screen, I saw my older sister run quickly from the bathroom to the girls' bedroom, wrapping her large body with a number of towels and trying to get into the bedroom before any of the guys in the house saw her. I smiled, but I also felt sorry for her. Then, here I came out of the boys' bedroom

carrying craft paper that I had designed and decorated myself. I started hanging it on the wall. Yes, I remember that day; it was my eighteenth birthday. I nodded, and sighed in frustration, as my father came out of his room and said:

- "What are you doing?" I heard the edge of sarcasm in his tone.

- "I'm hanging some decorations to celebrate my birthday," I said, trying to make my voice sound excited, hoping my enthusiasm would soften him.

- "Birthday? Since when have we celebrated birthdays in this house? If we started that here we'd spend the whole year celebrating birthdays. Get down and stop this."

- "Stop what? Why can't we show some care and appreciation to each other? Why-----"

- "For God's sake! Stop these stupid philosophical expressions you learned at school. We aren't like those people," he said, getting louder and a little angry.

- "This has nothing to do with school. School is over, and I don't even go to school any more. I'm talking

about something else, about thoughtfulness and caring for one another and...”

- “If you really do care about us, go out and look for a job to help with the rent, at least pull a little of your weight and help out the family, instead of wasting your time on birthdays. Why don’t you search for a job like your brother,” he interrupted me again, and his voice rose as he started shouting. The yelling caught the attention of my mom and my siblings. “Even your sister, the one we thought we would never amount to anything, already got a job at the hospital. She earns even more than your brother,” he said, pointing at my sister who stood there listening, her short wet hair surrounding her thick face. She clearly didn’t know how to respond because she couldn’t decide whether our father was praising her or insulting her.

- “Why are we always screaming and shouting? All we ever do is criticize each other’s faults and point out each other’s failures. I still don’t know what kind of job is best for me. I’m still trying to figure out what I really want to do and ...”

- "How long does it take to figure out what you want? A year, two, ten? We don't have the luxury of time, Mr. Philosopher of your era." He interrupted me again harshly, and I felt the blood rushing to my head.

- "Before you tell me what to do, you should think about the facts. Don't you remember that you couldn't find work for months? And you know that..." I could see the shock on his face. He never expected that one of us would remind him of his failure to find a job. Before I finished speaking, he stepped towards me and slapped me hard in the face. I started to fall, but I caught myself on a chair. My mother and sister screamed, and my older brother stepped between me and my father before he could get to me again.

- "Don't hit me. You have no right. I am not a child." I was trembling, but I took a step toward him. He managed to get his arm free from my brother and hit me hard in the face again. My mother's screaming became louder as she started pulling me away from him. He pushed my brother away

violently so that he could reach me. He didn't say a word, but his contorted face reflected his rage.

- "Leave, leave the house now!" my mom cried, as she pulled me towards the door.

I rushed outside. Our neighbor, who was an elderly man, was standing there with his wife. His pasty white face turned red, and I could feel his scorn and contempt.

- "Why don't you stop this foolishness! Not a single day passes without screaming and yelling in there. I'll call the police! I'll call the police! Can you hear me!" His words, merged with my father's shouts and curses, followed me as I ran down the dark stairs. The sound faded in the darkness as I darted to the ground floor. I felt like I was falling into a well of hopelessness, certain that I had no future anywhere.

I sat back, pulling out of the space created by the concave screen, and returned to the silence of the white room. I felt stunned by the contrast between the darkness of the stairs and the room's whiteness, between the noisy brawling of our home and the

silence surrounding me. My heart was pounding so hard that it sounded like a drum beating in my head, and my whole body was shaking with emotion. The man offered me a large glass of water. I took it in my trembling hands without thanking him. I closed my eyes while I drank the water in big gulps, wishing I could swallow the humiliating looks of my father and my old neighbor's faces with every mouthful.

- "I only wanted to add something valuable to our family's life. I wanted us to share some happy times, some warm moments with each other." I explained, full of regret. I wiped drops of water off my chin.

- "I understand. I don't need any explanations. You're an artist, and you were trying to draw your own world, but unlike pictures painted on a canvas, images of life don't submit to creativity easily."

The words "you are an artist" echoed inside me, filling my soul with profound comfort. I wanted them to go on forever, but, unfortunately, the echo faded and then died completely. Nevertheless, I felt an odd kind of understanding from the man standing in front of me. It seemed like he was

reading me from the inside. He waited for the consoling echo to fade away and then said, “You can never draw a picture without a background; it would be incomplete. Obviously, you tried drawing your life, but you didn’t know which background to give it: the background of your family or the background of your new community.”

- “How do you know all this?” I asked in wonder. It was like I was standing in front of a fortune teller who was reading all of my thoughts.

- “The most difficult thing is that you were not satisfied with either of the two backgrounds. Neither one impressed you completely. You wanted parts of both, to merge them in a way that suited you alone.”

- “No, you’re wrong,” I quickly denied, but my admiration of the fortuneteller’s abilities was increasing.

- “Then how do you interpret what happened that day? Examine it yourself” he said, pointing at the screen again. I understood that he wanted me to watch another scene. Once again, I entered the

semi-circle of the screen, slowly and hesitantly, almost like it was a set of powerful jaws that would suddenly snap sharp teeth closed on my head.

I had no idea what I would see this time, but even though I had no particular expectation, what I saw surprised me.

This time I was outside, not merely in the open, but flying through the air like a sparrow. I had always admired the freedom of this small bird and wished I could be like it. Suddenly, there I was, living that dream. I was flying and dancing in the sky over the main square of the town when I heard beautiful music that I knew well, the music of the annual celebration of Holy Week¹. The closer I approached the square, the louder the music became and the more the colors of decorations and the clothes of those celebrating intensified. I was flying, infatuated by this enchanting moment. Then, I landed smoothly and spontaneously like a bird, as easily as

¹ The street celebrations of the Easter Holy Week are famous in southern Europe, especially Spain.

if I had been flying all my life. I stood on one of the stone benches in the middle of the square, watching the parade that had always captivated my imagination from the time I was a small child. The celebrations were at their peak, when the procession of the huge statues, which illustrated the story of the passion and suffering of Christ in the last days of his life, passed by. Every statue stood on a large platform that allowed it to be carried on the shoulders of the celebrators walking on both sides. The statues on their golden stands were painted with an array of bright, delightful colors. The people carrying the statues wore long, bright robes that reflected the lights, and their faces were covered by colored masks with tall pointed hoods. The scenery seemed like it came straight out of one of the beautiful paintings of the Middle Ages that I had seen at the museum of art when I went with my school. As a matter of fact, I was really impressed by the old artistic traditions of the Holy Week celebration. When I looked at the procession, it seemed to me like the artistry was able to take a

person out of this world to live inside a beautiful painting that merged colors, shapes and music together to create an almost magical atmosphere.

Even though I liked the artistic tradition, for some reason the religious aspect of the celebrations offended me. I couldn't accept the idea of combining the rowdy drinking and carousing of this celebration with any divine meaning. In spite of the fact that the procession and the music were awesome, I felt it was artificial reverence. This sense of artificiality was amplified by the behavior of man leading the parade, who obviously held a high religious rank because he was carrying a long staff topped with a cross. He waved the staff towards the crowds gathered on the sides of the road, spreading blessings and demonstrating his holiness.

But I could see that from time to time he would glance back with annoyance at the people carrying the huge statue behind him, signaling them that they should speed up, rebuking them with angry looks and scowls. Then, his whole demeanor would change when he turned back to the congregation,

distributing blessings upon them right and left and nodding his head in fake holiness. I couldn't stop myself from laughing and giggling at the hypocrisy of the man, who could instantly change his expression from real anger to artificial joy. I heard laughter behind me, and I thought that the hypocrisy of the man had grabbed other people's attention too.

However, when I looked more carefully, I found a group of people from our neighborhood who had turned their backs on the parade and were standing at the other end of the square laughing about something different. When I moved to see what they were laughing at, my heart started pounding. I discovered that they were staring at a group of young men from my country who were standing in a line wearing their traditional white religious clothes with small hats stuck to their heads. I used to know these guys because we had grown up together. Most of them were about my age. I wondered how one after the other they had turned to a religious extremism that wasn't normal in our families. At this

moment, I knew that they were trying to convey a message to the neighborhood. The message was: “we are here, and we are doing the right thing, worshiping true God, not your heathen rituals.” I understood them well. I believe they saw themselves as courageous witnesses to the truth who were providing a role model for the neighborhood. They thought that this image would impress people and gain their respect. At this moment, though, felt like I was seeing them for the first time and that they looked very strange. I was suddenly seeing them through the eyes of the neighbors gathered in the square. Even though I could see how they appeared to the others, I was offended by the people’s scornful laughter at them. What made me more furious was seeing a number of the mocking spectators who were using their phone cameras to snap quick shots of the young men bowing and touching their heads to the ground. Some of the rude spectators were even cursing at them and calling them foul names. Then my anger spread to the group of young people from

my country. Why did they choose this day in particular to pray on the street when the place of worship was available every day?

I was overwhelmed with anger and resentment at both groups: the young people from my country who were trying to show off how righteous they were and also the residents of my neighborhood making fun of the immigrants and their strange ways. Nonetheless, what offended me most was that I couldn't really blame them because I had behaved exactly the same way when I mocked the religious man leading the parade. My resentment turned into frustration; I couldn't hear the music or see the colors anymore and instead of wings I felt invisible, depressing weights on my shoulders.

I pulled back from the screen to stare at the room; this time I was not nervous like I had been before. However, I was upset and miserable. Suddenly, I realized that the sorrow I was feeling wasn't strange to me; those negative feelings had been the defining mark of my life for the past two years. With only slight differences, the same situations seemed to

repeat themselves in my life over and over. I always ended up with the same depression, like my life was an inescapable cycle always returning to the same point. Ever since I finished high school, life had become a series of events that were annoying to the point of being intolerable. The heaviness mounted inside me every time I found myself unable to do something or change a situation. And running away or ignoring it didn't help at all.

I often felt that life had become like quicksand under my feet. The more I tried to get out, the deeper I sank. The feelings of heaviness and limitations became the mark of my life, day and night. Because of them I could recall long nights when I suffered from insomnia, which was worsened by my brother's exhausted snoring from the bottom bunk beneath me and the low ceiling of the bedroom above me that seemed like it was about to crush my chest. I never felt like that place was my home. I always felt like it was just temporary and that one day I would get out of it to somewhere spacious with fresh air and big windows

overlooking a garden. I hated the small window in my room. Its iron bars reminded me of prison. I always felt like one day I would live somewhere different and better, a place that I couldn't quite describe. It might be... It might be similar... yes, maybe similar to this place. This white house and these windows and this garden ...The idea flashed suddenly in my mind. I didn't really know what to think or feel, but I know I wasn't irritated. I turned around to look for the man. He was sitting in one of the comfortable armchairs. The look on his face said, "So what do you think?"

- "You're right. I'm someone who likes nothing. I dislike where I came from, where I live. I don't know where I should go."

- "Once again you're mistaken. You're a person who is honest with himself, and you have a unique ability to face realities, even the painful ones. This is what brought you here. You love life. However, you are too cruel in your judgments, both on life and on yourself. You have the ability to admire people and

respect them, but you can't tolerate their stupidity, at least what appears to be stupid to you."

The echo of the words "You're a person who is honest with himself" kept ringing in my head again. I realized that I had never met anyone who understood me to such an extent, except maybe my art teacher at school, but this man understood me in an even deeper way. What he said about my admiration of people was also true. I truly admired my parents' hard work. I liked my sister, whose beauty was in her warmth and gentleness not in her outward appearance. I was impressed by the arts of the country I lived in, but waves of frustration and sorrow continually swept these feelings away. I seemed to be nothing but a discontented, irritated, and moody young man, even to myself.

- "So, why does life treat me so cruelly? Am I asking too much? All I want is to live and experience what I love. And to do something meaningful, to make a real impact, to change things so that life has a better taste for the people around me. But it seems like

there's no one else who wants the kind of life I want or loves what I love."

- "On the contrary, you're on the right track. The only problem is that you've given up and have kept on with your cruel judgments. What's more dangerous is that you've rushed decisions and acted rashly. You have refused to listen to the people who love you, and you haven't given the people who care about you an opportunity to help you."

I couldn't understand what he meant. I was surprised that even the words "those who loved you" and "those who care about you" sounded strange to me. I have read about love and care about who I should love. Like any other guy, I want to be in love, to find a girl to love, but it didn't occur to me at all that *I am* loved and that there are people who care about *me*. I tried to imagine what that would feel like and to feel it inside me, but—and this also surprised me—I couldn't imagine it! I really could not even imagine how it would feel to be loved or what life would be like if I were loved or cared for. The surprise overwhelmed me.

- "I thought you understood me, but I am not sure of that anymore," I said with regret but without frustration.

- "You aren't easy to convince. Have another look to understand what I mean" he said with a challenging smile, pointing at the screen and settling back in the armchair again, as if he thought the experience would take me longer this time. I took a deep breath and approached the screen, and I silently prayed for the first time that he would be right and I would be wrong, that I would discover that someone really loves me.

This time I saw myself standing in front of a huge building in a big square crowded with cars. All of the drivers seemed frustrated, trying to speed up, but trapped in the irritatingly slow, heavy traffic. The people on the side walks around me walked really fast. It was rush hour in the Capital city, and everyone was in a hurry to get to work. I didn't like going to the big city, but I was trying to hide my irritation behind a façade of calm indifference. My tension and anxiety increased when I thought about

the reason I was there. Today was the announcement of the results of the annual artistic design competition. I attended last year as a spectator, but today I was one of the contestants. I had never dreamt of entering, but the encouragement of my art teacher not only convinced me to participate, but even made me imagine the possibility of winning. After I entered, I spent most of my days living in that dream. I fantasized all of the details of the moment, like I was running a short movie inside my head over and over again. I imagined my reaction when I heard my name among the finalists and how I would act surprised, like I wasn't expecting it. I would pass rows of applauding spectators as I went up to the stage, confident but humble. Then the moment would come to announce the winner, and...A voice calling my name broke into my daydream; I returned to reality to find my art teacher waving her hand as she got out of a car, quickly saying goodbye to her husband so they wouldn't delay traffic. I was waiting for her so that we could go in together.

- "I'm sorry I'm late; traffic was horrible, and we were stuck in one traffic jam for a long time, she said, as she hurried me into the auditorium.

- "You were only a few minutes late, don't worry." I said, hardly believing that she was apologizing for only being five minutes late.

- "I talked to one of the main sponsors of the competition; he's a manager of a big design and marketing company and he has known my husband for years. Basically, he admires your work, but no guarantees; you have to wait till the results of the competition are announced. As you know, the sponsoring companies fund the prizes, and sometimes they even offer a job to the winner, but they don't interfere in the artistic judgment. They leave that to the arbitration committee."

- "I can't even imagine getting a job offer. I'm very young in comparison to the other contestants, and I don't even have work experience," I said with a certain amount of false humility. I pretended to smile in way that showed I was indifferent, but when I heard that there might be a job opportunity

in an artistic field, my heart pounded. I desperately wanted this miracle to happen, to get this job. I had no idea that winning this competition could lead to a job so quickly. Winning the competition and getting a job on the same day would be the greatest victory of my life. I would finally prove to my family and everyone that my talent, my aptitude, and my dreams were real, and that they were wrong for making fun of me, saying I had wasted my time 'playing with crayons.' My hands trembled uncontrollably and were incredibly sweaty, so I put them in my pockets to hide them from my teacher. As we entered the auditorium, the ceremony was starting. The house lights went off, and only those focused on the stage were left. On one side, members of the arbitration committee and some other VIPs sat at a big table. The contestants, their families, and their friends were sitting in scattered groups throughout the theater. My teacher and I sat by ourselves in one of the back rows. After a short introduction from the president of the arbitration committee, the program started with a

documentary film that had not been part of the ceremony the year before. The film told the history of the competition and showed the winning designs from various years. All of this was accompanied by majestic music. Watching the film, I felt like I was sinking in my seat, almost being swallowed by it. The displayed works were wonderful and extremely high quality. Some of the winners from previous years had become some of the most important current artists and the most famous names in the world of art. The film ended to great applause, and I participated mechanically. The president of the committee got up again and started describing this year's submissions. He said the committee found the task very tough, as it was difficult to choose the winners because of the high standard of works entered and their closeness to each other in quality. With every word he said, I felt a chill spread through my body.

Then came the decisive moment, the announcement of the names of the finalists, starting with finalist number three. It was a young lady I had

met and knew a little, but I was never fond of her because she always seemed overly opinionated and argumentative. The moment she heard her name she jumped up and whooped, raising her hands, shaking her hair, and swaying right and left in a way that made many people laugh and applaud. I could tell that she was faking spontaneity, and I didn't think she deserved all this admiration. Second place went to a quiet young lady. She went quietly up to receive her prize and returned to her seat in a hurry. Then the president of the committee paused to raise the level of anticipation before announcing the first prizewinner. My fingers felt frozen, gripping the arms of my seat. Finally, the president called out the name of the winner. It was a young lady from a famous art university in the capital. Her works had grabbed my attention in the competition exhibition, and I remember having a short conversation with her. This time, she was not the only one to scream because she was joined by her family and friends, who jumped together like she had scored a goal in a soccer game. They surrounded her to congratulate

her as she cried with joy. I felt completely numb as I walked out of the auditorium, and the sound of cheers and applause that followed me felt like fists slamming into my face. I had to escape.

I turned my face to the other side of the screen to avoid the scene, and then I saw myself at home lying in bed. My cell phone was next to me, and its screen showed that my art teacher had left more than twenty messages over the two days after the ceremony. I know I had not slept for a single moment of those forty-eight hours. Nevertheless, I don't think I was totally awake either when my brother and mother entered the room to check on me. They didn't say anything, but their looks conveyed a message: "didn't we warn you about holding on to such big dreams?" I listened to whispers in the hall, followed by my father's loud voice, then other whispers asking him to be quiet. He was angry, but he didn't say anything hurtful, and I thanked God that he didn't come into the bedroom.

At the end of the following day my older sister came in. She hugged me and kept patting my shoulders. My tears that I had been holding in ran on my cheeks even though I tried to stop them. She cried with me without a sound.

- “You cannot continue like this. You have to go out, or eat at least.”

- “I’m not hungry. I can’t even sleep.”

- “I know; that’s why I brought some sleeping pills for you. They might help, but you have to eat before you take them,” she said while handing me a piece of my favorite candy.

- “After you eat this, take one tablet—only one. It will help you sleep. Tomorrow will be better.”

I took one tablet, but hours passed, and I still couldn’t sleep. My mind raced with overwhelming feelings of embarrassment. I felt like I had been stripped naked, humiliated unmercifully by defeat. At a certain point I saw myself shouting at my art teacher for giving me false hopes. I blamed her for what was happening to me now. Another time I imagined myself standing in front of the committee

of arbitration telling them how stupid they were in choosing the winners, especially the 3rd place winner who had no talent at all and was nothing more than a circus clown, who would never be a respectable artist. Other sarcastic thoughts ripped through my mind; I heard my father saying, “Even the clown beat you; I told you so; we are not like them.” Then I imagined myself running away to a very far country where nobody knew me, only to be slapped in the face by the reality that I didn’t even have enough money to buy a ticket to get there. I felt trapped and completely paralyzed by my shame and despair.

I took another sleeping pill hoping it would be finally work, but the waves of imagination were stronger. Before dawn, I took one more, but sleep was impossible. When my brother got up to go to work, in desperation I took a fourth sleeping pill. Finally, I felt sleep approaching, and I surrendered to it. I could hear far away voices, and it seemed that someone was trying to wake me up or move me in

bed, but I did not want to respond. I was fast asleep, and not willing to give it up.

I backed my head out of the screen and turned to the 'Man in White', as I had started to call him in my mind.

- "I don't get it. Why are you reminding me of all this? Why are you making me relive these horribly painful memories one after the other?"

- "They aren't my idea. I didn't choose these memories. They are the ones you bear within you and think about all the time. Maybe that's one of the reasons you came here."

- "I think you're wrong. I don't like these events. I'm trying to forget them and erase them from my memory."

- That may be true, but it doesn't mean that they haven't formed your perception of your life and cast their shadow across your every thought. Let me give you an example: after your confrontation with your father on your birthday, do you remember what happened?"

- "I left the house, and I didn't know where to go ... then I ran into my art teacher on the street."
- "She offered you a golden opportunity to continue training at her private school of drawing."
- "It's only a small school; the other students are all old ladies and little kids." As I protested, I was wondering what he could be calling "a golden opportunity."
- "But she and her husband are outstanding artists; they taught you everything they know of artistic techniques and allowed you to come to know the deep meaning of art as you never have before. You didn't only learn sophisticated, high quality artistic skills, but you understood through them the origin of the arts of this country and its roots in history. Maybe most importantly, she showed you how those great artists expressed transcendence and their own spiritual experiences in their artwork."
- "Yes, I know. Their religion was not only rituals and obligations, but a spiritual discovery that they expressed enthusiastically." I continued what he

said, and I started to feel enthusiasm about my favorite topic.

- "This is exactly what disturbed you at the Holy Week celebration in the main square in your town. Not only did you discover that people did not respect each other, but that the followers of various religions had become only actors, superficial, and (at best) involved in theatrical contests to prove that they are better than others"

- "As if being religious has become a game aimed at winning and at proving who's the best, rather than discovering meaning of life and its beauty and expressing these discoveries in creative ways," I continued what he said, overwhelmed with joy at feeling in tune with someone who understood what I said, and even completed it as I thought of it.

- "This is very true, but..." He stopped for a moment to make sure that I was following what he said "...it seems that you didn't give yourself an opportunity to understand the depth of these discoveries. You browsed through them like someone looking at beautiful merchandise on the shelves in a store who

quickly moves on because he is busy with other things. Your desire to prove yourself in front of your family and your community controlled you. You lived in fear of failure for two years, believing that what you do means nothing and has no value. That is how you have felt, from the day that you confronted your father and his refusal even to look at the decoration that you designed, until today.

- "I tried, but it seemed that what I produced was never good enough to attract people's attention," I said with embarrassment, while the feeling of harmony between me and the Man in White seemed to evaporate.

- "That isn't true, is it? The teacher and her husband showed continuous admiration."

- "That was only to encourage me. They didn't mean it."

- "Your older sister liked everything you did, and she used to go up to the school just to see your new work."

- "My sister doesn't understand anything about art. She just likes the colors, and the school was on her

way back from her job at the hospital,” I said, but I felt guilty for saying it and wanted to apologize to my sister.

- “The school students considered you their hero and role model.”

- “If that was my admiring audience, it’s no wonder that my highest ambition can only be producing coloring books for children,” I retorted.

- “I’m not trying to convince you that you have an audience who admires you, but to prove that the incident with your father nearly destroyed your confidence. So, you couldn’t receive admiration or encouragement, not because your audience was substandard, but because you have only been able to see your life in the shadow of this incident and its impact on your confidence. In your search for a way to respond to it, you couldn’t see the other events of life; you not only fear failure, but you also fear other people’s opinions of your work.”

- “Maybe you’re right about that day with my father having such an impact on my life,” I said, surrendering to his insight. “I really have lived in

fear of failure because of him. I've sketched so many beautiful ideas, dreamed of projects that might succeed, but when I got back to my room, I felt paralyzed and impotent. I spent dark nights, terrified, asking myself what would happen if my dreams would not be fulfilled. Sometimes I imagined that if I failed I'd commit suicide before he could tell me I was wrong and foolish and blame me for failing. Every day for the last two years, I have had amazing ideas for projects and designs, and when I work on them I feel like I'm in a completely different world, one full of magnificent creativity where I can forget not only my fears, but reality itself. But I haven't ever dared to display my work to anybody in case it turns out not to be good enough and proves my father is right about me. That's why I'm always waiting until I can create something perfect, something that will impress everyone who sees it."

- "Your work has gotten the attention and the admiration of everyone who has seen it."

- "But they're all amateurs. None of their opinions would prove my success to my family. The most important opinions—the ones that really matter—are the ones that come from the arbitration committee or Artistic Design companies."

- "In other words, the important opinions would come from the people who can give material value to your work, and not from the people who can enjoy it and get inspired by it," he said, smiling.

- "Unfortunately, yes. If there's no material appreciation, I'm a complete failure in my father's opinion and in other people's too. That probably explains the trauma I experienced after the competition. My worst nightmare became a living reality."

- I'm really surprised at how completely your frustrations, fears, and depression have blinded you to anything other than your own feelings. You know that you present true art. Don't you believe at all that the true talent will prove itself?"

His words had an oddly calming effect. I turned my attention from my cloudy emotions to look at the

beautiful garden outside. The sun had started setting, and I answered him while pondering the iridescent colors on the horizon.

- “I don’t know what to tell you. I believe I learned the skills, methods and techniques of the artists here as well as any committed student can. I know I’m able to use my tools well. And I’ve also learned how the spirit of inspiration came to many of this country’s great artists. I understand what they wanted to say and how their art has reflected and shaped the culture of this nation. I’m an immigrant, though—the stranger—and maybe because I am a stranger, I understand it all better than many natives do. I wondered why most of the contemporary artists don’t recognize their great artistic and cultural heritage. I probably sound arrogant, but this is what I really feel, and this is the first time I have dared to say it out loud. I don’t know why I feel guilty for saying it, like I deserve to be punished or something, but it is the truth. This what really made me miserable after the contest,

the feeling of injustice; I understand and deserve more than this.”

- “I’m not surprised by what you’re saying; I agree with you. Many of the ancient artists considered their art part of their worship and their way of illustrating their own understanding of the beauty of the divine. Maybe you could say it expressed their discovery of the creator of this beauty,” he said pointing at the sunset that I had been pondering through the panoramic window in front of me. “Look at their paintings! They express solutions to problems. Faces they draw showed knowledge of the God who inspired them to hope, and cope. But now, in our time, the expectation of miracles and shining divine hope in the face of the impossible has given way to the self-centeredness of contemporary artists. Smothered by hardship and boredom, their determination to express the affliction of their souls has prevented them from seeing what’s happening around them and outside them. All that concerns them is ‘Me and what happens inside Me’. It is a terrifying selfishness. No one calls it by its

real name; on the contrary, those who expose this inner ugliness are considered bold artists.”

His words expressed so many emotions that I shared but didn't know how to articulate. More importantly, his words penetrated my soul and so perfectly described me and my situation that I had no desire to deny them or defend myself against them.

- “Everything you say is not only true, but also incredibly precise and unbelievably perceptive,” I said. My admiration of the fortuneteller had grown immensely, and as I kept staring at him I sensed that he was somehow much greater and much more ancient than I could really see.

- “But shouldn't the artist's first duty be to express actual reality and what he actually feels, not unrealistic idealism?” I asked somewhat timidly.

- “You're right, but we should not confuse honesty with complaining, and self-pity misrepresented as fact and reality.”

- “But isn’t this considered being honest with oneself? I mean to express what is really inside you even if it is frustration?”
- “How many times do you need to be honest with yourself about how frustrated you are before you do something about it?”
- “I don’t understand.”
- “I mean if there is a situation that causes you trouble, frustration, or pain, and you acknowledge it, why don’t you change it? And if you can’t, how long will take you to let go, and leave those feeling behind?”
- “It’s not that simple. There are things out of my control, they keep repeating on and on. The decisions to stop them, or change them, are not up to me alone.”
- “In my opinion, expressing hardship, frustration, or injustice as an honest outpouring of emotion can be an acceptable temporary reaction to some tragedy. However, transforming that expression into a life-style—spending your life complaining or being self-destructive—and claiming that you don’t have

any other choice is faulty logic. Considering yourself a victim is really an attempt to cover up your shortcomings by blaming your circumstances and the people around you.”

I felt like his words were tearing down all my defenses. “Your point doesn’t allow for sensitivity to people’s feelings and conditions. You’re denying a person’s right to express his problems with an oppressive community,” I responded

- “So, you seem to be saying that the issue isn’t really an internal problem causing a person trouble, but weakness in the face of an oppressing community. Actually, you are right in a way. Many people don’t have the power to change things around them. If they’re really honest, then, why don’t they admit it, call the weakness by its true name, and ask for help?

- “And just who are they supposed to ask for help?” I barked back.

- “Help is always there. It may not always solve your external problems, but it can always increase your internal strength to deal with them.”

- "Ah, here we go. Here comes the shallow meaningless talk, worthless preaching unrelated to anything tangible around us. So, if you can, please tell me very specifically how a person can increase his internal power. I need clear steps and examples to follow, and not just unrealistic suggestions from people who live comfortable lives and have no understanding of what I am going through," I responded with increasing tension.

- "Why did you jump right to how to gain internal strength without asking me about the ability to solve external problems?" he said, smiling in an attempt to soften the sharpness of the conversation.

- "Please, don't try to dodge the question. You can't accuse me, after all I have suffered, of being responsible for my current situation and expect me to just accept that."

- "I didn't accuse you, and I don't expect you to try to do something that you can't. But to respond to your question about 'where to get internal strength' to tolerate your situation, I remind you that, by

definition, this strength is internal or hidden. You can't see it or touch it, and you're right; there aren't really specific, external steps to reach it."

- "So you admit that you're talking about something imaginary."

- "I didn't say that; all I meant is that practical steps vary from one person to another; obtaining it mainly depends on your internal state, or your conscience, and not only on practical steps. And although it's an internal strength, we can see its impact and be sure of its existence when we can observe it in the behavior and way of thinking of those who have it."

- "My experience is limited, I admit, but what you're talking about only applies to two kinds of people: idealists, who are completely out of touch with reality and who don't usually suffer from any real problems, especially money problems, or religious people who talk about solutions to real-world problems that will only happen in some after-life and who are always threatening that we're doomed if we don't believe in their version of the after-life. They don't give us a choice. We either

have to accept their ideas and turn into religious robots without any personal creativity or become their enemy and the enemy of God.”

- “Not exactly. The people I’m talking about are different somehow, though they aren’t angels, but you can tell who they are by two characteristics, at least. First, they have the ability to share freely what they have with others, which mean that they are secure, and not afraid of the future. Second, when they describe their own strength, they usually talk about a living reality, something they actually experience, and not possibilities may happen in the future. They describe the source of their inner power with assurance and enthusiasm.”

- “All religious people turn into 'excited hooligans' when they start preaching.”

- “You’re right again, but you also know better. You know that you can easily tell the difference between what’s fake and what’s genuine when you see it, and (for your information) most other people can, too. What you can’t deny is that anything genuine, whether it’s words or actions, has profound, lasting

impact. The kinds of artists who have influenced your life are proof that this is true.”

- “Sure, I told you before that these kinds of artists are my role models. I respect them more than anyone else in my life.”

- “But ...” he paused for a moment as he always did when he wanted to give importance to what he was going to say. “Have you been able to drink from the same fountain that these great artists drank from? Or have you only admired them and then gone on to live like many of the contemporary artists, limited by your own personal feelings?”

The question astounded me, even though it was what I was already thinking myself.

- “What makes you think that I haven’t found the same source of inspiration that they did?” I asked him—not really wanting an answer, but just trying to give myself some time to think about what he said.

- “Obviously, you realize that something spiritual is the source of creativity and beauty. But from seeing the kind of struggle you go through, it seems to me

that you haven't seen or touched this spiritual element the way your role models have. You haven't seen the same sort of divine care that they saw as an integral part of their personal daily lives. This is what pushed them to illustrate it so beautifully in their paintings."

My thoughts started running after his words trying to catch their meaning. Their echo evoked ideas and questions that I had thought about but had never found an answer to; I was trying to think, and catch up with him, as he continued to say:

- "Anyone who experiences divine intervention in his inner *life*, not just his circumstances, understands very well that man doesn't live by bread alone; and realizes that man doesn't live by monthly salary alone; or by how much people admire him alone; or by his social success alone..."

- "I see where you're going, and I can understand that many of those artists were free, in spite of financial and psychological pressure" I interrupted him for the first time because I already knew what his point was. "They continued their creative work

even in the worst times. But I never thought that was because of any inner special spiritual experience in their lives. I thought they were just people who had perseverance and were able to see the divine intervention, and divine beauty, in the world around them, so they expressed it in their works. But, to be honest, I haven't ever felt anything like that in my life, impacting me the way you describe. Did I only imagine that I understood them? Or did I interpret everything wrong? I'm so confused..." I held my head in an attempt to concentrate.

- "I don't believe that you need more explanation, you need to see and experience for yourself what they experienced." He sat down again at the desk and turned on his computer. He set the screen quickly then left his seat for me. When I sat, I was surprised because he seemed to be leaving. He walked towards the door, and it opened automatically as he approached it.

- "Wait, where are you going?" I asked.

- "I believe we're finished for now. The rest is in your hands, yours alone."

- "Wait please; I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing here by myself. It is true that so many of the ambiguous and troubling issues in my life have become clearer to me; but how did all this happen? Who are you? And how did you bring me here? And what should I do? I need a lot more explanation; you can't leave me without explaining everything."

- "This place is a fulfillment of all your dreams and a solution to all your problems ... from your own point of view." He took a step back toward me. "This spacious and elegant room instead of your small cramped room, the organization of the elegant furniture instead of the chaos in your home, panoramic windows instead of tiny windows with bars, the big garden surrounding the house instead of concrete rows of apartments and condos, silence instead of noise, even, someone to understand you,... even me, a person to talk to, someone who listens instead of interrupting, or shouting and screaming at you, someone whose is wise and

experienced but still seems like a peer who speaks your language. In short, this is the perfect world, as you imagined it. All this was a gift to you. Not to solve your problems, but to prove to you that all you have wished for is really just a different frame or container for you to put your life in—a way to get rid of the irritating container that you had before—so that you can discover for yourself that a new container really can't answer your inner questions or change your state of being.”

- “Then what should I do? How can I find the answers and get out of all this?” I asked him, wondering what he meant when he said, “**all this was gift to you.**” A gift from whom?

- “Take a look at the remaining scene, and afterwards things will be much clearer to you.” Once again, the fortuneteller had read my mind and answered my inner questions. He turned toward the door, waving his hand at me as he stepped outside and the door closed behind him.

I looked around at the room I now had all to myself; it seemed comfortable in every way. I wondered, “Is

it possible that I could stay here forever? Without even worrying about searching for answers? Why not? Here I am in my fantasy land, where all my dreams have been fulfilled” I spent a moment trying to enjoy the beauty of this reality, just letting it all sink in. I closed my eyes to savor it, but the joy and feeling of happiness that I imagined I would feel was not there. The greater surprise was that I suddenly realized that imagining I could stay here forever is not a cheerful idea as would thought.”

- “The surprises of this day just won’t stop,” I mumbled to myself. “If this isn’t it, then, what is it that I really need?” Again, I was surprised because the answer was already there “I need to find what the real artists who preceded me had found. I want to discover what they had actually experienced, to see for myself the real answers and express them through my art just as they did through theirs. I want see depressing reality fade away and the dawn of a better, new reality,” I laughed at the jumble of realizations and new desires that filled my mind.

- "It seems like I can't escape this last confrontation," I told myself, and I laughed out loud for the first time in a long time. I closed my eyes, and this time I approached the screen enthusiastically with high expectations.

- "I opened my eyes, but I couldn't see anything this time. Everything around me was mist and fog, like I was standing inside a cloud. Although the cloud wasn't moving, there was a cold breeze blowing across my body that made me feel like I was totally naked. Oddly, I wasn't scared or embarrassed. Even the cold didn't really bother me. On the contrary, it was such a soft, gentle breeze that it wouldn't even have blown out the most weakly burning candle. In fact, it was the kind that would cause a flickering, dimly burning fire glow. I felt kind of glowing inspiration similar to the way I felt when I was immersed in my art, except this inspiration was at least ten times more intense than all my past experiences.

“Sadek².....Sadek” I heard a quiet, gentle voice calling me; I didn’t know whether it came from around me or inside me. Suddenly I remembered the name of the film that I had been searching for all day. Yes, my name is Sadek, but I ‘ve never heard anybody calling me this way in my whole life; my name was not a label, stuck on a product; the voice was calling my whole being and everything I have ever done or experienced. It truly knew *me* and made me feel like I wasn’t alone in the cloud, or in this world. The voice was warm, and it engulfed me in its warmth. I can’t really describe all that I was feeling and sensing: peace, completeness, satisfaction, security, harmony—everything that could be described as wonderful and positive. What’s strangest is that I couldn’t think of any reason for feeling this way. There is nothing; no project, no competition prize, and I hadn’t done anything to deserve these feelings.

² An Arabic name means honest, sincere, or genuine

- **“I called you by your name ... I know everything that happened to you ... don't be afraid ... I'm here to save you ... let's start a new page.”** I don't know how to explain it. All of the feelings that had haunted me: the fear of failure, teasing, contempt, and scorn, all of those feelings that had tormented my life and had been a continuous, heavy, suffocating burden suddenly disappeared. ... Yes, they disappeared as I took deep breaths of freedom. I searched for them, and I couldn't find them ... I wanted to shout with joy. I wanted to hug and kiss the one who saved me. I discovered that there was someone who knew about and even cared about my weariness and pain and could help me. I felt overwhelming love ... Yes for the first time; I felt that there was someone who loved me, without condition, without explanation, and without me doing anything. The discovery filled me with so much joy, almost more than my body could stand. I wanted to hold this moment so that it would never end. I knew that I was in the hands of my creator. Who else would know how to help me like this? He

alone knew how to lead me to this moment of complete fulfillment. I didn't know how it had happened, but I knew that I had finally found what real life is, and deep down I knew for certain that I would never allow myself to lose it again.

- **“As of today, you will ask people for nothing ... you will give to them instead.”** The words kindled something new inside me ... I felt power ... inner confidence ... my soul shook off the dust of weakness and bitterness, I didn't need all this ... the power of life increased and overflowed. I surrendered to it without hesitation. I felt that there was a river of life flowing out of me, and I wanted to run to someone, everyone, and hug them and to tell them what is happening to me. I also felt like my whole body was shaking. I was free from every burden and all bondage that had chained me down. The clouds started to clear, and I felt like I was descending from a high place. I was landing flat on my back in a place that vaguely seemed like the white grass garden with its green and white trees.

The trees were blurry; one of them seemed like moving toward me.

- "Sadek ... Sadek" the voice was calling from the tree, as the clouds cleared, and the shape of the tree was changing, from it I heard a familiar voice, once again. "Sadek... Sadek," I tried to clear my eyes, and a face entered my view. It was my sister's face, and she was calling me with excitement: "Sadek ... Sadek." I felt her hugging me and heard her burst into loud sobs.

- "Where am I? What's going on?" I said, looking around the cold, strange white room.

- "You are in the hospital, in the intensive care," said my art teacher whose eyes met mine as she came over and stood next to the bed I was lying on. She was crying too.

- "In the hospital? How did I get here?" I looked down at the hospital gown someone had put on me.

- "You overdosed on the sleeping pills I gave you," said my sister, who was in tears. "I wanted to kill myself because I felt so guilty for giving them to you."

- "The medicine has side effects, and one of the rare effects is that it can put you into a coma." The art teacher completed my sister's sentence.

- "I was in a coma? Since when?"

- "About 24 hours; it's been terrible, horrifying for all of us; I hope it wasn't for you," the teacher said, trying to smile while crying.

- "I think they were the most important and happiest twenty four hours in my life," I said, smiling feebly back at her.

- "Don't say that," my sister said, "the whole family is outside, horrified and sick with worry."

- "I'll explain it all to you later," I told her.

- "Why did you take so many pills? The doctors think you were trying to commit suicide," the teacher said.

- "No, that's not true; I just couldn't sleep, for two whole days, and I needed to sleep desperately."

- "Why didn't you answer my phone calls?" she asked. "I had some important things to tell you..."

- "I'm not worried about losing the competition anymore. Everything has changed, and that just

doesn't really matter to me now," I interrupted gently

- "It isn't about the competition, though; it's about the Design and Advertising Company."

- "What do they want?" I asked with surprise.

- "What do you think they want?" She said with a teasing smile. "Of course they want to offer you a job to work with them."

- "Impossible, what about the winners in the competition?"

- "Work is one thing and the competition is something else. The winners are considered by the companies as the best choice, but that doesn't mean they're the only choices. In your situation, the manager of the company could see that the mixture in of classical art and the modern schools in your work is more useful for them. That's why he decided to offer you the job."

- "That's incredible; it's a miracle." I said while my heart leapt with joy inside me.

- "We told you this would happen one day, because of the great gift you have and because of your hard

work. But somehow you just wouldn't listen," she said laughingly.

- "That's right. I couldn't hear or see, but now the situation has changed and I think I can see clearly."

- "Wow, look how working in giant companies changes people in a second!" she teased.

- "This has nothing to do with the job; although I am thrilled about it. For a long time I thought it would be the solution to all my problems, but now I know that there are things that are more important."

- "It seems that the past twenty four hours really have changed you," the teacher said, as she pondered the expression on my face.

- "Yes, I'm not the same person, and I believe I still have a lot to figure out about what has happened to me."

- "The doctor said we can't visit for more than ten minutes," my sister said, looking at the teacher.

- "Yes, we have to let him rest. Besides we need to let the rest of the family in on the good news that he is OK."

They left me alone in the cold room, and I found myself thanking God for the job opportunity that was not lost. But I found my thoughts drifting to something else, to the words that I heard in the clouds that I did not want to lose or forget: **“I called you by your name ... I know everything that happened to you ... don’t be afraid ... I am here to save you ... let’s start a new page. As of today, you will ask people for nothing ... you will give to them instead.”** I remembered every word and repeated them several times. As I recalled the words, the overflow of emotion and understanding that accompanied them overwhelmed me, and I found myself saying: “Yes. Now I know who I am, because I know who you are ... you are the one who gives freedom ... you are the one who gives a new beginning.”