

ENDLESS NIGHT

Martin Ralchevski

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*There are no road signs at the most important
crossroads of life.*

Charlie Chaplin

Once when I was about twenty years old I picked up the receiver to make a phone call and accidentally listened in on my mother who was speaking to her friend from the other room at the same time. I was just about to hang up when I mistakenly heard her saying that she's been worried about me for some time now.

'He is always writing something in his spare time,' were her words. I was very puzzled.

To be honest, I was not strong enough to resist the temptation and contrary to my good up-bringing, I continued listening.

'That is so wonderful. Why don't you encourage him?' her friend asked. 'Don't you think he may become a writer someday?'

'No!' my mother replied in a firm and explicit voice, without any hesitation. 'He writes because he likes to write!'

Now, about twenty years later, I would like to tell my little son, to whom I dedicate this book and all those who long to find themselves, that in order to be truly happy we have to do our best in finding our vocation and boldly stretch our imagination to the limit, no matter what our age and social status are.

It would be very sad if we just journey through life without leaving any trace behind us.

While writing this book, I was working nonstop, whilst taking care of my son. A large part of the book was written on my knee, in cars, in hotel lobbies, in offices and in other similar conditions. My motivational strength for everything was my faith.

Martin Ralchevski

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A man is truly happy only when he creates something, no matter what it is – writing poetry, drawing a picture, furnishing his house or simply planting a flower.

Martin Ralchevski

PROLOGUE

An ancient Christian legend tells of an Egyptian monk, the finest in his perfection and wisdom, who had dedicated his entire life to a single goal – to understand the meaning of human life. When he reached the age of eighty, while walking in the woods, he suddenly met his Creator, who appeared to him as a modestly dressed white-bearded elderly man. The monk immediately realized that it was nobody else but the very Creator standing in front of him. Without any hesitation, he asked immediately: “If you are appearing to me, my Lord, it means one of two things, either it is the end of my life or you have heard my prayers and decided to fulfill my request.”

“You are right in both cases,” the Lord answered. “You are here because you have worked incredibly hard during all the days I have assigned to you on earth, having only one purpose – to understand the meaning of my creation. Thanks to your never-ending desire and unceasing perseverance, you have come extremely close to your goal and you almost have the answer. That’s why I decided to reward you by fulfilling a wish of yours.”

The monk bowed his head because it was very difficult for him to look his Creator in the eyes, and humbly uttered: “I’ve lived my life my way. I’ve received wisdom and knowledge that hardly anyone on earth possesses. I’ve achieved true freedom and peace, which many people dream about, and I have them in abundance. But one thing I could not understand: what is love?”

“Is that your wish?” the Lord asked.

“Well, yes and no,” the monk replied. “Yes, because that really is my wish, but no, because I would like to live my life again in order to accomplish it. If possible, I want to become a twenty-year-old again, but to preserve my current sanity.”

“All the laws and forces that you people know are completely dependent on me,” the Lord answered, “but there is something that

you obviously cannot understand and that is that I created them not to be broken, but to be obeyed.”

“So you are not going to fulfill my wish?” the elderly monk asked unhappily.

“I’ll give you everything people dream of, and yet, second life... I cannot do that.”

The monk did not answer. He bowed his head quietly and waited humbly.

The Lord saw his humility and appreciated it as well as the monk’s true and strong longing. “I can really see that you are a wise, devout and dignified man, that’s why I’ll make an exception!” He said, “I will bring you back to the age of twenty, but as I said before I will not break all the laws. I will take you back sixty years but without the experience and the wisdom that you’ve acquired during your life.”

The monk became very sad because he realized that man has only one life to fulfill his dreams, and only one chance to know love and happiness... and he wanted to die.

PART ONE

*Man has only one life
and a single chance
to fulfill his dreams.*

A few hours had passed since Mark had arrived at Anzio. He was in no hurry. There was time enough to enjoy the day.

After spending some time leisurely window-shopping, he headed down the slope. With every step he took, the excitement in his soul was growing. More than three years had passed since his previous visit to this place which was so precious and important to him, and, at first sight at least, the town didn't seemed to have changed at all. Just like the first time, he was taken aback by the hospitality of the local people. The residents of the whole region were extremely kind and friendly. Perhaps that was one of the reasons why he wanted to spend such cherished and unforgettable moments there.

Mark walked slowly, contemplating until he arrived at his destination. *"One always returns to the place where one was once happy,"* he thought. The house was just the same. Only the greenery outside sparser, but that was probably just because of the dry and hot summer that had just passed.

As he was looking around and reflecting on his living memories, the landlady appeared on the porch. She had been waiting for him, and, as he had requested, had prepared and arranged the room the same way she had three years ago.

"Mark, come in! I'm very glad to see you," she started speaking right from the porch. "How are you, how's Monica...? Come in."

Mark nodded, but naturally didn't reply to her question.

"And how are you?" he asked in return. "Did you receive the money I sent you?"

"Yes... yes, I got it. Come in, make yourself comfortable."

Excitement seized his soul the moment he crossed the threshold

of the house and stepped inside. *"The conscientiousness of these people is touching,"* he thought as he opened the door of the room.

"I am very pleased. It is obvious that you've done your best," he muttered a few seconds later, but nobody was there to hear him. To his surprise, the woman had already left the room.

He caressed the immaculately spread snow-white sheets that covered the bed and as he walked around the room the excitement that filled his heart turned into grief. He knew this room's every nook and cranny in a way he could never forget. Here, in this place he had experienced so much joy and happiness. The walls seemed to have been soaked with that mysterious energy that gives life to everything beautiful and eternal and to what makes world better – love. That kind of love, however, could not be recreated or described. It could only be experienced. Mark pulled one of the two chairs in front of the table, took out the only bag he carried and an empty envelope into which he had carefully folded a couple of blank sheets of paper beforehand. Sighing, he thought for a moment and then began to write. *"Dear Moni, from the bottom of my soul I would like to tell you that I am truly sorry, mostly how on that day you went out, I missed telling you how much I loved you... I know time flows in only one direction and I have no chance to turn it back and yet if we assume that..."* For a moment he stopped, as if startled. Glancing around, he started to wonder. Why was he writing this letter? What did he hope to achieve? What was he expecting? Monica would never read his outpouring. It was obvious that despite the strength of his desire and craving for a dialogue, his efforts were in vain. There was no point in procrastinating any longer. *"The moment has come,"* he muttered to himself, throwing the letter to the floor and standing up. Shivers ran down his spine and small drops of cold sweat covered his forehead. *"Well, if there is still something beyond,"* it crossed his mind like a flash of lightning *"is it possible that, instead of setting myself free from the pain and the burden, I may take them with me forever?"* He was aware that if he really wanted to bring it to an end, he should not think about such things. He ignored the vague ideas that were causing him to hesitate, opened his bag again, took out two packets of pills and started to open them. He knew already, through his advance research, that he should have eaten beforehand, just to ensure he wouldn't vomit when the pills began to dissolve in his stomach. However, despite himself, he had been unable to put

anything in his mouth since morning, and now the day was almost over. Mark looked in his bag again, only to discover that the bottle of mineral water he had bought in Rome was empty. *“How ironic,”* he thought. Anyway, did it really matter what kind of water he was about to take the sleeping pills with? For the first time in weeks he smiled, then rose and went to the bathroom, poured a glass of water and started to take the pills.

He took five at a time, followed by a big sip of water, swallowing, waiting for a moment, and then taking the next dose.

Suddenly, as if stung, he leapt up and went to the window. Why not spend his last minutes, or an hour maybe, walking on the beach? He could then enjoy his favourite place all the more, and keep it deeper in his heart, rather than spending his remaining time doing nothing in the room. He would also spare his landlady the inevitable headaches and troubles she would face as a result of his action.

Mark swallowed the last pill and headed towards the street. *“Strange,”* he thought as he went towards the beach, *“I’ll probably be dead in an hour but I still have a purpose.”* Absent-minded, he walked from the house to the beach in less than five minutes. When he stepped onto the sand he saw just a few people there lying on the still-warm sand trying to enjoy the last rays of autumn sun. It was such a cherished and unique moment. Every minute was incomparable, final and holy, that’s why it was quite logical for him to choose to experience it alone. After a quick look he chose a quiet, comparatively remote spot, quite far from the few people on the beach, where he could end his life in peace. He had always loved his privacy, the quietness and the silence. Now more than ever he needed them. He sat down and rested his tired body on the fine sand. This would be the last stop of his existence – the place he would remain forever.

The people on the beach were unaware of what was going on. They probably hadn’t even noticed him and that was definitely for the best. The thought of what others would think when they realised that he had committed suicide had bothered him in recent days. Now, to his surprise, all his previous fears and remorse had completely left him. In these last minutes he preferred instead, to sink into the nice and beautiful memories which he had experienced right here on this appealing azure coast, rather than torture himself anymore with things that he could not control. He wanted to memorize this

wonderful picture, of which he was now a part, and weave into it those eternal and beautiful emotions of his precious past.

The sea was more beautiful than ever. The sun's autumn rays were more gently soothing than ever before and the water was shining crystal clear, warm and full of life. There were several yachts sailing in the distance that seemed, in the sun's reflection, to hang in the air rather than touch the water. *"What did people in the Middle Ages think,"* Mark wondered while gazing at the distant boats *"when they watched ships disappear from sight, first their hulls, then their sails and finally their masts and flags? In those days they used to believe that the Earth was flat, so that the gradual disappearance of vessels beyond the horizon was really surprising and mystifying to them. This "phenomenon" surely raised lots of questions in their minds which they were not able to answer at all. As to the Sun it used to be easier – they used to see what we see now: that it appears to go round the Earth, and not the other way round, which they used to believe without unnecessary reasoning"*.

The effect of the sleeping pills had not apparently started yet because at this stage Mark was thinking quite logically or at least he thought so. He was surprised at his desire to go for a swim for the last time – something he loved and was good at. But he quickly rejected this idea on the grounds that it would be too ridiculous for him to drown, bearing in mind that he had a reputation as an excellent swimmer. *"It is a weird feeling that since I've taken the pills, I have been constantly obsessed by different desires. First I wanted to go out, then I came to the beach, and now I want to swim. Could the reason be that I'm still not ready to die?"* He started looking at the sea as his attention was, for the second time, distracted by the small, distant boats which seemed to be purposely sailing on the very border with the horizon. *"It really is beautiful. There is probably no place on earth which is so beautiful..."* Now a couple in love was passing by about thirty metres ahead of him. They were holding hands and obviously burning with desire and yearning for each other. Mark was completely stunned for a moment – he felt he envied them. He had not experienced such a feeling in all his life. He had always strived to be good, careful and modest. He had been raised in this manner and that's how he would die. Different mixed feelings and desires were raging in his soul now when he most wanted to be in harmony with himself, relative though it was.

An hour had already passed since taking the sleeping pills; at last they slowly but surely had begun to take effect. In a way you could say that Mark was well aware of the fundamental problems of psychotronics, as well as the various stories about paranormal experiences on the threshold of death described in many books by different authors. He was impatient to see, as most books described, the most important and significant events of his relatively short life that would appear as a film before closing his eyes. Then he had to go through something like a tunnel and be finally welcomed by a creature radiating white light. However, all stories ended up back on Earth and the dying would wake up again in their well-known, mostly sick or injured bodies. Whatever the truth was he would finally be able to check it himself and it was about to happen very soon, for better or worse. This thought made him feel slight satisfaction and even aroused, for a while, the constant human curiosity that relates to everything unfamiliar and unknown.

Ten minutes later he had no strength left. The effect of the medicines was becoming more obvious: only a few minutes before his mind had been clear and relatively calm. Gradually, however, mental fatigue and drowsiness prevailed. His thoughts were growing unreasonable and illogical, and the focus of his eyes imperceptibly shifted from the beautiful sea to the sky. Mark was still lying on his back, making his last attempts to concentrate and muster up his remaining strength in order to move his left arm. For some reason or other, his arm was in a very unnatural way, placed quite far from his body. He concentrated all his energy and last efforts and willed himself to place it in a more comfortable position. His eyelids grew so heavy. Time was tightening its grip; he could not resist any longer. He could still feel the sand but hardly hear the surf. He slowly lost all his senses. Mark closed his eyes and relaxed fully.

The last feeling he had was that of sinking.

* * *

Mark heard the magnetic voice of his deceased father like a distant echo.

“You must believe in your dreams, my boy. If you believe in them with all your heart, then God will surely help you, and you will fulfill them one day,” he said. Mark opened his eyes and saw

his precious father leaning over him. He warmly smiled at him and gently caressed his head, then turned the lights off, wished him good night and silently went out of the room.

“I’ll believe in my dreams,” Mark was thinking to himself *“and God will help my dreams come true. It’s good that I have somebody to help me out. First of all I have to decide what I want, then I’ll start believing and when I grow up...”* he turned aside, huddled in his soft blanket and fell asleep with a nice, warm feeling.

The voice of his mother woke him up. Unfortunately he had to get up for school.

Mark had mixed feelings concerning school. It was not that he didn’t like it. On the contrary, most of the time it was pleasant and interesting to him, but the problem was something else – unfortunately he didn’t know how to communicate properly with his classmates. Maybe the actual reason for that was the fact that he was often deliberately closing himself off and wrapping himself up in thought, which was definitely irritating and insulting to his classmates because they thought he was avoiding them. The town he was living in was small and almost everybody there knew him. That’s why his parents were often getting hints about how their boy didn’t want to play with their children or how he believed he was worth more than they did and the kind of stories which were somehow true but in fact had almost nothing to do with the truth.

Although Mark didn’t like reading much, he was one of the most excellent students in the class. The town he was living in was really small and there was very little entertainment, so his everyday life was quite routine. The only exception was the days in which he would go to the small grove nearby, with his father’s permission, after having earlier finished his homework. Whenever there was more time he preferred to go deeper inside but most of the time he didn’t have this chance because he had to go home at the exact, obligatory dinner hour – a tradition carried on from generation to generation. Mark would love to give different names to the forest areas. Along one of the paths leading from the main road and deeper into the forest there was a beautiful fir tree which he had named after his first, childhood unrequited love “Dolores”. A little bit farther this path, in the middle of a trench, a wonderful view over the valley became visible, he had called this valley “Hope”. He knew that all the names which he gave to the areas and the subjects in the grove were weird, to say the least,

and it would be ridiculous for anyone to find out about them; that's why they were his little secret. He had ventured to share this only with his father because he always supported him and encouraged him to express his emotions and feelings and to be never ashamed of his dreams. Mark had the best friend on earth in the person of his father. After receiving his father's blessing once again, he named a majestic old pine as a sign of gratitude after his father, who was the embodiment of wisdom and perfection to him. But unfortunately even his father, as a middle aged man, had many obligations and could not always respond and satisfy all his needs. He was a state employee, a clerk probably. Mark never got to know the exact nature of his work, because almost every time he was coming home from work he had to finish calculating and counting something. Mark would never forget those conversations between father and son that were mostly in the evenings. It was during these ten-to fifteen minute talks, just before wishing his boy good night, that he would try to pass on and reveal the best of himself in order to teach his son to love, to believe, to create and to dream.

Sometimes, though very rarely, Mark would have a thought that maybe his father was not that different from other children's fathers and that he probably adored him because, just like other boys at his age, he needed a strong example of behaviour and authority, someone whom he could admire. However, he knew well that this was not actually the truth for the simple reason that he could always compare his dad with the others. By the way this was also the most reliable way to find out and value his privilege over the others.

To him, the grove was a place for contemplation and relaxation. Here he would seek the answers to the questions he had discussed with his father. It was his sanctum, the starting point for everything around him, his silent, faithful and true friend.

* * *

The weather was cloudy, the atmospheric pressure was high and the temperature – lower than the usual for the season- made people do everything a little busier than usual because they expected it to rain at any minute. It had not actually rained for more than ten days, a period of calmness, which was definitely longer than usual for Mark's motherland. It definitely seemed better for him not to

go much further away from home in case it rained before he got back, he would certainly get drenched and catch a cold – a risk not worth taking. For this reason he gave up walking in the woods on this occasion and decided to stop by the local church instead.

They were told at school the previous day that a very old, miraculous icon from Russia was expected to arrive in town. Their teacher had especially emphasized that it was a blessing from God for the entire population of the town and that it would be good for everybody to go to the cathedral and worship the rare relic. Although Mark was educated in the values of the Christian religion, he knew the religious rituals and rules quite superficially and his faith was weak and fragile.

When he entered the temple, he noticed a small group of people arranged in line waiting patiently for their turn to pay their respects to the icon. For a moment Mark hesitated because he didn't like places where there were lots of people and he was instinctively about to go out. However, something was not right. For the first time in his life he felt some special secret power that made him change his mind in an inexplicable but distinct way. *"Well," he said, "there will be probably no value in my staying but it is not going to cost me anything."*

"I have to ask for a particular thing," he thought while waiting for his turn. *"Probably everyone has come here with a specific request or a problem. That's what our nature is – we usually turn to God whenever we need something."* At this point, Mark suddenly remembered his father's words which he had heard frequently in recent years. "Just remember that if you believe in your dreams with all your heart, there is no way that you will not get help to fulfill them."

"Lord, show me, please, the meaning of life and give me love," Mark whispered before the icon when his turn came at last and he faced the calm image of Christ.

Realizing the meaning of human existence was surely something everybody aimed for, Mark thought, because the answers they gave to this question at school were extremely unsatisfactory. Love... it was the most important and obligatory condition for achieving happiness because if man went through the entire journey, as his father used to say, without having really loved someone, then he had lived in vain.

After standing for a while before the icon, Mark kissed it, as

others had, left the church and set off for home. To him, it was rather like a lottery ticket that he had submitted hoping that he had done everything that depended upon him. By that very same evening, of course, he had completely forgotten about it.

Ultimately, the meteorological department had forecasted the bad weather and torrential rain had started.

* * *

“When are we going to talk about important and eternal things, those that you only ever touch upon and never talk about?” he asked his father one day.

“You have to be mentally mature to be able to handle the burden of truth in a calm way because not everybody is up to it,” his father answered.

Mark grew sad. He felt unreasonably undervalued. “*Why is the truth a burden?*” Obviously, his father was talking like that because he wanted to hide something from him. “*What could be so scary so as to be hard for a father and son to discuss?*” he thought. At this very moment his mother entered the room.

“Are you talking man to man again?” she asked with a slight irony.

“I’m trying to prepare him for the truth in life,” his father snapped slightly and went out.

Although he was generally a very good and quiet man, sometimes, though rarely, he would become quite fastidious perhaps because he was bored and tired of his work which he was not in love with – something he had never hidden. That’s probably why he often used to talk to Mark about this issue because he did not want his boy, pressed by circumstances, not to have choices and to have to work doing something that was far from his heart. However, his behaviour was almost always a true example of a man that could be followed suit of. Mark remembered well one occasion when his father had taken him and his mother along with his boss’ family to dinner at the most prestigious restaurant in town as a sign of gratitude to his being promoted. His behaviour was exquisite and his manners – exact and precise in every respect. At that moment Mark saw in his face an undiscovered, real gentleman that he had previously only read about in history textbooks.

One of his favorite characters, of whom Mark often heard about from his father, was Churchill. He could not forget that sad story when the boys from his class had gathered over the weekend to hunt in his beloved grove – a tradition, dating back many, many years and emblematic of the country. He had tried to dissuade them and he got a spanking for that. However, the physical pain had been outweighed by the psychological one. Mark suffered immensely for having lost his buddies. “No eternal friends, only eternal interests,” his father had said when he heard about what happened. Those were Churchill’s words spoken by him on a particular political occasion, but at that moment they referred more than ever to his wounded heart.

On Monday, when Mark had gone to school, he was surprised to find out that he had got a new name. The defender of the grove and its animals had been “fairly” called by his classmates the *Forest spirit*. Since that day to his graduation his nickname followed him everywhere.

“But it does not sound bad,” his father had sincerely exclaimed when he heard of it. “Nicknames, in most cases, are given to abuse and cause grief, especially in childhood. I also used to have a nickname when I was your age which, in comparison with yours, sounded awful. Remember: you should never change views and principles just to make others like you. If you do, I know from personal experience, sooner or later you will regret it”.

“But I don’t want to have a nickname,” Mark had objected as he was asking his father in tears to help him and save him from it.

“I will tell you what to do. Listen to me carefully. Tomorrow or any day thereafter, whenever you decide you’re ready, tell the leaders of the class that you have found something in the woods which definitely looks like an antique. You’ve ‘discovered’ it while digging randomly in order to lay the foundations for something like a shelter where you can get protection from the rain. Then you came across a large chest that seemed like a part of the missing treasure of Henry VIII, probably hidden there by one of his servants. You will also say that you think it exactly matches the description of the lost treasure. As you are the best student in the class, nobody will doubt your words. You will ask them whether they would kindly help you to uncover it, reminding them that if they do and if you hand it back together to the state, a significant percentage of the value of what has been found would surely be presented, as a reward to the people that have handed it back.

That's what I meant when I told you that there were no eternal friends, only eternal interests. Beguiled by any eventual profit, which only you can offer them by sharing your secret, they will not only stop calling you by a nickname but you will even become much closer than before."

"But what will happen when they want to come and dig the treasure out together?"

"Do not worry about it. I will help you to bury an old chest. And when they arrive, you will be surprised to find out that, after your discovery of the treasure, someone had come and stolen it before got back to it. But you will immediately reassure them that from what you have read you know that this treasure is very large, so there's sure to be other parts buried that need finding and digging out, however, you will need their help again. The discovery of the other chests will take more time. They are likely to either lose patience and interest or simply grow up during this time. In either case, trust me, they will never call you *Forest spirit* any more."

Mark had liked the story his father had quickly made up. He remembered with trembling excitement how enthusiastic and impatient he had been for its implementation. For the first time in his life he could see himself not just as equal to the rest of his classmates but as something better – as a leader.

However days passed by but Mark still didn't dare to raise the issue with his classmates. What was weird was that his father behaved as though they had never had such a conversation.

After about a month, he finally ventured and asked timidly when his father was going to help him with the chest.

"I thought you had forgotten about the story."

"But how... Why should I forget?"

"Do you really want to have fake friends? The kind of friends who are only with you because they expect to get something in return? Oh no, I don't think you want that. Please do your best, my boy, to remember and observe two main things in the future and you will be always happy and have peace in your heart. Firstly, you should never worry and suffer about little things in life unnecessarily, and secondly – almost everything, no matter how it looks at the time, is minor."

Of course, as always, his father proved to be right again. "*Well, there are many things that are worse than an unimportant, harmless nickname.*"

Mark had learned his lesson and continued to go to school trying really hard and managing not to pay any attention to his new name, but what was more important was that from that day on he had eliminated lies as a means of solving problems.

* * *

There were many incredible ideas and desires that had developed in his head over the years. At the time he used to believe in a childish way that he would definitely be able to accomplish them one day in the infinite future. However, the most important idea was to write his own film scenario when he grew up, the plot of which was almost entirely developed in his mind.

Mark learned that our lives sometimes surprise us in strange ways. The nickname which used to worry and offend him a lot in the beginning had gradually become something intimate and even sentimental for him. He was determined to name his future work exactly as his friends had once called him. Although these were ideas and dreams that existed only in his head, he would often like to mull over them, especially as for some reason or other they made him feel happy and free.

* * *

Another topic that his father would often mention was that of happiness. "Man only fully lives when he has a particular purpose in life," was his way of thinking, "but the purpose must be positive and bring about spiritual satisfaction, otherwise it is just a waste of time. Happiness is most complete when you see how your dreams come true. So you should believe in them, sparing no effort. Believe in them and you'll feel how different and meaningful your life will be. Then every single day will be meaningful and significant to you because it will take you closer to accomplishing what your heart is longing for."

When he spoke like that his father would always shed a tear and sometimes, though rarely, he would suddenly go out of the room, put on something quickly and leave the house. He would walk down the street for about ten minutes and, almost every time, on returning he would repeat the same one thing: "My son, do not let your life slip

away as happens to millions of people all over the world. Take me as an example. Having a family, a house and a good job is not enough to be happy.” Then he would usually make a brief pause in which he would often light a cigarette and finish: “You ought to have the courage to believe that your dreams will come true because this is the most reliable way to understand the meaning of life.”

“If my dad doesn’t know what the meaning of life is, then who does?” Mark thought whenever he decided that his father surely knew the answer but was saying these things because of modesty or for some other unknown reason.

Mark remembered that another of his father’s stories was that in order to fulfill your dreams you should not forget to ask for help from the One to whose power everything in our world is subordinate. His father would often use such metaphors and stories in order to illustrate and present what he believed in and wanted to teach him, using more comprehensible and clearer words.

“Once upon a time there was a remote kingdom whose king was famous for his proverbial kindness to his subjects. He was the kind of a person that was truly happy only when he could give joy to his subjects. He used to give whatever was asked of him, to everyone according to their needs. His kingdom was rich and blessed and everybody lived happily in true peace, harmony and understanding. However, there came dry years and these brought very poor harvest. This caught some of his subjects by surprise and they went to the king requesting him to donate grain to them to stock up because despite his boundless kindness they were still afraid of the vagaries of time. Thus, in times of hardship, if the land could not produce the expected crop they would have what they needed to eat and whatever they needed to sow when the weather was more favorable. The rest of his subjects, however, knew that their king was a good and honest man and would never leave them in times of trouble, therefore, despite the obvious signs of the weather that boded ill years, they asked him for nothing.

The king was surprised that only a few of the inhabitants of his kingdom turned to him with a specific request and asked for his help. “I want to give to everyone whatever he needs,” he thought, “but unfortunately I do not know what everybody needs”.

Years went by. The king was attacked by a neighboring kingdom. In addition to this difficult period for the country, drought hit the

already weakened kingdom. Poverty and famine gradually overtook everything. Despite his good intentions and a desire to help his people, the king had no physical chance to do it. Only the prudent ones who had asked for grain were better in this difficult time and faced the hardship significantly easier than the others whose only hope was their master's mercy. They hadn't taken any measures when he had plenty and waited for them in hopeful expectation and now they crowded at the gates of the palace anticipating help in vain.

Filled with pain and sorrow the king stood in front of them and said: "My dear loyal subjects, we all used to live in peace and prosperity years ago and you are well aware that everybody who asked me for anything, as long as it was reasonable, received it. Even before I knew that there would be war, a small group of you came to me and asked for grain to stock up if needed. At that time I wanted to give to all of you, as well, because in my heart I had never had any preferences to anyone in my realm. But none of you came to me at that point and I couldn't make you take care of yourselves by force. Now you can all see what has happened. Many people have died because of war and drought. Our rich and glorious kingdom has suddenly become poor. I want to give you but I do not have anything left to give. Tell me what I should do? What should I say to you? If you had wanted it when we had it, you would not be suffering now. Therefore, you should not be angry with me for the situation you are in now because you have made your own choice".

"Don't forget, my boy, whenever you have dreams that seem impossible and unrealistic, so unrealistic that you are ashamed to even share them with your closest ones, then ask the king. Everything that you want deep in your heart is possible for Him and He will give it to you," his father had concluded.

According to him the most important questions that he truly hoped one day Mark would at least partly understand (although he used to honestly admit to himself that he didn't know the answers to) were: "What is God and why did God create us?" A question which he believed everyone should ask himself at least once in his lifetime but can rarely admit to the others. The second of his most important fundamental questions was: "What is the meaning of our lives?" It is a question that most of us avoid consciously because of the lack of a satisfactory answer. Thirdly, he asked rhetorically for

the individual mission and purpose of each one of us. When a man finds his purpose in life and goes confidently along the path mapped out by the Creator then he can understand the answers of the other two questions in the reverse order.

* * *

Mark even remembered the story about the camp from which he had skillfully and cool-bloodedly escaped as a boy.

His mother and father had sent him away in order to develop positive habits and to achieve greater independence together with the other children from his class. The very first night, however, he had felt abandoned and betrayed by his parents. Therefore, instead of fighting against his nature and tormenting his psyche by staying at a place where he felt extremely uncomfortable, after a slight hesitation he had decided to escape. *“Why should I force myself to experience such an unnecessary hardship? Who could make use of my pain,”* he thought. Advice such as: “You are a man and you should fight”, “Men do not cry” and other words of a similar nature were totally unfamiliar and unintelligible to him. “If all the people on earth had to be strong, they would have been soldiers – he thought – and this is ridiculous because the world need artists, writers, teachers, doctors, etc. in order to be diverse and colourful.”

After he had returned home hitchhiking and had explained his actions to his parents, instead of telling him off, his father had been deeply shocked. Apparently he was very surprised by his courage and audacity, something that he had already acknowledged with reluctance to be positive features of a strong, young and developing personality.

* * *

Mark’s memories went by imperceptibly over the years. He was virile and preferred not to share everything with his father which was normal and natural for a young man.

The wheel of life had gradually turned him to that age and state where the inevitable time had come to separate from his parents. It would probably have happened soon anyway in the natural course of life had it not been for that ominous Saturday night on which fate had befallen him as never before and forever taken them away.

Mark didn't want to remember the shock of the news, nor the crash and least of all the funeral. The event had left deep traces in his soul which he already had to live with, to the end of his days.

He had thought at the time, and continued to think, that this was the worst, most sinister and cruel thing that could happen to a boy of his age.

* * *

The death of his parents was something like a Trojan horse for him. As if a strange, evil force that was constantly building anxiety and angst in his soul had implanted the city. Wherever he looked, wherever he went –to the city park, the town square, to the church or the grocery store, he would feel that he might meet them again, even if it was just for a moment. But most of all, he felt it strongest in the house. Everything in it showed him that they were alive and well or that they had just gone out somewhere and would soon return. The precious picture above the fireplace that was taken on his prom night, on which they were all laughing and embracing one another, was saying, as if in a mysterious and speechless way, that they would stay together forever. Most of the objects were as if glued to the tables, to the lockers and to the shelves. There had been nobody to use them for weeks and Mark couldn't see any point in moving them aimlessly just to persuade himself that they had been moved by someone else. Therefore, almost everything in the house was covered in dust. This horrible grey sheer covering had gradually occupied everything. *“Even the strongest, most optimistic person would probably not stay behind these walls,”* he thought. In fact, the truth was somehow different. The main problem he had wasn't the walls, the objects, the dust, or anything else like that, it was his strong filial affection and devotion. Perhaps somebody who didn't have this love and deep connection with his parents would remain in the house without any difficulty, but things were different for Mark.

After walking around his parents' bedroom he quietly shut the door the way he had always done before, passed slowly down the corridor and went into his room. Although nobody had left it, the place here was showing their absence in an inexplicable and painful way. The permanent calmness that had been everywhere for weeks

and which he had really enjoyed before when he was left alone for a while, was now painful and oppressive.

For some time now Mark would fall asleep in the following way: lying on the bed with his clothes still on and sometimes even with his shoes on, having turned off the lights in the room, but always leaving one light on during the night and usually choosing the lamp in the corridor. He would cry for a while and then consciously start his precious journey in his memories. Thus, after about an hour he would imperceptibly fall asleep. Two or three hours later, usually after his first sleep, he would get suddenly startled, stand up, quickly take his clothes off and lie down again. Still leaving the lamp on in the corridor. Although he realized that this way of falling asleep was definitely stupid, he continued doing it unconsciously, as if against his will. "*I must get over these feelings soon or get out of here forever,*" he concluded spontaneously, falling asleep with his clothes again, after another hard, exhausting and aimless day.

* * *

If you consciously put a problem that is troubling you into your mind before falling asleep, you are highly likely to, surprisingly, wake up in the morning with the right decision. Mark knew this from experience. He had tried it many times and almost every time he had managed to find the best solution to any difficult situation or concern.

Spontaneously the memory of a dramatic and unforgettable event of his childhood, that he hadn't been able to resolve in the well-known way, appeared in his mind.

There was something of an outdoor storage yard for second-hand car parts near the school where he used to study. One night he and two other boys stole into this interesting place, and probably out of stupidity, but actually - if he had to be honest with himself - quite deliberately, Mark had the idea to set a huge tyre on fire. They had no idea what sort of car would have had such a tyre. The very next day they had figured out that it was in fact a tractor tyre.

Even now, at this time, Mark would not be able to give a clear and a satisfactory answer why he had done such a thing but you are supposed to learn from your mistakes and not repeat them.

The tyre had continued to burn for hours, a thick black smoke formed a dense cloud that could be seen all over the city and surrounding area. This created a violent discontent with everyone.

The next morning the school had held a little investigation, which was soon to reach the offender. There was no risk for Mark – he was not even suspected. “The revealed criminal” was an older boy he did not even know personally. Although the boy had categorically denied having done it, the school management had taken a unanimous decision to impose the heaviest penalty possible according to the school rules.

When he came home in the evening, Mark was feeling understandably confused, guilty. What was he supposed to do? What did he have to do? There were two possible choices. He had to either continue behaving as though he had nothing to do with the case or take responsibility for what he had done, admitting his guilt and saving his innocent schoolmate. He fell asleep and gave his mind the difficult task to give him the right solution, the one that was most fair but with the fewest possible negative consequences for him. In the morning when he opened his eyes the right decision was unambiguously written in his thoughts. He had to admit to the school director his guilt and ask for leniency. When an hour later he stood before him and revealed the truth, Mark stood completely stunned. The director almost immediately, without giving it much thought, said to him in a friendly manner that when there was true repentance there shouldn’t be any punishment. However, it didn’t mean that he could let him do the same thing again. This case was successfully over for everybody: Mark was forgiven and the other boy was free from guilt.

This well-known and tested method, however, refused to work on the following nights. It definitely puzzled him. One of the most successful and proven means he had used, and tremendously relied upon, had become ineffective. In reality, the method was not only working as usual but was also repeatedly giving a clear answer. There was a small but important detail – there was nobody listening.

Mark loved his father’s house too much to leave it but it was obvious that he had to. If he did so, it would mean more than just leaving the house– leaving his home town forever. It wouldn’t make the difference if he changed the house but remained in town

because there were only a few places left that wouldn't make him feel nostalgia and pain.

The situation was crucial and irreversible and certainly required a more objective assessment and more concentration to help him to make the right decision with confidence and without regret. Mark knew from his father that when a person was faced with an important choice to make in his life, he should not act prematurely and impulsively. The best thing to do was to wait as long as necessary to get used to the idea of change because, otherwise, everybody could potentially be unprepared when he suddenly ended up in a new situation. He knew it well and that's why he was trying not to push events but to find the best alternative for himself.

To leave town? It would be a leap in the dark. Of course, he wouldn't be the first or the last person to do it. But the main question was – why? Leaving town in order to find a better job or study at some university seemed very significant reasons to him. But just leaving to try and kill and overwhelm his grief seemed totally unacceptable.

After some hesitation he decided to postpone his decision for a few more days.

* * *

Mark felt strongly that he had to say farewell to his parents and put an end to the vicious circle that he had been helplessly caught in for more than a month. He found that the grief he had been feeling recently seemed to begin mixing and giving way to some new, unknown feeling – the feeling of hope. *“This must be a religious feeling”* he thought, *“finding comfort even in adversity, believing that this has not happened by chance and that it makes sense and maybe that they haven't died completely but that they are here somewhere, maybe in heaven, or still here on earth, or even in the house.”* All these thoughts came spontaneously and suddenly into his head and prevented him from coping with the situation. Despite his upbringing, Mark was religious deep in his soul, he had heard from some of his Protestant classmates that God could speak to believers through the Bible – if you just ask Him for something specific and then turn to any page. It definitely sounded pretty naive, even superstitious, but he had reached an impasse and was ready to experience anything just to get some satisfactory answers to his parents' death and his future from now on.

Contrary to what he expected, Mark felt excited to a large extent. Although he wasn't drinking, he decided that this time he should make an exception. There was also something else: it was another way to get closer, albeit indirectly, to his loving deceased father by doing something he used to love doing while he was alive. He took a few sips from his father's favourite bourbon straight from the bottle, as if frightened of being caught and exposed for his actions. Then he went into his parents' bedroom and for the first time since they had died he could afford to sit on their perfectly made bed. He sat comfortably and took the holy book that was always on his father bedside table in his lap and for the second time in his life he anxiously decided to pray.

"Lord, give me an answer, please! Why did it happen?" He mumbled and immediately opened the book on a random page.

*"I am the man who has experienced suffering under the rod of God's fury; He has led me and caused me to walk in darkness, and not in light; He turned against me only."** He remained somehow impressed by what he had just read but he could not make the connection, and so didn't attach any great importance to it. Besides this, he was even a little disappointed. He later thought, *"What would my father have done if he had been me?"*

"We always have to be open for the signs that our destiny provides. Only if you let your heart open up to them, can you be sure that you will never go wrong in life," he once said.

But why did he have to follow any of the signs that were vague and incomprehensible to him anyway?

He loved everything in his home town so much. He was born here, he had grown up here, and he had fallen in love for the first time in his life here, though unrequitedly. He used to admire the nature here in his own, inexplicable way that could hardly be experienced anywhere else. Here he had learned, mainly from his father, such valuable and useful things, but it was also here that he had come upon the biggest misfortune of his life.

* * *

"You have one month to leave the house, but I wouldn't advise you to wait until the last moment," the broker said.

“Don’t worry, I won’t stay up to the deadline,” Mark assured him. “I just wanted to ask if I could get extra money for the furniture.”

“To tell you honestly, the furniture is not worth anything, it isn’t even appropriate to raise the issue with the purchaser. We both know that the price we agreed on is good and you must be pleased.”

Mark shook the broker’s hand politely and walked him to door. Then he stopped for a moment in front of the mirror in the hallway and began to look over every detail of the interior of the house. He was saying goodbye to a part of his life that was irretrievably gone – his unique childhood. There was the huge outdoor oak door with its unique carving depicting an elf sitting near the forest spring – a scene which he liked a lot, but he had never understood why his parents had chosen it when they had done the repairs. The crystal chandelier with twelve cups, six regular and six with the heads of lions, which his mother used to carefully dismantle and clean a few times a year and with which Mark was always helping her. Then the polished wooden floors that he used to slide on in socks for fun when he was a boy, with his mother running after him and reminding him to be careful with himself and everything around him. And his favourite ceiling, the one in his bedroom on which he and his father had tried to draw the Universe. There were hundreds of galaxies, stars, planets and other luminous bodies on it. The view from the bed was incredible. When he used to look up at this exquisitely painted ceiling, illuminated by a special light behind the wardrobe, for any length of time, he sometimes felt as though he had recreated that miracle. Mark grew sad. He went out onto the porch. Very often in the summer he used to talk to his father about many interesting things. This porch was definitely a silent witness to one of the most beautiful and warm paternal-filial relationships in this world. His eyes stopped on the flowers that were grown by his mother with so much love and care. Mark was surprised to notice that some of them seemed to have faded. He had never forgotten to water them and take care of them, but they had obviously suffered the absence of their true owner in their own way.

Mark entered the living room, sat in his father’s chair and looked at the wall clock located over the fireplace which also had its own history. It was prominently placed as a sign of respect to his grandfather. His father had told him many times that this was a precious family relic that should never be sold. His father’s collection of classical music

CDs which he, despite his great desire, had failed to understand and love was carefully arranged under the clock. He liked certain tunes that could soothe him and bring him pleasure, peace and happiness. However, he rarely played them when his father was absent.

Unexpectedly, Mark was suddenly overcome with the desire to listen to some of these tunes. He got up, went to the discs and stopped; hesitated for a moment, because he didn't know what he wanted to hear, then confidently grabbed Mozart's Requiem. He turned the volume up, sat back in his armchair and closed his eyes.

* * *

It had been three weeks and six days since the sale of the house. Departure time was ripe. Although Mark had been going to the graves of his parents almost every day so far, he had categorically refused to accept that this was their home forever. His sadness was much greater when he was pacing the empty house. His grief seemed insurmountable. However, there was something positive in this – it had helped him make the right decision. *“If their spirits are alive, as it is according to our religion, they might be in the house rather than in the cemetery,”* he thought.

Once again after the crash, Mark felt the need to say something to them, but again he didn't find enough strength to do it. He thought it was crazy to talk to nobody, although deep in his heart he felt that his words wouldn't be uttered in vain.

In situations like this Mark was supposed to be taken care of and comforted by his relatives. But he was completely deprived of this kind of attention simply due to the fact that he had no living relatives.

Mark locked the front door, passed slowly across the porch for the last time and went out into the street where there was a cab waiting for him.

In less than an hour he was travelling to the capital with a one-way ticket in his wallet, truly hoping to find a new beginning. The largest city in the country, just like every densely populated and cosmopolitan place, could offer many opportunities for change and realization. The capital was a desired aim for hundreds of thousands of people, not only from his country but from all over the world. Mark was not sure what these different people coming from everywhere

could be looking for, other than a better paid job. He doubted that everybody's dream was to live in a crowded place, breathe polluted air and travel to work and back for, in some situations, more than two hours. During those random thoughts, he suddenly found the answer: anonymity, independence, freedom – that was the main reason for him to come here rather than any other city; it was probably also one of the leading reasons for others.

Unfortunately for him, his country was not at all big, thus his journey wasn't going to take longer than a few hours, he needed something like the city in order to forget and free himself, of course this was actually quite impossible because of the memories that constantly chased him.

Although he was well aware that a longer trip would influence him in a positive manner, as it would release him and help him to live in reality, he didn't dare to afford it. He lacked neither money nor time – there was nobody in the capital waiting for him and no urgent work, however, it seemed too unreasonable for him just to wander aimlessly like that. Just like the one that wouldn't let him speak to his deceased parents, some inexplicable personal shame restrained him from the inner urge to listen to his heart. On the whole, Mark was a pragmatic and didn't want to act irrationally when it wasn't necessary. If his destiny determined travel, he would be pleased to follow it, but he knew well that this was not the case.

Although he was lucky to be born in and to live in one of the richest and well-run countries in the world, for some reason he had never left his home town until now. Maybe that's why he chose to maximize the benefit and pleasure of the trip and, instead of whining that it would be short, enjoy it fully. Shortly after the train left the station, he experienced an inexplicable feeling that he had never had before. He felt as if some unknown positive power was floating around him, helping him to look more cheerfully towards the future. For the first time the permanent pain over the past few months had released its grip on his soul for a while. *"This is probably hope,"* he decided and leaned back.

Every tree, every house, every person in the rapidly changing landscape through his window seemed beautiful and full of life. Almost everything he could see had its own unique charm. *"Maybe it all depends on the inner attitude that a person has and if he is open to new things, he can see and feel the beauty around him."*

But if he isn't, despite its strong presence, it will probably remain hidden from him forever," he thought. At first sight the area looked grey, monotonous and boring to him, but it was not like that to Mark. He knew that each house has its own unique history. There were many human destinies hidden behind the walls of these houses, most of which were probably full of happiness and joy, but there were certainly those that were much more tragic than his. Without words, he felt for the first time that he was able to thank the Creator in his inner-most heart for allowing him to feel and experience all of that.

The train was going through lush green pastures, through industrial areas, villages and towns. Perhaps the key to what happened to him at that time was his recent indirect contact with death. That's why he could value each detail of the surrounding world, a thing he had never done before. Being aware of the fragility and transience of life was obviously what enabled him to understand the situation and appreciate how valuable it was to be able to enjoy beauty and nature, all human achievements and all the living creatures.

It wasn't typical for strangers in his country to talk to each other without a good reason, so Mark felt slightly embarrassed when his peace was unexpectedly disturbed by one of the other passengers in the compartment.

"Is this your first time to the capital?" asked the stranger.

Mark turned and saw a good looking man in his noble mid sixties, with a small beard sitting to the right opposite him. He sensed something more than pure human curiosity in his eyes.

"Yes why?!" He snapped slightly.

The man raised his eyebrows and gave a surprised expression.

"Nothing personal, you've just reminded me of a very good friend of mine and I felt a spontaneous desire to talk to you."

"Please do, I don't mind," Mark said. "I reacted like that because... you know... I didn't expect..."

That seemed enough for the man to get out of the awkward situation and feel confident to continue.

"I left my home town for the first time thirty years ago. I was filled with hope back then and I thought that my journey would be full of many pleasant surprises and experiences," he continued loquaciously. "I was almost your age and just like you I used to look through the window enthusiastically. I know it is a sign of bad taste and bad upbringing for a person to give advice when it isn't asked

for, especially from a stranger, but let me just tell you one thing – the brave ones do not necessarily walk on a path full of victories.”

Mark looked at him in surprise. He could not understand why this good-looking gentleman regarded him as a brave one. “*He must be trying to impress me. He is shooting at random in order to get a companion for his trip,*” he quickly concluded and calmed down. He had nothing to lose. His father told him again and again that there was always something to learn, even from the stupidest conversation, article, book or film.

“Why are you giving me this advice? What makes you think that I’m ambitious and motivated and therefore believe that this advice will protect me?”

“There is nothing that makes me think that, I just needed to give you this advice... perhaps to myself.”

“?!”

“Just like you, I headed for the same place with a one-way ticket years ago. I was accepted as a student in my dream major – I was about to become a pilot. During my first trip I already felt that I was flying. Even though it would take years before I really started to fly I remember that I couldn’t stop rejoicing. The feeling of euphoria hadn’t left me for almost a year. With each lecture that I attended, with every exercise, with each exam that I passed, I walked slowly but surely towards fulfilling my dream.”

The man stopped for a moment and looked Mark surprisingly, straight into the eyes.

“You should know, however, that there is some power that certainly doesn’t approve of excessive passion and fervor in a man regardless of his reasons and intention!”

“Are you a pious man?” Mark asked spontaneously.

“No, my boy and nor have I ever been.”

“Then why are you talking about some power that does not approve of this and does not approve of that in life?”

The man looked down for a while, sighed slightly and continued.

“I’m not talking about it because I believe in God, but simply because I wanted to tell you that despite my pragmatism, which I’ve been following all my life, I cannot deny that there really is something that grounds us when we are experiencing unreasonable passion and inspires us when this passion is constructive and useful to others. My personal experience has taught me that I am not the

only one. I don't know if everybody else thinks like this, but I am sure of it for myself."

Mark's assumptions that the stranger wanted to start a conversation with him proved not only to be true but quite more: the man was apparently trying to reach his soul.

At that moment, however, he did not need such interloper. It wasn't because of his unclear and useless advice, on the contrary; maybe there was a great deal of truth in what he was saying. Mark just knew from experience that when a person is sad or going through something because of someone else, he is not able to think over serious topics – something which the stranger was definitely trying to push him to.

There was also another reason why Mark didn't want to talk to people. Despite his prejudices, emanation and self-confidence, the man reminded him of his father in some strange and inexplicable way – something that made him very sad.

"I will try not to get overly enthusiastic. Thanks for the tips," Mark replied with clear intonation showing that he wanted the conversation to finish.

The man looked him in his eyes.

"So be it. Just remember that if you want and love passionately, there will inevitably come a day when you will suffer and cry. It's not bad to feel strong emotions, the bad thing is that they all cost too much. Seen from another angle, however, they only make us feel truly alive."

Mark nodded as if he understood.

"*Yeah, these are definitely the words of a strange man,*" he concluded, and looked out of the window again.

Twenty minutes had passed when he from heard a slight involuntary noise coming from the unknown gentleman, probably from a fairly light object which he had dropped on the ground. Mark turned spontaneously. There was a book on the ground which the man quickly picked up and clenched tightly in his hands. For a moment their eyes met again. At this point in the eyes of the stranger, Mark really seemed to recognize the eyes of his father who was watching him with great anguish, pain and sadness, but also with much love.