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University of Northern Colorado
Greeley, Colorado

BONUS: A MALE'S JOURNEY TO MASCULINITY

A Thesis Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment for Graduation with Honors Distinction and
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

Jorge Rubio

College of Humanities and Social Sciences

MAY 2020

BONUS: A MALE'S JOURNEY TO MASCULINITY

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Abstract

Masculinity is a construct that has come into question in the recent past as society grapples with concepts of gender and roles. The following quote alludes to the significance of this project: "some masculine traits are concerning and potentially harmful for the person in question and those around him" (Mull 2). I intend to address the growing concerns society has with men's identities. To do this, I am writing a short, 80-page, 7-chapter, novel titled Bonus: a Male's Journey to Masculinity. In it, I discuss the topics: morality, God, men and masculinity, and meaning. Which I argue play into one another, that the concept of God being male gives young men something to strive for, meaning. Morality is a code of conduct for achieving this end, and masculinity as a label moves one in this direction as opposed to another. I am drawing on my previous work on morality, convention, and status function, a theoretical framework of morality "Convention and the normative structure." Books I've read like Thus Spake Zarathustra by Fredrick Nietzsche for this novella. I intend to evoke thoughts in young men who identify with Bonus, and through Bonus rethink morality, God, men and masculinity and meaning - as it applies to their identity. By the end of the novel, I hope that men can begin to identify with their labels, their privilege, the source of immorality, and how the concepts: men, God, and meaning play a role in their masculinity.

Keywords: Masculinity, God, Meaning, Purpose, Manhood

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Introduction

A recently published article by the APA states that “boys and men who exhibit traditional masculine behavior are at greater risk to themselves and others” (Mull 2). *Bonus: A Male’s Journey to Masculinity* is a creative work that looks to address a growing concern over traditional masculine values and behaviors. For this reason, "Bonus: A Male’s Journey to Masculinity" is a fiction story. It features Bonus, an existentially unhappy father, who rediscovers God, meaning, and masculinity. His traditional masculine values seem to derive many of its features from religion and one’s deep sense of responsibility to become a man, stemming from the human need for meaning. Throughout the novel I bring to light my perspective on where traditional masculine traits originates, targeting two potential sources: God and meaning. Through the journey of Bonus, I aim to illustrate a relationship between God and meaning, and their contribution to what masculinity looks like today. Then through a meaningful conversation with God, Bonus (as well as the audience) will have the opportunity to think, then rethink/reevaluate values, teachings, and stigmas of masculinity. Finally, I look to metaphorically and implicitly introduce the idea of morality as some objective, abstract, and calculable phenomenon. As *bonus* means "good" in Latin, my second goal of this novel is to represent morality as a socially-constructed phenomenon. I then show how, if morality were socially constructed as it is in the story, we get the problems that Bonus faces in the start of the novel. This is only a secondary goal, taking a back seat to the main focus of the novel: masculinity and its connection to God and meaning.

Author statement

The prescription of what it takes to be a “real man” varies from place to place, culture to culture, and society to society. Any discussion of it must adapt acquiescently to the time and place in which we look to have this particular conversation. I explore the concept of masculinity as it relates to God and meaning. However, as this is no comprehensive treatise or research paper of any kind, "God" like "manhood," ought to be relevant to my culture, community and society. That is one, heavily influenced by Christianity.

The content of this novel comes to you as a direct extension of my childhood experience with masculinity and as a result, its conclusions are my own. For the reader, I look to convey one overarching message: there is a fundamental relationship between the ideas of God, meaning, and masculinity. This relationship can help explain what has driven young boys to become men and why this journey continues to be relevant today. I must admit, however, that although this story is my own and I have revealed my truest belief about masculinity. Thus, I do not consider myself an authority figure on this matter nor do I see myself as an expert; rather I am an explorer, and a reconciler.

I explore and marry the ideas of God and Meaning as the foundation for Masculine flourishing. God for me and this novel, is the collaboration of human awe-making features: strength/health, intelligence, and a moral character. I argue that these features are desirable to those who look to become men: that is, man is something to become and not something you are. Thus, we get meaning. According to Viktor E Frankl, “meaning is finding a purpose,” According to Aristotle, is to participate in intellectual life and According to me, neither are these possible without health: as a prerequisite.

Today young men are facing two types of external force. Pressure to become men and pressure to be less like traditional men. This is not to mention their own internal struggle to be who they desire to be. Navigating this space is often frightening and very difficult, seeing as though some traditional masculine traits can be toxic and oppressive to others. My job in this novel is to help navigate this terrain, through example, I hope to make clear what being a man ought to be, that is both descriptive and leaves room for the different personalities and desires of the individuals called upon.

But before I continue, it is important to recall one of the influences I have had while writing this novel. Fredrick Nietzsche was famous for statements things “God is dead, and we killed him” and “life has no meaning.” In this novel I argue with my own statements about life: “God is alive, and we have created him” and “life has many meanings.” What I mean by such daring statements is that I applaud my contemporary and agree with him heavily: there is no one goal or purpose for man but many. The problem is choosing one. The same goes with God; he is a combination of three awe-making features: *omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolent*. These features correlate with the three awe-making features humans’ value in each other. Thus, I argue that God is the epitome of the perfect man. I argue that the pursuit of becoming masculine should be celebrated, if directed in the proper way.

As an ulterior motive for writing this novel, I have chosen this as my method of reconciliation with my father who abandoned me, my brother, sister, and mother 12 years ago. I am 22 now. I’ve done this by crafting my main character Bonus after my father, describing his temperament, attitude, build, etc.... Only the character and his desperate need to escape from punishment are extrapolated directly from what I know of my father; the rest is my journey. I

recount the intellectual grief and desperation that came with growing up with no father and the struggle identifying what being a man really is.

As an aspiring philosopher, I was tempted to write a comprehensive treatise about what underlies the label "men": what things are fundamental to that label, and which were subject to change. In it I would have talked about status function, social order, morality, and the like, but I am certain that I would have left out certain ideas that are both meaningful and have sentimental value to my personal journey. I fundamentally believe that some things are not best talked about through logic and philosophical debate but through story telling; and this I believe is one of them. Given this decision, I am inspired by Fredrick Nietzsche and Hermann Hesse whose books *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and *Siddhartha* respectively, have an underlying message but are not entirely philosophical. My goal in "Bonus: A Male's Journey to Masculinity" is not overtly philosophical by maintains a level vagueness and mystery to three overarching themes, God, meaning, and masculinity.

Finally, this novel is a symbol of my growth and my continued growth despite the many challenges and struggles I have had. I leave you with my favorite quote and scene from this short novel: "as my [statement] comes to a close, I feel the deepest sense of bliss for having had some meaning, some purpose for my life these few weeks, months, [in anticipation to bring you Bonus: A Male's Journey to Masculinity]."

Project design

Parts

I plan to complete a short novel, totaling 7 chapters. "Bonus: A Male's Journey to Masculinity" is geared towards young men ages 18-25. I utilize an archetypal story of a person being pushed away from home, crossing a threshold, struggle, rebirth, and a return home in order to retain a level of familiarity: the hero's journey as codified by Joseph Campbell. I also chose a first-person narrative written in prose to best relate to my audience of men since I try to engage a myriad of gender specific topics. Below are the three concepts I will be focusing on throughout this project.

- *Meaning: Left marginally defined, meaning, for Viktor E. Frankl, roughly is a person proactive attempt to identify for himself a purpose and taking responsibility for himself and others.*
- *God: God as conceptualized in Christianity has three features or attributes: omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolent*
- *Masculinity: "boys and men who exhibit traditional masculine behaviors are at greater risk to themselves and others. Men who learn to be self-reliant, strong and to minimize and manage their problems on their own may be to blame" What then does non-toxic masculinity look like?*

Methods

In order to develop this story with the changing scenes, developing characters, and philosophical concepts; I adopted methods employed by authors of books like: Thus Spake Zarathustra, After War, The Great Gatsby. Saul Bellow states "A writer is a reader moved to emulation" and I will take after him!

Literature Review

This creative project is a short novel following a snapshot in the life of Bonus, from the small village of Eden. He is existentially unhappy, and when he is told to become the village shaman, he runs away, fearing if he stays, he will be murdered for refusing. Threatened, he leaves his home village and is subsequently followed. Continuing to run, he comes to an opening in the forest. There in the mountains, he decides after contemplation to kill himself through starvation. At his weakest point, a strange person emerges adjacent to him.

This story is remarkable because it gives a male audience a different look into what masculinity is. Bonus is archetypically a man's man; he is stoic and fits a Western idea of what a man is and how he is supposed to behave. Unfortunately, Bonus does not fit this description perfectly as many men do not, and this leads him into his existential crisis. He, however, encounters God, and together they discuss meaning and masculinity.

To do this successfully, I have identified characteristics from a select number of novels to help facilitate world and character-building elements.

Anselm: Ontological Argument for God's Existence

Saint Anselm was a Christian philosopher who was responsible for the creation of the ontological argument presented below. This argument is logic-based in favor of God's existence. Its basic proposition is that God exists because he is greatest, and if he did not exist, he would not be as great as a God who did. This idea is illustrated below:

1. “It is a conceptual truth (or, so to speak, true by definition) that God is a being than which none greater can be imagined (that is, the greatest possible being that can be imagined).
2. God exists as an idea in the mind.
3. A being that exists as an idea in the mind and in reality, is, other things being equal, greater than a being that exists only as an idea in the mind.
4. Thus, if God exists only as an idea in the mind, then we can imagine something that is greater than God (that is, a greatest possible being that does exist).
5. But we cannot imagine something that is greater than God (for it is a contradiction to suppose that we can imagine a being greater than the greatest possible being that can be imagined.)
6. Therefore, God exists.”

(Anselm 2a)

Two years ago, I wrote a paper against this very argument. I argued premise 3: “A being that exists as an idea in the mind and reality is, other things being equal, greater than a being that exists only as an idea in the mind.” That is, things being equal, with a being in the mind and a being in reality, the being in mind can be greater. To argue this, I set forward an example of a \$100 bill in the mind and in reality. Both have the same value and are equal. Prima Facially, the \$100 bill, in reality, is more valuable; after all, you cannot buy anything in “real life” with \$100. However, it was my thought and idea that while a \$100 bill in reality could only buy you may be an expensive calculator, a \$100 bill in the mind can buy you a couple of yachts, a plane, and a mansion, if you fancy. In this way, it appears that a \$100 bill in the mind is much greater than \$100 in “real life.” My point was that a god who does not exist could be greater than a god who

does exist. I would argue in favor of this idea since a real god would be subject to logical limits, like not being able to create a rock that they cannot lift, while a god in the mind could, in fact, work outside of these bounds.

The importance here is whether or not God exists. I think there is something valuable there whether there is a real and actual power or a metaphysical kind. In my book, this is important. Since not all people believe that God is real, I think there is something valuable there still - precisely, the guiding principle that suggests that moral goodness, knowledge, and strength are essential without having to justify the intrinsic value of “thinking and goodness” in our society. Strength, though, seems less justifiable in this same way. Instead, I argue that health is always a precursor to strength, and strength is often an excess of health. Bodybuilders are thought of as healthier than internet gamers. I am talking about physical strength as opposed to mental strength, although I do not argue that physical strength does not require a level of mental and emotional strength. I would bracket that conversation to further my argument.

Relevancy and The Bible

For my audience, mostly men in the U.S. I have decided to work with the Christian God. After all, 80% of people in the U.S. considered themselves Christian, which means most people ought to believe what is written in the Christian Bible (Adelle 17). If these things are correct, then Christians take seriously the idea that they ought to develop features similar to those of Jehovah: “So try to be like God, because you are his own dear children” (Ephesians 5). Now the question persists, what is it to be like God? This question is especially tricky, considering the Bible gives us a list of norms, both social and moral, to adhere to in order to accomplish this goal. It is tricky because to be like God would be to hold a few things true that God is

“omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect” (Toley 1.1). There is also a list of norms we ought to adhere to. The problem here is that, I believe, some normative material goes against morality. As discussed later in this literature review, morality is a product of rational thought, and some norms like ones that specify and detail gender norms are not moral. That is because gender norms directly prevent a person from freely choosing to be who they are. Therefore, I suggest instead to forget about the normative material present in the Bible and focus instead on the abstract three components.

Now let us talk degree: Omni is all, and scient is knowledge. The problem for humans is that they cannot have all knowledge, which, according to Plato, is justified true belief. Instead, I follow Aristotle in this to participate in intellectual life, intending to have rational thoughts, which produces knowledge. Furthermore, rationality, according to Kant, has a byproduct: morality. That is, rational thought produces morality as its byproduct. Finally, power was among the most difficult - for this project, I searched for synonyms like health, leadership, and strength. I suspect it is synonymous with upholding and ability since one can say God has the power to create the world, and any words like strength and ability can replace the word power.

What is meaning

According to Aristotle, the meaning of life can be reflected by reflecting on the species' specific capabilities in their own life; This helps to determine not just the philosophical meaning of life but also the practical means of living well and finding the good life, which is ultimately to engage in intellectual activity. He suggests that we are a product of sensation, locomotion, and intellect, and when two of these, like sensation and intellect, are removed, the person metamorphoses into a metaphorical plant (Leach 3). When the intellect is taken away, and the

other two remain, he is a beast, but when irrationality is removed from his intellect, he is more like a god. Aristotle also holds that humans can become like gods. This gives us both a definition and a practical aim for humans: intellectual activity is the meaning of life for the purpose of becoming like a god (Leach 7).

The moral-normative structure

We can model the normative structure in two steps. Because many moral norms are abstract, they pose problems for guiding action. In particular, moral norms govern interactions between and among individuals and, if there is no explicit prescribed action, coordination problems are bound to arise. So, as a first step, abstract moral norms may give rise to moral coordination problems, and conventions prescribe particular solutions to these coordination problems. Second, in conventionalizing a moral norm, various roles emerge with associated deontic powers. The notion of a status function helps to explain how even more fine-grained moral norms emerge through conventions and better help guide individuals' behavior.

Many moral norms are abstract and, consequently, do not provide guiding action. Take, for example, the moral norm to respect others. Unfortunately, it is not sufficiently specific about how one respects another—what one person may find as respectful behavior, another may not. Moreover, what counts as respectful behavior depends on one's community, which is itself a product of widespread conventions. Conventions as solutions to coordination problems provide an answer when there would not otherwise be (Heath 286). There are coordination problems like what side of the road to drive on which are non-moral and have no clear answer, choosing either would solve the problem - what side of the road should we drive on? Making eye contact is often seen as a sign of respect in the United States but is rather rude in other countries. In effect,

abstract norms like "respect others" give rise to a coordination problem—how do two moral agents cooperate so to respect each other (Heath, 278)? Conventions, thus, establish patterns of behavior that make the moral norm concrete—people in the United States adhere to the "respect others maxim by maintaining eye contact (among other actions). The difference in patterns of behavior between that of the U.S. and some other countries is just a different (cultural) solution to the coordination problem present in the moral norm of respect.

The second stage of the model involves the specification of fine-grained concrete (conventionalized) moral norms through conventional roles. Here, an abstract moral norm becomes extremely concrete by way of status functions. Status functions specify deontic powers—a cluster of rights, permissions, and obligations—in virtue of the conventional role an object or individual possesses (Searle 56). We can think about status function in three steps. The first step in the status function is to think of something in a different light, often giving that think meaning. E.g. money is green rectangular paper¹ but it's being money is thought of having some value i.e. \$1 is worth \$1. Two, money is widely recognized as having value, that is we have a population of people who all hold the belief that money has some value (Searle 56). This recognition is integral, since recognition holds the deontic powers money conveys, stable. Deontic powers are rights privileges, entitlements and function that are bundled together under the umbrella of "money." The rights, privileges and entitlements of money, take for instance, you take a \$1 bill to the store and you find some snickers bars on sale for \$1. It is the privilege of \$1 bill that it is accepted as legitimate trading currency over buck skins or gold coins. Finally, the status function is founded in an institutional fact. We can think of an institutional fact as synonymous with a brute fact. Where a brute fact is a fact in virtue of a thing's chemistry or

¹ Note that the function is not bestowed on the paper because it is inherently valuable. Instead deontic powers are bestowed in spite of chemistry or physical features.

physical property e.g. blue is called blue because it is blue, money is money virtue of its institutional fact (Searle 58). The institutional fact is an external “truth” making process, much like a ceremony is the truth making progress in a marriage or the signing of a paper, money is produced at the U.S. Department of Treasury and any “money” not made there does not have the deontic powers that money has.

Occupying a particular role in a conventional context will involve a cluster of deontic powers, providing the person in that role exclusive rights, privileges, and obligations specified by the conventions widely recognized as part of the role. For instance, a professor has obligations in virtue of being a professor, and some of these obligations are universal; professors teach. However, given what kind of professor they are, they have different universal obligations. Science professors must grade and teach biology materials. Professors of biology from different universities may have different obligations; they may have to focus more on while at another school research less.

Consider the conventions and roles regarding etiquette in a particular culture. Etiquette often involves roles based on institutional authority or one's age. Take, for instance, the cluster of deontic powers and expectations between the young person and the older person in this context obligate the youth to offer their seat... The expectations and cluster of deontic power a young person sustains hold that person to set standards of what he should do in certain instances. It is part of that cluster of obligations that a young person has in virtue of being a young and older person in virtue of being elderly. These norms are appropriate only as they relate to the role and are inappropriate out of that context.

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Chapter 1

The Uninspiring

Your sins may yet be forgiven but be sure to heed the words that I will speak henceforth, for they alone may reconcile you with the gods. As a man, both you and I have a journey where he must shed the pains of freedom. This world will swallow you up, and if you let it, prevent you from entering eternal life. Do as you were instructed, run from option and shed yourself of freedom. In this way, a shedding of freedom may you enter eternal life, receive grace, and be happy. This shedding is the shedding of pain, and that is the highest good, the only good. Our departure from tradition, which humanity so often does, causes the gods great pain. The worst of who are condemned to eternal nothingness.

Having heard these words from the old man, my adoptive father, I looked at him and at a defeated man at my father's feet; nodded subserviently. Many would laugh at the sight, and I did, but not without regret. My laughter was meet with a proper whipping and verbal thrashing after. Even if memory were to fail me, the groves that marked my shoulders and aligned my back would soon refresh my memory. I may have laughed even after, but then, whippings came more frequently, I laughed during it. But that was back when he had not yet managed to domesticate me and when I wasn't well versed in his ideas, "his teaching." Back then, I naively argued - If the shedding of pain from one's life be the highest good, why then would the gods keep us in existence? Does not, the human race brings about pain and misery to them? The old man turned to me, and he silenced me. His stare promised yet another whipping; walking away, I mumbled to myself, " thanks dad."

My insubordination did not deter my father from involving me in matters, philosophical or theological. I would ponder whether he had seen something in me--perhaps a philosopher's heart or maybe a sage's mind--or merely intended to keep me honest and "raise me right." I was dragged along by hand and kept at his side. I pretend to listen but my gaze drifts away in contemplation on other, more pressing matters--those of children, of play, and of sweet fruits. Fruits of which were bright yellow and round with an unusually large seed. Melting in my mouth; its hide leaves tethers in between my teeth so that in passing, I could entertain myself with picking and pulling at them. In a moment of boredom, I would imagine myself among the battling gods, which had been one of the few things that caught my attention when father would speak. Elders would persuade us to behave with gruesomeness stories about how gods ate their bad children and their battles between good and evil. Still, as we grew older, the stories would fuel our imagination, often reenacting our favorite gods and clashing with one another. These thoughts kept me from misbehaving too much since my father was prone to taking away my playtime. When I did engage the older men in their debate, I did, at times, manage to stump some of them --the most idiotic of them. This brought great joy to the sage, my father, and it enticed him to keep me rather than to orphan me. That is, a whim of good faith upon a summer's day, made me adoptee.

As I reminisced about my life, she--the daughter to the shaman, and my wife--was slowly moving her pale white hand over to me. The sun peppering her skin as it crossed the threshold between light and dark and laid it upon my arm, hoping to wake me for morning breakfast. I looked over to her lazily. It was the morning before resting, a tradition who spoke to the boys, and men once a week, it said to leave the house for the day. She was careful but enthusiastic about waking me, feeding me, and leading me out the door. This was the case in our town, Eden;

not one man would be allowed service at his own home as tradition suggested, and we would fast till the next day, after breakfast in the morning, of course.

She smiled, wake up darling, you and the boys have much to do today. I smirked back and slipped my legs from under the blankets, slouched myself over while rubbing my eyes to wake, and stood. I towered over my wife, perhaps the length of my forearm over her. She would often stare me up and down in approval. I was among the most handsome and well educated. My eyes, as she always mentioned, were a darker shade than everyone else' s--something uncommon in Eden; So was my skin. I was physically appealing as well when I was younger; wealth had spoiled me, and I became soft and sluggish. My skin stretched itself over the many bumps and notches on my skin. I was strong. She had a white complexion, with big breasts. Her frame was petite; it widened towards her shoulders before narrowed down at her waist and back out at her hips. Her nose was small, a small round pebble, her eyes blue, blonde hair. She, being the shaman's daughter, was the most desirable, thus the most beautiful among the village women. I was not impressed, perhaps it was due to the fact we grew up together that I never grew lust towards her.

Reaching over, she grasps my hand, pulling me towards her, kissing my shoulder, and hugging me, wrapping herself through and under my arm. Satisfied, she pulls me from out of our room and into the living room adjacent to the bedroom. This sort of behavior, her acquiescence, was surprising to me, it came swiftly after the marriage, which, to be sure, she fought furiously against. I did not fight against this; at this point, I was well aware of what disobedience led to, and I was content just to have some space away from the man. I believed she had disdain for me because I was now a son to the Shaman who couldn't conceive on his own. This probably grew as I would poke fun at her, rile her up and get her in trouble whenever it was convenient or to

avoid a beating. Shortly after letting us know that we were getting married, the marriage was arranged, and soon after I was married. But our friendship would suffer from unrequited love on my part towards her. Even after she would look at me differently, she would touch me individually, kiss me differently. Yet, I would never feel much in return.

My two sons, who had overeaten stumbled over to me, groggy but looking forward to the day. My oldest was well studied, reliable, and fully entrenched in the traditions of our village. He was the pride of his mother, grandfather, and his master. His younger brother, on the other hand, was rebellious and caused havoc wherever he went. This reminded me of myself at his age, and it would make me laugh; his recklessness with himself and others was both problematic and hysterical. At times he would catch me smiling at his ridiculousness and his reluctance to obey the most straightforward commands. He would smile back to which I responded with a momentary glare, letting him know that that was not ok.

Today he was different. He was obedient, perhaps because of all the food, he stuffed himself with. I took both by the hand, gave my wife a smile, and we began to walk. I was not one to talk, choosing instead to provide nonverbal signals. Instead of a farwell, I wished her an underwhelming smile. These days I spoke a lot less; at times, not at all. Perhaps it was a development of the many years I spent with my father feeling rejected to think anything he did not approve of. Strangely though, while his words and actions told me to silence myself -- his eye and his continence spoke otherwise. His eyes would say, good or intriguing, or continue, or yes, or what else. But all of that was overridden by beatings or whippings, nevertheless. My skin would tell that story, and my boys would ask about them. Dad, "what happened there?" pointed to the wounded area. To which I responded, "I was disobedient with my father, and this is the consequence of it." The questions would continue, and so did the answers. They wondered

whether the beatings made me sad because my father would administrate them. Still, they did not know their grandfather was not my father. Neither did I let on that it bothered me and saddened me. Not because it was my father but because I had lost my will to fight back. By the time the beatings had ceased, I was at a place of maturity. I understood well the ins and outs the when, where, and how; to act, to appear civilized and well educated. Although I had the sneaking suspicions that like me, all men of Eden were masked.

On the way to the village center, my youngest son, tugged at my arm "no clouds today," he said. I looked down at him, repeated, "no clouds." The gravel path soon leads to a clearing at a hill's edge, and there I could see past Eden, down by the town Terra, where I grew up, and far past where my father was buried. Here, memory had a tradition of attacking me, drawing me away from my current mission and into the past. This time I was transported to when I first learned to maintain, rather than to question tradition. "Boy, asking questions of the great thou shalt is both unwise and unwarranted. You would do best to listen and remain in silence, this is your purpose, uphold, protect, and learn." I would think to myself even then how silly it was that the other men would agree to this, as though they enjoyed being told what to do by an incapable old man like the Shaman. In fact, they would stand by him in this. "We must obey" they retorted as though this brought them pleasure

My youngest son pulled at my arm again shifting me back into the present. What are you thinking about, father? I looked down at him as he struggled to back look up against the sun; I lifted my hand over his eyes, using the shadows to guide it, blocking the sun from his eyes. I smiled, "nothing," of course, this was a lie. Talking to my son about novel ideas would lead him to pursue a similar vein of thought, which would inevitably lead him to severe punishment by the village. Instead, I always fixated on teaching him what I was informed by the shaman, in this

way, his own thoughts wouldn't later cause him harm. So, I disciplined him in the stories that founded our philosophical ideology, grounded our theology and established our social standards of etiquette. Ensuring that he would have a good life in the future. I often thought about leaving with my family and moving elsewhere. I fought this urge with the thought that there I run the risk that there too is infested with traditions and shamans who run the village.

From my old town, Terra, for instance, their beliefs lead to my adoption, my brother's death, my mother's enslavement, and my sister's kidnapping. In that town, the end of the father is a direct attack from the gods to the family. Consequently, mothers are sold into slavery, and we were abandoned, becoming castaways of the village. For some years after managed just fine under the guidance of my elder brother, who was just the age of my eldest son now. We struggled to find food, but it was rare when my sister and I did not eat. My brother, however, began to lose weight, and his face began to lose its softness as a result of our hard life. He lost so much weight so that his ribs became prominent. My sister and I would spend time entertaining ourselves by counting his ribs, and as he became more and more skinny, we began counting more and more bones. This trend of not eating came swiftly to an end, though. During a night's winter storm, my brother had found a wall to lay against, the fire inside kept it warm and we sat facing it. He sat up and had us sit in his lap next to one another while he wrapped us three in the two blankets that we found abandoned on the street, one blanket compensating for the other holes. In this way, we would be safe from the cold, and it worked. After a few moments, I could feel the warmth fill the small space, so did my sister.

My brother, on the other hand, had been shaking, the cold on his back tortured him through the night. He would say, alright you to, go to bed now, to which we closed our eyes, pretending to sleep. We giggled a bit at our futile attempt, and my brother laughed along,

pushing our heads together so that we bumped heads. Enough you two, sweet dreams. In the morning, we woke to a thud and a swift change in temperature. My sister, still trying to wake herself, rubbed her eyes while I stared down at him. My brother had lost all of his colors, he was white now his body was still warm, but the life was sucked out of him, his eyes had rolled back and his mouth open. My sister would say what the heck, I was sleeping, but I did not laugh, I knelt next to his head. I softly exclaimed, brother... brother, grabbing his head and shaking it awake. My tears concerned my sister, "what's wrong with brother?"

My son pulled at my arm, waking me from my memories, "we have to go, dad." I stood up, the day had turned dark, and families of men and boys began to depart home. "Let's go," grabbing both by the hand again, we made our way back. We walked through the moonlit gravel streets, observing petiole stone and thatch wood homes. We knew what to expect from each house. But through the cracks in the family's windows, we caught glimpses of families at the dining room table speaking, laughing, and eating. At the entrance of our home, I stopped, stared up for a moment, reconciling myself with my memory, making a piece with the heavens with a glance as I parted ways, entered.

Chapter 2

Sleepless nights

As I age, sleep eludes me, I spend long nights ruminating, obsessing, thinking about what life would have been, if my biological father had not died. Tonight, when my room darkened, the edges, the pots and vases became ominous, stimulating my imagination; I saw panthers, black bears and serpents. The spaces produced deep, profound black voids that had no end. My bed

and its wrinkling sheets made shapes of serpents that toiled slithering about. The roof crafted stories and images of people and villages. Overnight, these stories would unfold as the light moves from one corner of the bedroom to the next. To my left, my wife was asleep, her body turned to face the opposing way. She had been asleep for some time, and her breath softly lifted the bit of hair that didn't make its way behind her head. It raised with every exhale and dropped again with every inhale. Her white skin became fluorescent by moonlight. Her arm over the covers tenderly lay over one another, nearly grasping at the sheets in front of her. I was jealous of her only in this respect, however, because the night did not torment her with the thoughts that it did me.

Other instances I would wake late at night from some noise or movement, and my thoughts that tormented me throughout the day would spill over into the night. Demons would collect in my thoughts, drops of rain received refuge at the edges of my eyes. My father, my mother, brother, sister, wife, sons, all at once. The shaman, the village, the gods, and goddesses assembled in opposition to me. They are pointing down to me, "bonus," they would say, the ground rumbled under their voice, my knees would buckle, and I would fall, before them. The shame of a mind full of anguish was exposed, so was a heart tormented by commandments, orders, thou shalt. In waking, I did not find relief, reality was forever present in my partner, in my sons, and in my behavior. Although some nights I found pleasure in her/with her, I always came back to the idea that she was never entirely mine. I had been skeptical of her ever since her attitude with me radically changed. The rare, I love you, fled her lips, and evaporated into nothing. Her face was unmoving eyes unshifting, her voice passive. Emotionless, I did the same in return, never quite feeling the words, it was like a "how are you, good and your conversation." There was nothing there from her or from me.

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My memory crowded the room, and on one occasion, my wife demonstrated for me a set of extravagant clothing. Twirling to illustrate how the garment draped over her thighs and how it lay over her skin silky, smooth blurring the lines between where her dress began, and her skin ended. In contrast, my sons showed contempt for their clothing, uncomfortably pulling at their edges to stay fixed, showing his mother their disdain. They wore purple silk on top of brilliant shades and variations of blue and whites. My immediate attention seemed to please her, choosing to ignore our children, pleased with how they looked. Her happiness was supplemented by my smile, which showed my approval. This was the extent to my affection towards them, I would sometimes extend a hug when the occasion calls for it. Otherwise, a smile was enough of an affectionate gesture. Otherwise, they found a few words when they sought counsel from me. Instead, what I would save in spoken word, I made up with thoughts. Most of my ideas involved a philosophical debate on present-day morality.

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On the rare occasion that I spent dinner time at home, my children often took advantage of this time to question me vigorously. My youngest son in his innocence would ask questions about my work week and why I worked so much; "Father, why must you work so much? Do we not have enough?" This was a constant for him, I would answer -- why yes, my son, we do have enough, but we only do so because I work. "Oh," he would say, returning, not knowing exactly

what I meant, but my authority was not questioned. By contrast, my eldest son would ask me to recall for him this or that thing, "Father, would you recite for me (.....) verse? I would like to know what it means as well," pausing. My wife, wide-eyed, would glance over at me; she was eager for a response. She was watching me, my actions, my intentions. I looked back at him. Seeing this, her eagerness for my response, I asked him, "Why do you want to know?" Quickly, my wife, interjected, "just answer the question..." I looked over to her and back at him, "So?" I asked. He looked over at his mother, who was still talking to me, but my eyes deadlocked on my him, "why Son?" ignoring her. With hesitation, he responded, "I want to know because I want to get ahead of the other kids, because this will impress my master, because its important because...". Interrupting, I responded, "I see," raising my hand to silence my, still speaking wife. She quieted down in obedience; they Listened carefully. "Throughout any particular day, the man ought to work to suppress the motions of his mind, such as fear, cowardice, sadness. In doing this, he will be free. As a bird must man become and his sentiments must be captured in his clutch, waved about only as his plaything. His food is the sentiments which below wiggling about; they work on their own accord. Still, the bird, far above them, can choose to act upon them, eat them, and in choosing can ruminate them like a cow. What do you think, son, is this what you recall from your day's lesson?"

My wife was enraged, I could tell by the way her feet began to tap at the floor, and her eyes glared after me. My response was accurate, but this only helped to anger her more. A combination of ignoring her and my calm attitude turned her cheeks red hot. I continued, "what is it that you get from this?" He looked back at me, puzzled for a moment, thinking, then spoke, "I understand it as a metaphor, its prescriptive in nature, thus should be straight forward. With that being said, the metaphor invites us not to allow our sentiments to control us." I shook my

head in approval. "But," he continued, "that seems to contradict the idea that we should love one another because, in that instance, we are being told to act by one's sentiment." I smiled a bit, approving of this thought process, which in turn seemed to anger my wife - she must continue to believe I patronize her as I did when I was child. "Look, son, you are knowledgeable and is why master has decided you should be his student. Two things about what you are asking; One we can act in by our emotions. That is, one can carry his sentiment in his talons and fly alongside you. This emotion and virtue can be in agreement with one another. That is, loving one another, following by moral virtue, is nothing more than good fortune. Another thing my son, it would behoove you not to question to carelessly, in case one may mistake your curiosity for blasphemy." This seemed to relax my wife, her shoulders dropped in relief.

Take my lesson in this way... let emotion, not control you, as it does your mother, to which I laughed and pointed at her. My youngest son, who immediately began to imitate and poke fun at her while I spoke. Instead, we are to carry it with us, watch as it wiggles around, letting it move about, hear it with attentive ears. Like food, the mind motions bring knowledge, like a worm carries nutrients of the earth. If we are not careful, though, we can lose our worm, letting it run around rampant, we no longer have control over it. Take, for example, your brother whose emotions get the better of him; he is often punished by his mother. Both my wife and youngest son look down, embarrassed. I was stopped abruptly, though, as my wife stood, to end dinner, interjecting. "Your father is exasperated. You should go out tomorrow to seek the shaman and inquire into his knowledge of this."

Her watchful eyes took a break and focused on the activity at the table, which she had full control over. "Pick that up, don't drop that, pick it up, I'm telling you to stop that," filled the air as she struggled with our youngest. I was finishing up my supper, by-myself, I watched her,

curious about what she thought, how she felt. I tried to drive some conclusion from her actions now juxtaposed to her action early in her life. She enjoyed, much as she still does, to control the dining table. Ordering both her father and me were among the few things women had domain over, and she flourished in it. I wondered if because of the control she had over the table validated her self-worth in some way. In instances I would take my time to leave the table, when I was younger, it was out of spite because I enjoyed annoying her, but now I took my time to eat. I think she caught on when instead of fighting her, I would hand over my plate, which was not done. After some time, she understood I had left that behind some time ago. Now while I finish, I find interest in her mannerisms.

The way she took an interest in the responses I gave to the boys was investigative more than intrigue, after all, she knew as much as I did. I came to suspect her of relaying back to her father, keeping a keen eye for divergence from tradition. My suspicions would find footing when my father would visit after some controversy between myself and my wife. He seemed to know what had happened the night prior, reminding us what tradition meant. One night I had considered the possibility that he was a mystique of sorts. Still, I soon abandoned that idea when I watched the shaman fight off a dog who had stupidly try to steal the shaman's sandal. Its' ravenous teeth just missing the shaman's big toe. The dog pulled at the shaman, dropping the shaman on his ass. It was apparent to me that a mystique, like him, would have been able to convince the beast not to attack his sandal. At a minimum, know preemptively envisioned and predicted the creatures attack. I accepted the idea, my wife was talking to the shaman, with an unknown purpose.

The night always went by slowly, which was both good and bad. Sometimes I could hear some of the most disappointing subjects of the village arrive in a drunken haze, yelling to one

another about this or that thing. I once heard a terribly loud noise that temporarily woke my wife. It was a two-part noise, a tremendous ruckus, and then a loud thud which ended the interaction. I was not interested enough to get up, electing instead to imagine what kind of thing might have happened outside. Perhaps some poor creature had been caught by one of my neighbors and having angered him received a blow to the head. Admittedly, ending its miserable existence, or maybe a giant bird or bat had finally collapsed of old age. Tomorrow it would become the villages next wonder. Or probably one of the drunken neighbors had fallen over and instantly fallen asleep to be discovered in the morning. Which had always been bittersweet, sometimes the mystery was much higher than the actual discovery. But that day, the development exceeded my imaginations. The eldest son of a neighboring family had been murder just outside his home, relatively close to mine. The blow had presumably been to the head, which was sufficiently hard enough to bulge his eyes outward and cave the poor fellow's skull. The attack did not stop there, it continued the poor boy was stabbed six-seven times. The murderer was never discovered, and my neighbor never received justice. He often brings up his son during town meetings to justify a bolstering of night watchmen. This was never granted, and after some time, we completely disregarded the man's pains.

I hated the sun, when it would begin to rise in the east. The first glimpse of light meant that I would have to face the realities of the external world and, eventually, the person to my left. I was tired of the rituals of the village because of the necessitated behavior for men and women. Some of which mandated lovemaking on a particular day. Which I heard was not well adhered to by the majority of women in the village, but my wife and I subscribed to it. We were the children of the shaman, after all. Any misbehavior on our part would surely be seen as a failure on behalf of the shaman. Other traditions mandated men-only audiences, such as town meetings where we

decided the fate of the village's economics, festivities, etc. This tradition failed to recognize that many of the women of the town are expert economics, trained engineers. Their husbands made a mockery of their wife's instructions. The woman was a man's plaything, and servant, and the man was the protector of his family. Although many of these men were unworthy of such title. They would first save themselves and their goods than to keep anyone of their family members. They were about the drink and their money; I knew of some of which would travel a town over to trade to meet woman drink and gamble their money. All of which landed many dead by the law of the shaman. Others, however, were much more ambitious and looked to be the heir of the title of the shaman. Which was reserved for the shaman to decide. He would make his decision based upon the quality of man and understanding of the verses. He would carry on the customs of the land. This, I presumed, was going to land on the shoulders of an Eden child, the only other man who was as polished as the shaman. The family friends of the shaman were all candidates, and I suppose I was as well. I was more or less ok with this, as long as I wasn't selected.

It was morning, my wife was waking up, and ruckus began in the other room. My stomach was rumbling, and my wife got up. The day started at it had many times over, my unhappiness with the day was apparent and much more difficult to hide at that point. However, it was becoming just as evident with my wife, who was just as unhappy. I had found the day was uneventful; My eldest wore a robe that reached his ankles and was golden, accented purple, telling of his wealthy parents. His belt also white, fastened tightly enough around his waist to warrant complaints. His sandals were among the finest in the village. However, because they were handmade, there were some imperfections that my wife complained about whenever my son wore them. My youngest, on the other hand, was almost entirely in the nude fighting off his mother, throwing around the clothing she tried to force on to him. This was ritual for him, and I

would excuse myself from the living space to chuckle at his rebellion and the anger he brought to his mother's face. Leaving during these times was instrumental since he would see the apparent disapproval from me, which was necessary for his learning to obey, and it appeared that I supported my wife. Inside, the rustling would slow down, as his audience dissipated. He would struggle less and less, grasping his shoulders, plopping down heavily, clapping his feet together, and clinching. I would catch a glimpse of him through the window, covering my mouth from laughing hysterically. His mother would tear at his guarded body, pulling one limb free and squeezing it through a sandal; eventually, he wore his robe and slippers.

Chapter 3

NO!!!

"Son," the shaman welcomed me as I entered his room. "Father," I replied, "you've summoned me?" He did not respond immediately, instead waved his nurse away, "How is my daughter?" he asked.

"She is well, what is it that I can do for you?"

He sat erect, He asked me over. I came over to him and kissed his hand. He had become ill, his face had grown pale, and very weak.

"Son, I am sick, and I fear that the end is near, in anticipation, and for the sake of the people of this village, I must choose someone he who will be the next shaman."

I interrupted, "I am sure you will recover; this matter can be discussed at a later time, when you are better."

He continued "I do not know how much time I have, and my sickness has proven to be much more challenging to treat."

"I see," trying to end our conversation quickly, "then I believe there are a host of worthy men among the villagers they are willing and capable. Many of which you have taught; many as infants. You've been there master, they are just as versed as you, their families are honored and respected."

He interrupted, "I did not send for you to hear for your counsel. You are here to accept the role; you will follow me as next shaman...."

I took a deep breath; the room became silent. I did not break eye contact; neither did he, we stood there as though the first person to react would lose. The sag around his eyes revealed the red underneath his eyelids and around his pupils. His skin was cracked in his cheeks, and his beard crusted with skin particles. The door cracked, breaking the silence, a gust of cold wind, broke our silence.

Finally, he said "Your wife had been tasked to watch you. That way, I could get a flavor of whether you could follow in my footsteps. I have seen growth in you throughout most of your life. Your wife has watched over you since outside of my watch."

While he continued, rage sparked in my heart and my mind drifted of... I thought to myself my suspicions where right she had been speaking with her father.

Calmly, condescendingly I asked, "Why have you continued to intervene in my life? Ignoring me, he continued, "Son, I am proud to pass on the mantel to you. Accept my offer son, make me proud.

I looked down at him in his bed, anger filled my heart, my fist clenched, and pressure filled the back of my head I repeated, "Accept my offer, make me proud?" I was staring down, I

held my shoulders down, my anger was bubbling. Why was I chosen? Have you not seen the contempt I have for you?

"I have," he calmly responded.

"I thank you for saving me, but I have made up for the debt I owe you -- I took your daughter as my wife, and I adhered to your customs, refused to live as I desired, and learned what I was taught. Becoming the next shaman would only serve to prolong a repayment that a dead man has no right to ask for. I refuse to become the next shaman."

I turned and moving toward the door. After me, my father said, "you have two days. If you refuse, I will have to have you killed in front of the village; if you accept, I will forgive you for what you have done just now." My heart shock, he was severe, but I did not turn, laying my forearm across the frame of the door; pausing. I continued forward.

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When I arrived home, I pushed aside my children and made my way to the bedroom. "go outside until I call you in" I told them. My wife was waiting for me. She had stood erect and asked, "did you accept." I closed the door behind me, approached her until I towered over her. She stood looking for some space between us, I cornered her. To prevent her movement, I laid my hand on her shoulder. "How long have you been keeping track of me?" She placed her hands on my chest, creating distance between us, she was afraid. I moved towards her creating pressure between her hands and my chest so that her arms; her arms began to bend at the elbow. Her arms began to shake. "how long?" she responded but I heard nothing; I had gone deaf with rage. I could see her lips shiver and shake. I began to squeeze her shoulder. Speak, I yelled, tossing my

arm next to her head, a loud noise came from it. "Speak." She attempted to but collapse to the floor, with both arms I picked her up and pushed her against the wall.

"Please stop," she said, but saw that I had no intention of stopping. She scratched at my arm, momentarily stunning me and attempted to flee the room. At the door, I snatched her back, pushing her on the bed. Everything went black and when I woke from the frenzy, I had finished delivering a final blow to her skull. I couldn't recognize her anymore; blood ran down her nose; her eyes had swollen, and her skin had turned purple. She lay without a sense of fight. Tears ran down her temples, disappearing into her hair. She was breathing heavily, but the rest of her body appeared dumb. Her eye spoke where her mouth couldn't, she was afraid. I retracted my arm from her chest, I stood and calmly I walked out. I whispered at the door, "I never loved you," as I walked out.

I called out to my children, "run and get the nurse their mother had been involved in an accident." My youngest in shock called over to me, "whaaa," but I cut him off before he could finish. "Fath..." he tried again

"No, just go." When I could no longer see them in the distance. I returned I closed the door behind me made my way to the cleaning bowl and began cleaning some of the blood droplets that had collected on my arms and face. From the corner of my eye, I could see her body lay motionless on the bed, still breathing heavily. *Why had I not felt anything?*

When I was done, I walked out, turning my gaze over to my wife one last time. She was still breathing, I walked out and made way out of the city. I imagined that by now, the nurse had arrived, and my children had seen my wife's condition. Maybe She might have made her way out to the bedroom door, met them slumped over and supported by the front door frame. My boys would run up my youngest would begin to cry in fear, and my eldest would try to calm him while

assisting the nurse. To aid, she would have my wife sit down, asking her about the nature of the wounds and how they were inflicted. But by the time she treated the wound and send for the military, I would already too far to catch. I would have made a reasonable distance between us and eventually get swallowed up by mystery and forgotten.

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I was going to travel home, back to my birthplace - Terra. I was confident that the walk back after many years would bring memories rushing in, and they did. The night I was taken in by the shaman, I hid from seasonal rain. I was under the hood of a run-down home. I slouched over, trying to keep myself warm and as dry as possible. The Shaman came to me; he said nothing and extended his arm out towards me. I looked up weakly, I said nothing, and we stayed like that for some time. He broke the silence, "I know what happens to children whose fathers die." A knot found its home in my throat, and my tears were masked by the rain. I maintained eye contact with the Stanger. "Come." He said, but I did nothing. He came down to my level, "come," and he picked me up, moving me easily, I must have weighed very little at that point. Placed me atop his horse, and we left the town. I was fragile and found no strength to resist, and so I didn't.

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I could see now as an adult how weak I must have looked as a child. Upon arriving in Terra, my old hometown, I saw the wall I sat against those many years ago. The town was

surprisingly empty, and I navigated the city quite quickly, remembering the various corridors, markets and neighborhoods. Everything had remained much the same. I still vividly remember kicking over rocks, picking up trash, collecting bones to give stray dogs. The gravel passages were difficult to distinguish from the cobblestone roads. The road was hard to differentiate from the cobblestone walls. And the walls hard to make out against the grayed thatch roofs. It was darkening and the nights winds cool winds carried off the day's heat, hinting at a cold night. Tonight, the winds would keep me company.

The outskirts of the town were laden with abandoned buildings that sometimes were suitable to stay in. Here broken-down buildings were surrounded by heavy dust that covered the ground and nature began to take over, rejuvenating life. The many building walls faded out and broke, the inhabitants, mostly animals, stared back with glowing eyes from behind the blackness. I managed to find a newly abandoned house; the cobblestone rocks that aligned the foundation maintained a stable appearance. The wood that was a composite of the windowsills were cracked. Some of the window doors began to fall off. Others were off resting to the side of the building. Its rectangular shape was reminiscent of the town's old architecture, the thatch weavings were outdated, parts of its frame had fallen and developed holes. Critters made their way inside, utterly destroying the ceiling, and revealing the moonlit night. The door was intact when I opened it, nothing stared back. But the moon was visible from the corner of the small building, and it reminded me of a home for the elderly. Its simplicity was remarkable: It was small; fragmented cloth and blankets collided off to the side, many of which were moldered over and would fall apart when I picked them up. I collected what I could and covered as much as I could of my body, curling up to preserve some heat and falling asleep.

In the morning, hunger was upon me, I was in pain from the evening travel and from a night's rest on hard stone. I rose slowly from my sleeping place, where the sun beamed through from the hole in the roof. The warmth persuaded me to continue to sleep, although it also bothered my eyes. I took inventory in what I had with me some coins that I had from the previous day, and nothing else. I pushed the door open, the sun made contact with the town, and just beyond some of the older homes, I could see the marketplace. There everything was lively, the children ran, and the adults were talking about prices and negotiated. And the mayhem brought a smile to my face, not many things brought me pleasure, but this had. I was anxious to begin, buying and selling was my old town craft, I waited out many of the merchants; scouting out potential products. I set my eyes on a man's apples.

One of the boxes had torn, it would not be possible for him to take all the apples back later that evening. When things began to settle, and the old man began to pack, I approached him. "how much do you want for those apples, pointing at the mound of apples". He asked for a bargaining price, but I denied offering much less than asking price. He denied this offer but as he began to load his goods onto a wagon, he found no space for them, they began to fall and scatter. In a fit of rage, at his inability to take them all agreed. I had nothing to put them in either, so I sat next to them waiting for someone to pass by with an empty sack, maybe a few of them. When someone did, I offered up some of my apples in exchange for the sacks and collected my earnings. For the remainder of the day, I spent eating apples and watching the crowd die off and come back to life and die again. I felt particularly safe. On occasion, some of the children would remind me of my children, which both scared me and brought a bit of joy to me.

I was relieved when no one recognized me. I made my way off to an opening in the crowd, where I sat to observe the mayhem: placing my sacks of apples before me. I stayed there

for some time, along with the deadly violence, the night crept back into my world, disturbing a deep pleasure in my heart.

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Weeks had gone by now and I had bought and sold at a discount undercutting many of the merchants and establishing quite a yield. Which I would bring back home in baskets and at night would sometimes fight giant rats over them. Some nights I did not sleep as a result. I also put in efforts to repair the house a bit at a time. Replacing parts of the home, returning them to their original state.

I was caught smiling and joking with the locals. Even laughing when some of the young would steal from me. Offering them more than what they had taken. Eventually, some of them would begin to work with me buying, selling, and carrying some of my things back home; in exchange for food or money. "Mister," they would say, "did we do good?" To which I would smile, "yes, you did..." some of them never came back, others came back every day, and others only when they found no other options.

Some months later, I woke in a dark room, the light would no longer seep in through the roof. And instead only through the small gaps in the windowsills. I slipped out of my blanket and stepped out of bed. Counted among my collection, determine what I was going to sell that day, setting aside money to buy some for myself and some other for a home in the future. Life began and I yelled over the voices of men, women, boys, girls, elders, and so on, I enjoyed life in the market. I sold to everyone alike, although I sold to children at a discount price.

At the end of the day, one evening I noticed from a distance a young boy, not older than my youngest son. His head was down, he was weeping and made his way towards me. I stared trying to make out his face... when he was close, I knelt to meet him at his eyes. As he removed his hands from his face and spoke his first word, I fell back in disbelief. He outreached his hand, grasping onto my knee tightly clinching... da dad.... my heart flushed, and my body began to shake uncontrollably. He began to speak, yell and cry; I was out of words staring at him in fear. "go away," I tore him off, pushed him over, and stubbled to my feet. I began to run furiously; shivers ran down my spine.

I looked back, he was at a distance now, but I could make him out, I could still hear him, crying and yelling after me. He was in pursuit; his eyes fixated on me, his limbs dirty and bruised torn in places. It was my son, *had he come alone?*

Chapter 4

Home

When I stopped running, I laid slumped over, my outstretched legs across dead leaves over green grass. The day had gone, and the sky was overtaken by the mysteries of the dark. To my right was a vast forest. At this point, I felt sick, and the wood was drowned in awe and curiosity. My legs much too weak to continue, looking up, I saw between leaves a clearance where the twinkles of stars protrude out, untainted by the overbearingness of the moon. I could hear the flutter of an owl or bat in the distance. Twisting and turning narrating combat. In the wake of that mystery, I was overtaken by emotion. It pierced through layers of fortification that I

developed over my years of hiding and suppressing them. I was conflicted, did I fear my impending death, or was it the sharp anamnesis from my life in Eden.

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I remembered the last time I had felt this much emotion was years ago when I was just a boy, I was sitting across the table from my father, by true father. His jagged, rough facial features staring back at me intensely. It wasn't always that he maintained a stare-like that, his face was often soft and caring, his eyes tenderly looking down at me, but he was serious. I was alone with him, and the pressure of his glance bared down on me, and I could find no escape in my mother or deflecting it one of my siblings. I was an adult in his eyes. When we spoke about obligation, I was his equal. He never broke eye contact, his eyes a soft blue shaded themselves under dark brown, almost black eyebrows. Nothing broke this stare, even with my best attempts - like the time I smiled at him and in an effort searched for mercy, nothing. I began to cry under pressure and to apologize, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry I won't do it again," tapping my head against the table in self-punishment. He interceded, placing his hand between my head and the table. When I looked up, he was smiling over at me.

Later, I found that a good reason or justification for my actions is the best method for deterring his intensity. In hindsight, this method brought me great pain because the shaman who was less of a grand teacher than a grand reciter decided that pain would best silence me. Reason would only work to intensify my duration under a whip and his frustration behind it. My true father was fond of Reason and justification that he often found himself indulging in conversation with neighbors. He always began with a common question and would be followed by some

ordinary and generic answer. What is love, he would ask, "it's the feeling that one has between lovers." My father was quick to suggest that it must not, since there is love between father and son, not just lovers. The neighbor would revise their answer typically with a "no no no... of course it is not just between lovers, sons' fathers! It's that feeling!" My father pushed back, "is it not also among neighbors?"

"Of course," he would say "it is among everyone!"

My father would laugh, "yes, of course," tapping his adversary on his shoulder. Under his breath, or to me, he would continue "but not between villages, my friend, sometimes not between father and son or lovers..."

"Father," snapping him out of his trans, "are you not going to tell him?" I would ask.

He would look at me and said, "when you are older, you will understand that people do not like to know what they do not know and fail to see." "Can't you help him see father?" I would ask... and he said, "only if he thinks through what we have talked about, but unfortunately if I push too much, he will resent me even if it is what is best for him." Years later, I know what you mean, father, I've pushed too much, I thought to myself.

Once, when a discussion ensued between my father and me, I asked, "father who makes the rules and why can't I take something which is not mine." Father mistakenly gave me a generic answer, "son, you must not take from others because it hurts them." "But father, he will never know that I took from him, and it will not harm him since the fruit I had made was nearly rotten, no one was to buy that one." Father looked at me a bit taken back; it had been the very first time he had ever broken his intensity with me. He thought for a second and revisited his statement. Son, your observation is excellent, but your conclusion wrong. Just because it will not hurt him like you suggest does not make something, permissible. However, you may be right in

your analysis, and for that, I am sorry. I've given you a lousy reason to believe what you did is wrong, but I don't have a proper answer for you right now. For now, son, I ask you not to do such things because it will hurt your mother." He chuckled a little patting me on the head. "You are a brilliant child, and when you're grown, I want you to act righteously and morally, and never the standard and punishable." "What does that mean?" I asked... he smiled and held my shoulder caringly; "you'll get it don't worry."

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When imminent danger was no longer upon me, thoughts came over me where I sat. But as time traveled past me my legs called on to me to continue, I stood up, and I walked on, and each step drove me deeper into the forest. I could hear the noises of a thousand creatures surrounding me engulfing the quiet. When I would get close to any particular sound, it would silence, both I and the noise waited. It stalked me, and when I passed, it began again as if to push me deeper into the forest. After some time of walking, I came upon a river that seemed to stretch itself deep past the forest. I drank from it and saw at a distance small and large creature emerged from the deep. I couldn't make out the creature, but neither it nor the dark frightened me.

I admired the view, but at the corner of my eyes, I caught a glimpse of a person. This brought me back to life, and legs began to work on their own, they hurled me forward into the dark. I ran up against the river towards its end, I looked back periodically to determine whether I was being followed. And I re-entered the forest periodically to scope out my pursuer. As the sun began to come up. The colors of yellow-orange-red filled the skies. I was not Relieved, that was not an appropriate word for the morning.

The light did, however, show me my destination. It appeared to have cut the earth unnaturally. There was a great and sudden divide among the forest, mountain range and desert, in

which the mountains bridged up deep into the sky and was made clear against the colorful sky. Come to think of it, Eden and terra were vastly different to this, which mixed a very domestic landscape featuring grassland and flat plain. This landscape was diverse, hard to imagine that anyone would settle here. The land was scattered, such that it would make it difficult to find a flat surface, to farm on. The ground became slanted the closer I got the mountain range. It was scorching now, and I hadn't eaten for some time, and the moans of my stomach kept me company as I made my way. I had realized how I had never gone a day without food, and it bore down on me now. I reflected on the situation of the poor children of terra who went hungry for days and remembered my own sentiment years before when I sat among them, begging and scrambling for food. However, it was never quite this bad. I was genuinely spoiled in Eden.

I pushed forward, at times edging slowly through the forest. The forest guided me as it was to my left and the river's edge to my right. The brilliant blue sky's bounced back mockingly, the clouds were distorted by the bobs and weaves of the beautify transparent waters. Underneath the water, however, the gentle brown almost tan of the sandy pebbles aligned the corners of the river, and more massive smoothly edged boulders clipped against much smaller and different sized rocks. Each was distinctly clothed in deep greens and profound mossy browns, twisted ropes flowed with the river, and fish hid behind them, peeking up at me in a curious manner. When I got close, I could see my reflection. I could see that I had developed a protruding stomach, my cheeks had rounded in my face, making me seem younger, and my hands stuffy. My blue eyes had darkened, and so had my brown hair. My skin had become light from the lack of sun exposure. At this point, my reflection at the water's edge was the only figure following me.

I look very different from the time I first arrived at Eden with deep grooves in my ribs, slim boney fingers, cheeks sunk in, and my eyes sunk into their sockets. Back then, I could save a piece of stale bread for long periods, and I would enjoy it every time I tore away at it. As of late, not even the most expensive chunk of fish was enough to quench my gluttony. I ate enough for two people for two days at a time. Life was sacred then because it was life, and I would thank it if I required lunch. I would pick up a grasshopper from his sturdy hind legs its tiny spikes that may have deterred smaller animals but merely tickles tips of my fingers. Its compartmentalized shell-like exterior painted shades of green-brown and red struggled between my fingers. I would say, "sorry young grasshopper, but I'm ravenous, and I know that you probably have a family else were, but I won't make it if I don't eat you right now." With tears at times, I would chew the creature. But later I traded for dead animals, ranging in size and taste, I ate it along with its children and had them all on the same plate. I would not stop till they were both gone chicken and egg. I had the neighbor kill the animals I bought to eat. In that way I wouldn't feel the guilt of killing them myself, I would buy my fish dead already so that I would not have to ask for forgiveness or permission, and I ate them with little pleasure.

I started to approach my destination; the mountain much more significant than it had appeared from a distance back. Now its genuinely massive statue towered over the land. I was impressed but more so worried since I was not in this for the sport of the climb; instead, I was in search of some shelter for the time being. I had yet to rationalize my actions back at the village of terra. How did he find me? Did my family come to see me? How did they know that I was in terra, did they bring others with them? I began to worry, and paranoia set in. I began to move quickly, pacing myself, and periodically looking back to make sure I was not being followed. I made it a point to stay close to the river because I would need it for direction later and for a drink

whenever I was thirsty. But I was in search of some valley by which I could make a home. As I walked along the riverbank, I came to a break in the enormous mountain. Between the two ridges, two small hills adjacent to one another split by the river. The hill to my right was overshadowed by the towering mountain nearly connected to it. Sloping downwards and back up to the peak, a story above the closest hill was a hole, a cave of sorts. That would be my resting spot, and the mountain next to it would be a great place to observe the land.

As I trekked forward, I again caught a glimpse of myself reflected back at me. This time, however, I was much sloppier and more intentional about my view. I crunched myself in disgust, taking a look at my stiff and overwhelmingly overgrown figures, touching my cheeks. I blew up my cheeks in mocking disarray. I grasped at my protruding belly that has developed over the years. I was angry at the person staring back, I looked down, and the fact continued to set itself in. Disappointment. I've grown so arrogant and entitled to the world at large. I'd lost all sense of responsibility for myself.

Looking back at myself in the glistening waters below. This was not my body, not my crafting but Eden's, my clothing of Eden's, my lifestyle, and teachings too. But what was mine, what made me, me? Come to think of it, no one person at Eden was a person. Each was designated a role by some other person, our wives and husbands were chosen for us. The norms by which we adhered to, the day we did this or that thing, everything was regulated by some other person. And each of us made sure that everyone else adhered to the rules they never chose.

My thoughts ended when I came to the edge of the small creek. It had narrowed here as it began upward towards the mountain ahead. I found a shallow corner to the stream that was only about an ankle-deep atop of jagged rocks below. I took a step into the cold water, my teeth clenched at the blistering cold, and my arms began to bump. And when I landed at the bottom of

the shallow river, I took the next step, nearly losing my balance, from the slick mossy rocks. Stumbling over stones and shallow waters and when I made contact with land, I was relieved. I wasn't particularly good at balancing. I was a mess, but having landed safely on my feet, I was relaxed. The sandy shore gave my feet relief from the cold, its warmth sunk into the crooks of my foot and sandals. Still, my attention drove forward, and up, I was excited from my moments of intense mental disarray.

In a momentary pause, the sky appeared profound; the beautiful blue sky over light transparent clouds, and a slight breeze made itself present. A smell of freshly weathered leaves made its way down from the north. It must be raining over there, I thought to myself. My legs were much more spent than I had previously thought, and my eyes had become lazy and burdensome. My arms had been scared and chafed from the treks into the forest. And some began to itch and others to hurt. I developed a red spot that extended throughout the back of my arms, wrapping itself around. I needed some rest. And so, my legs went forth, in a more unstable and uncomfortable manner, they struggled to keep a steady pace as now I felt the pains of a night's panic.

I made it to the edge of the mountain, a small, rough trail made its way up, perhaps person or animals, I was no tracker, but something made its way through here. The shady bronze grass peppered my idea, fine dirt almost dust mixed itself with gravel, gray, pink, and black rocks protruded throughout the trail. The occasional boulder made for a useful handle for my utility and the snake rattled at a distance, motivated me forward. At the entrance, I peered in the dark made it difficult to see the physical features of the cave. But one thing was sure nothing lived there, and it was not so deep, so even if there had been something there, it wouldn't take long to find out. I tossed in a nicely sized rock, smaller than my palm large enough to give it a

delightful whirl. I crashed against the wall, but nothing made itself present. I crept in on all fours still a bit wary, and I lay, resting my head against a perturbation in the cave. Listening to the cave, I could hear nothing, and my vision blurred. My eyes took their time to close and reopen each time, focusing itself on the surrounding, just in case.

Before sleep overtook me, I was reminded of the time my father lay with me, staring up at the darkening sky. He ventured to tell me about those things that he believed sincerely in and what he was thankful for, all of which I listened intently to. With a sigh, he began, "you know son, a lot of people go out to the edge of the world, to the tops of their homes, the heights of monumental mountains just to say that they are at the top of the world; to feel that way. But with you here, I feel that way always." I stared over to him in admiration, he continued. "Did you know I once met a man who claimed to be a god?" Smirking, he glanced over to me. Skeptically, I said, "no, you didn't." he laughed for a moment and continued, "I did, its ok if you don't believe me..." I was in awe and disbelief, "Listen up, he told me in all his wisdom that men like you, and I should always fight to be virtuous, that's why I scold you so much." I responded, "You scold me because I have virtue?" I asked.

"No," he chuckled, "because you lack virtue."

"I don't even know what that is, so how can I get it in the first place?" I snarled.

He smiled, "this is what he told me."

"Virtue is all those things that lead to happiness..."

"Like, fruit and play..."

He bonked me on the head. "No, and don't interrupt." Rubbing my head, I listened.

"Virtue is not those things that are pleasurable like fruit and play, although those things are not bad, they aren't virtues. Virtues are those character traits that we can develop that can be either pleasurable or painful, but nevertheless produce happiness, do you understand?"

I responded, still rubbing my head, "no," he laughed.

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In the last hurrah my eyelids began to shut, I saw the sky and was thankful for the memory. I fell asleep.

Chapter 5

Bad Dreams

When I woke, I sat up, stretching the soreness in my back and neck away. But when I tried to stand the pain in my legs was torturous, it was a rigid pain that tore at my thigh muscles and drove down to my toes. After a day and a half, I spent half walking, and half running I was in immense pain. But I ran from my leg pains by lying down, but only then did my stomach attacked me, with the strains of hunger.

The pains would come and go, when I moved my legs the pain in my stomach disappeared in exchange for pain in my legs, and when I would lay down, it would shift upwards to my gut. When both went, the knots and aches in my throat took their place. My eyes would respond with tears that ran down my cheeks, I clinched in agony... In silence, the questions why. Why. Why. Were closely followed by yelps that broke out from my pain. I would clench and grind my teeth together. But the shouts came, the pains moved hysterically, in my throat, then

my legs and back up to my gut. The many thoughts which I kept dormant all these years broke out, the frustration, and hurt, brought with them the memories they were attached to. I misunderstood the lack of choice I had over my life. How could the gods justify tearing me from my family, subject to servitude, I made no choices for myself. How was I now a criminal, how was I at fault? I did not choose to exist; I did not wish to lose my family, to be adopted by the shaman.

The only decision I ever really made was to leave Eden, even that was forced. The punishments that ensued, the knots in my throat, those in my gut and in my legs, the fear, were those that came from having too the lack of choice.

In due time, the pain in my legs settled, and those in my stomach receded. From my resting place, I could oversee the massive forest below, the monuments mountains, and the beautiful blue river below. The sun hit the water at its surface, the waters divots shook the sun's rays so that it would wave back at me. My legs began to thin, and my desire to live became thin. For some time, I had felt strong enough to find something to eat. But I fought against the stomach pains. The pains in my stomach came less frequently. Although I did walk over to the river a few times a day for water. I could not handle the strains of lack of water. And the river gave me something to entertain myself with. It teemed with life underneath the surface, and when I was lucky, I could see some strange serpent outstretch its body and see it hunt some poor crab or fish.

The Years of stuffing myself with food proved helpful in these times. I had not yet turned skeleton, because the many layers on my body fueled me. It had been many days, and I still retained much of my stomach, although my arms and legs were substantially thinner. It would not be long before my stomach would shrink, and I was but a skeletal fragment of the man I once

was. That and my beard had begun to come in. It was full and grew in length. My hair grew substantially as well dropping over the sides and nearly covering my eyes. I was content for the most part here, I had time to think and reflect. I was now over my disappointment. Instead, I found cathartic pleasure in the idea of sitting here and starving to death. My patients would land me in a calming end. Perhaps in my death bed, I would find something to fight for, In my debate, I would wonder whether death was a choice? It was puzzling to me, how much of a decision was to take away my ability to make a decision, at times, death seemed as trapping as living did. If I died, I would not be free to make decisions, but neither would I suffer. Well, unless there was a god in which case, presenting myself in this condition would inevitably cause him rage and land me in an eternity of pain and suffering. But I also thought. If the gods were a myth, then dying would relieve me of the world. If I was dead and when the villagers found my corpse, they could find no pleasure in killing me, neither would I feel any guilt for having left my children.

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For one night, rain began to fall, the moon was off to one side and bleed through some of the clouds. I saw the vast extended forest that was some distance from my cave. The water gave everything a glow. The wind made it challenging to stay comfortable, although, towards the back of the cave, the wind did not have the same effect. Blankets of water droplets crashed against the bottom of the cage and began to darken the walls. But I could stare out legs outstretched; I was safe from the breeze there. I was empty, and I had grown very weak, but I was calm and safe.

In an instant, as though something they had appeared out of thin air; I saw a person. Adjacent from my cave was a hill, and on that hill was a person who was moving up and down the slope, collection sticks and branches, periodically looking over to me. Although the darkness and heavy rain masked my presence. I was shocked, of their presence.

A day would pass and so did the rain, and I eventually saw a brightly lit fire, they were still there. After a few days, I was forced out, but only because of a lack of water was making my stay unbearable. As I made it out of the cave, I saw no one, the hill had been abandoned, and there seemed to be somethings left behind. I was curious whether there was food there, I hadn't eaten in some time. By the river, I gently descended my hands into the water, the cold made me gasp a bit. From it, I delivered water to my lips, which had become chapped. Curiosity got the best of me, so did the idea of having something to eat, so I climbed using my arms in support of my legs to stand, and I force myself up over the hill.

At the top, I found the man or a woman standing before me, they stared back at me, at the far side of the hill. As I struggled up from all fours, I slipped against the gravel, landing on my knees and hands. She looked down onto me. Her face was soft, gentle around the edges. Still, her body was reminiscent of wildebeests, jaded bursting with strength, stiff and strong. When she spoke, her voice loud and masculine. She spoke "Welcome child, you stand before a mother and father."

I said nothing, but I remained in awe staring back at her, making eye contact and moving my eyes down to her body, trying to discern who or what I was staring at. I spoke nothing and attempted to get to my feet but could not conjure up any more strength. "what is your name, boy?" I responded, strain in my voice "I am bonus of Eden." I lied, "this place is my fathers, and you are neither myself nor my dead father. What brings you to my land uninvited?"

She Replied "On the contrary, the land before you, to the left of you, to your right is my land. Beyond what is visible to the naked eye from here to the edge of the world is mine. Now I ask you what brings you to my land uninvited, Bonus of Eden?"

She continued signaling me to take a seat in front of her. "Bonus, you look like a man but are much too weak, you cannot even get to your feet." Her demeanor was definitive, she talked slowly and eloquently, educated and unwilling. When she saw I was incapable of standing on my own, she stood and walked over to me. She spoke down to me, "you... you are a son of a small man? Are you naturally weak? I recall not having created man so weak."

This appeared strange, she spoke as though she was not human, human but had some other haecceity. I protest." Why do you speak of humanity as though you were not, man, yourself?"

She took no heed of my questions and continued in curiosity. Have you become domestic, like a dog? What has happened to man?

She stood behind me now, investigating me, grabbing at my legs and arms. She demonstrated for the both of us how weak I was, kicking me to see my constitution. In this, I tried to make a retreat. Obviously, nothing good would come of this interaction. I struggled up in a burst of energy and attempted to move forward, but buckled under my weight, I dropped to the ground.

She reiterated, what a weak man, I'm afraid you may not even be man, kicking me in the side. I dropped to my side, covering it with my arm and elbow. In desperation, I spoke loudly "I am a man, I am a good man, a responsible man. I have raised my children and taken the responsibility of my woman; I am a man."

She was taken back by cogitation, "where are your children and your wife. You lie to me again? She wound her leg back, I braced for the impact, it lands flush against my stomach sinking itself, pushing my insides apart."

I turned to face the gravel, piercing pain accompanied the equally painful and sharp laughter at my expense. Her vivisection of my life pained me; more than did the numbness the filled my insides, she swung again, clipping my forehead. Warmth and red began to the mixed with the dirt.

My eyes began to water, and as this woman placed her foot upon my head, pressing me deeper into the ground. I was without help; my body was much too weak to move.

"Do you feel pity for yourself, little man, boy, weak? Perhaps dying here for you would be honorable." She snarled.

With a sigh, she removed her foot bent over to look at me in the eyes she had a malice smile and sat wide open on the floor to keep making eye contact, I looked away.

"Remain silent while I speak," she said, placing her hand on mine and driving it into the ground.

Who was this person?

She continued to my surprise, demanding my attention by force. But my chest became burdensome, and my eyes struggled to stay open. But when I finally, heard what she had been saying, it had not followed for me, I must have missed something. She spoke"...As I recall, gods and goddesses are exaggerated demi-humans whose features are extrapolated from the humans and exaggerated to the highest possible degree. The greatest among the gods is he who is righteous, powerful, and intelligent. Are these not man's characteristics?" Pressing my head

down to make sure I was paying attention. "Yes, further god is male, why? I suspect because a woman is not free, she is subject to her husband and before that her dad. True? I think so..."

But at this moment, your statement's validity. You appear weak, you are not righteous for you to have lied to me, an eternal sin. Neither are you intelligent; otherwise, you would not be in the state that you find yourself in. It seems to me, you are not free, because you cannot free yourself at this moment. You cannot be man, if so, you would have a degree of intelligence, righteousness and strength. You are among those who have failed to accept the calling which you have been selected to be on.

I took a final glance up to her; she looked much larger from that position. She bent over to meet me at my eyes, she appeared angry and then reached down to grab my head by my hair. She was striking me, but I could feel nothing.

I had fallen asleep.

Chapter 6

Divinity and Masculinity

That night I was attacked by dreams; I had been woken up by force, torn from my bed just alive enough for them to kill me. Strength and commitment of the village was demonstrated through my example. I was bound so that I could not escape; wrapped in contempt and anger. They finally saw Bonus; the criminal and not Bonus the son of the shaman.

I was placed on stage, alongside a rope. I stood alone before the very people who raised me; Who taught me. I stand before them a dead man, and all I can think about is the day when I visited my father for the last time. Amongst the tall grass, the water and the high slopes of Eden.

I spoke these words, "dear father. I've matured into wealth power and prestige amongst the people. My family is respected, having had two strong boys; I am truly blessed, and I am envied. However, father, I've also learned the vices of the land and most importantly to hide them. My honor has been replaced by reputation... father, how I wished I was not so Foolish and afraid." I was placed under the rope; it was loosened, and it met me at my neck. It was systematically wrapped around my neck... moments later I heard the.... click and clack of my neck ... I thought to myself and prayed "now I must die an early death. Oh, father, I've abandoned my children as you have yours, much too young and full of folly."

I felt no pain but warmth, a release, and pulsing now course my body, and the darkness enters. Deeper it comes and the softer it gets, much quieter. I've never felt so alive or dead. My body is no longer subservient but a mass which hangs for all to see, "a failed man, a worse man" my letting go would be welcoming. A welcoming of this last epoch and memory in which I lost my family, myself; my fate was sealed as Bonus, the failed quiet man.

My family stood idly by with stoic remorse, none at all. I was not surprised to see that they had pretended to love me all this time. Neither was I shocked to see the many faces and hear the many voices yell, hang him, hang him, nor was I surprised to see the old man rise from his resting spot to see the spectacle.

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When I woke up, I was on my back the bright sun was coming down on me, I was on the hill just above where I had slipped, and my face was bloody. I must have fallen and hit my head, I thought to myself, I must have had a series of nightmares. I was calm now. I took in the cool

morning breeze through my nose and let it sit with me in my stomach, holding it for some time teasing its exit. I opened my eyes in the release, and I again saw the beautiful clear skies, I moved my arm to meet my chest and turned into the ground so I could meet the gravel with my chest. With one motion, I lifted myself and sat back. But when I was erect, I caught a glimpse of the woman in my dreams. She was sitting across from me.

I was taken back, and my gut flushed, she spoke "I have a question, traveler?" I did nothing but stare back at her.

When I dared to speak, I said, "what is it?"

She contemplated for a moment "Hmm, well... no. I want you to know something. I knew your father." A gust of wind blows by me, removing some of the sandy hair from my face revealing the swelling under my right eye and cut on my brow. my eyes widened, and pupils dilated, my face flushed white, shoulders raised.

"Ho... how... how do you know him?"

Leaning back, she removes debris from her hand, "don't look shocked, after all, I'm divine, naturally, I knew your father from way back. He was a smart man, he inspired awe, he was most among the wisest, in his village, you, on the other hand, are truly disappointing. What a strange thing has humans turned out to be." She said.

I regained my senses and interrupted, raising my hand to signal her silence. I conjured up some of the bit of energy that I had left and responded, "I am a fugitive, a loner, sinner, and blasphemer. I've come to this place seeking to be alone and to end my existence. I disappoint you as I do myself, and I have one request, leave me here and go on your way. If you knew my father and I do not live up to your standards and the man you thought I would be, then I bid you goodbye and fair well. What does a god have to do with a man such as myself? I will not die in

your company." I stood up, my legs trembling, I took a step to retreat, but was torn down by force.

"I am not done with you, regardless of your useless appeal, I demand your attention." She stood and kicked me in the ribs, leaving she remarked "that ought to keep your from running away while I am gone."

When she disappeared among the brush, the pain in my ribs would recede, but as I sat up could feel it pulse through to my toes. I sat up holding my position and collected my thoughts. I leaned back against a stump. I could see the whole valley below. Not too far down, I could see her at work collecting figs then dried sticks, and a bundle of dry wood. Before, entering the forest she looked up at me, and flashed the universal sign of contempt. She smiled and disappeared into the forest. After some time, I could hear a distinct whistle or squeal from off into the distance, I wondered what she had caught or whether it was even her.

When she reemerged with what appeared to be a rat of some kind. She scooped up water from the river bothering not to look down and instead fixated her vision on me. The liquid made me lick my chapped lips I felt the deep ridges where my lips cracked.

She made it up the hill, she took the lifeless creature from its tail and began to skin it while tempting me to towards the water, she kept right next to her feet, just beyond my grasp. She stripped its organs from its body and flung them just over the rig outside of my vision. The naked, dead, and the gutted animal was stuck to the end of a stick and was cooked. The world was getting dark again, and cold would hit my skin with a southbound wind. But the warmth of the fire brought me comfort and relief from the momentary weather.

Not a word was spoken even though we had made eye contact on various occasions. Instead, she finished darkening the meat and consolidated it among vegetables on two leaves,

and a shell of water. "Be careful," she warned, "eat slowly," to which I reciprocated a kind sign of contempt and began to consume it rapidly and furiously. My hunger gave the food an enriched flavor. I could taste everything so vividly. The vegetables rested kindly in my stomach, and their flavors brought me a lot of intrigue. But the meat's tenderness was hard to eat. Still, it was like the rest of it, brilliant, the blast of taste was euphoric. I felt bliss, and the water was gone within seconds. Naturally, having eaten so furiously and without consideration of my stomach, it revolted when I was halfway through the meal. I jolted, bit my tongue, and held with all my might. I felt the pains that came with holding back my vomit. She looked over, expecting me to vomit, but I stared back, holding back any visual expression of my pain.

"You ok?" She asked,

"I'm fine."

"You don't look it."

I responded, "Yeah, well, your food is awful."

"Ha, sure it is... You know, I ran into him, your father, in the marketplace while asking for directions to the village of Eden. I had have heard of a great philosopher in the region. I was convinced he was Eden's shaman. I've been to different countries, different people, and languages, and I was always disappointed by the results; Myths. Your father was quite intriguing, he knew and said just enough, not to bring attention to himself. He was a careful man. Naturally, though, I pursued him, and he invited me to a quiet place. I remember quite vividly our conversation that day. He spoke of happiness, he was adamant about what it was, he said it was humanities the final end. It was what humanity sought after. He thought of happiness as an intangible and unattainable thing. Like water in many ways, no matter how much your grasp at it, slips away."

"I was raised by my father in my younger years, and I recall only a few things he tried to teach me, he often never explained himself and simply left it up to my guess. He focused on morality, over all things, he said it was rationality that separated us from animals and happiness was a product of a moral human."

"Well, you see, our conversation was cut short, your father must have been sick, because he suddenly, began to shake uncontrollably and when I found help it was too late. Which is the reason you and I are here; I need you to help me work some things out"

"I see, well as far as I know, fine-grained moral and social norms are dictated by their respective community. But the source of each is different, the moral norm is a product of morality. Take, for example, a group of people who decide on the rule that they ought to can kill one another. Then if everyone follows that rule, no one would exist in the group. Obviously, we permit kinds of killings; some are permissible, and others impermissible. For instance, because I've denied being the shaman of my village, I am subject to death. This is clearly arbitrary because they could easily have decided that imprisonment would best suit the punishment. These examples are Both representatives of an overarching attempt at cooperation. Still, neither are perfect incarnations of the rule don't kill. Furthermore, the person in charge of doing the permissible kind of killing has a special label that allows him to behave in a certain way, in certain circumstances. While he is executer, he can do instructed killings; while he is civilian, he cannot. Even if done so in the exact same way."

I paused, I looked into the eyes of my companion, I was curious why they wanted this information, why it seemed so important to them.

"Why did you stop?" She asked

"All this time you haven't told me anything about yourself, you found me, knew who I was, refused to allow me to die and you made it a point to hurt me while doing it. You spate nonsense and said nothing of the matter, why?" I responded.

"I am in search of knowledge, I do not accept dead end religious mythology, like those of the Gods. I am a more pragmatic and philosophical thinker. For instance, I am of the thought that the God are extensions of man. I am directly against the idea that God or gods created man in their image. I assert that we are admirers of great men, we are lovers of the physically strong, the intelligent and the morally righteous. These I call the awe making features of man. I posit that the Gods are a kind of models and greatest among them share the three awe making features. To be healthy, intelligent, and to be good, to be divine, to be a god, to be a man. Exercise the body, participate in intellectual life and be moral/responsible."

Chapter 7

Return Home

As I listened to this person across from me, I felt everything we had talked about came together and made sense to me; God is an extension of man. The mechanics were both elaborate and, at times, rudimentary. But as I sat in contemplation, I rose my hand to silence her; I spoke: "I must leave you now." I raised, having recuperated most of my lost strength from weeks without food. While I stood over her, I continued, "It has been a strange couple of days in your company, but I am grateful for your presence, thank you, stranger; I hope you've received value from this conversation. I've acquired something valuable too." *I came to realize that as a moral*

agent, my society has given me fine-grained moral norms to follow. Through those rules I was supposed to express what it meant to be divine and moral.

She took a moment, sat back, and contemplated looking over at me. "Very well," she said.

I found my first steps towards the forest from whence I came, difficult. I felt the anxiety that came from having to face my family I abandoned some time ago, the shaman who I denied, and the potential of death for my sins. At this point, however, my moral remorse caused me just as much anguish. I needed to return; it was both an emotional and moral responsibility.

I set a ferocious pace, motivated by shame. I suspected I would be back by night. The rising sun's warmth kept the forests lively, and the river's water ran south, it would guide me on my way home. The sun burned my neck and directed my way. I stumbled over sticks, stumps, rocks, and imperfections in the ground. I felt condemned by the freedom to choose, and my conflicting responsibilities; I was going to be responsible for what will come next. In this time, I understood my role as a man, a father, and heir to the shaman.

I spoke into the wind "It is my conviction that God is an abstraction, of the ideal man; an Omnipotence, Omnibenevolence, Omniscience; perfect man. As such, there is an invitation for all men to be good, strong, and intelligent/useful. And to do this, I must necessarily be part of a community and have a role in that community. I looked back in gratitude to the top of the hill, where my visitor had bestowed upon me a mission to be strong to seek knowledge and be moral."

I thought to myself as an intelligent man; I can best understand what is right and what is wrong; as a robust man, I can defend what is right and destroy what is wrong, and as a moral

agent, I can act under what is right without being a slave to it. I'm expected to understand morality, to have the capability to do evil, and chose not to.

As I hurry home, thoughts flood my mind and blur my vision. When I come back into reality, I am further and further along. The memory in my body guides me; it understands that my mind can be no help at this moment and would only interfere with the journey. My body distracts me with the thoughts of what I will say to my family when I get there, how I would make up for my sins and what was going to happen to me when I arrived.

In the moments when my mind returned to reality, I felt the pain in my legs; I saw the darkening sky's and the progress I had made. I could no longer see the mountains, and the forest was behind me. I made my way up the recognizable gravel road and the path that leads home. On the way there, homes were vaguely lit, the light would seep through the gaps in between wood planks.

When I made it to my old front door, I paused for a moment facing the door. Light burst out from its edges, lining the ground with a shadow. It interrupted the darkness. I heard voices inside. I took hold of the door handle, the door creaked, silencing the people inside. I opened the door, looked inside, and my family juxtaposed in their regular configuration looked over to me.

I could see the shock in everyone's faces; together, we seemed to have paused for a moment until my youngest son stood up to run towards me. I quickly responded by raising my hand, stopping and sending him back. "That is not appropriate; take a seat and eat your dinner," I said. I came to the table and sat at the head, "Please serve me," directing my attention to my wife. The wounds I had inflicted some time ago had healed over, but marks remained where it had not healed properly. As I sat patiently, my oldest son attempted to speak, reaching for my attention,

but his voice broke, and tears began to form. I reached over, tenderly grasping his arm. "it's ok son," he began to cry profusely and laid his forehead against my arm. His tears ran down my arm, and his brother reached over for my other hand. Crying in-between the palm of my hand, his tears slipping through my fingers landing on the table. My wife had served me laying the plate in between my outreached hands. Her eyes watered, and she sat next to me, laying her head against my shoulder. In a whisper, she cried out, "We have missed you."

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In the morning, the sun pierced through the cracks of the window to say good morning. It promised a good day, a bright day. I looked over, but my wife was not in the room. There was a rustling in the other room. I suspected it was life as usual. Until everything was a blur and my head thudded against the ground, I was dragged out by two large men. Dragged outside, I could faintly make out the faces of my two sons, who were desperate, wailing their arms wildly, screaming and grasping towards me—everything went dark, and when I woke up, I was before an assembly in the village center. My arms: tied behind my back, and a rope tied to the top of a large tree extended my neck. All I could recall, at that moment, was a reoccurring dream that I had been having. In it, I stood alone before the very people who raised me. They laughed at me, jumped in joy as life left my body, and they rejoiced at the agony I demonstrated. I repeated the same words I could only think, "Oh father, perhaps in another life I would have accepted becoming the shaman. How I wished I was not so foolish and afraid. Now I must die an early death. Much like you did, abandoning your children, my siblings and me. I am on the verge of dying, leaving my children, much too young and full of folly."

At a distance, I could see my sons struggling after me, begging the men, women, and children of the village for my forgiveness. The stump was kicked from underneath my legs, flung my head upwards towards the heavens. I felt no pain but warmth, a release, and a pulse that coursed through my body as the darkness entered. Deeper it comes and the softer it gets, much quieter. I've never felt so alive or dead. My body was no longer subservient but a mass which hangs for all to see, I wonder if they saw "a failed man or a bad man?". This moment was the last epoch to a story that never started, and memory and knowledge that is lost. My fate sealed as Bonus, the quiet man who was a man nor a man meaning.

With faint light, I forced my head horizontally to catch a final glimpse of my family. They stood still in time. I could see everyone around them cheering, wooing, throwing up their hands. In the midst, my wife's eyes watered, and my youngest son sprint towards me, and my eldest was on his knees. In those moments, it no longer mattered, having acquired meaning, knowledge, or purpose.

I Just wanted to live.