18+

ANASTASIA OCEAN



# BEN

## REWRITING THE FAMILY CODE

CHRONICLES OF THE ETERNAL RETURN • BOOK THREE

A Psychotherapeutic Novel of Healing

**Anastasia Ocean**

# Ben. Rewriting the Family Code. Chronicles of the Eternal Return. Book Three

*https://litres.ru/74749053*
*ISBN 9785007159234*

## Аннотация

You are always on guard. Your fists clench when a conversation gets too close, and all you want is to leave. Since boyhood Ben has held his family together, and for twenty years he kept silent about the abuse he suffered as a child. In Izmira's office in Nice, session by session, he reclaims the right to feel and stays a man. A psychotherapeutic novel of healing, with a foreword by the man who inspired it. Strong men feel too. 18+

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Anastasia Ocean

*Cover designer* Anastasia Ocean (Kalinina)

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ISBN 978-5-0071-5923-4 (т. 3)
ISBN 978-5-0071-5925-8
Created with Ridero smart publishing system

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*Strong Men Feel Too*

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18+

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*This is a work of fiction. The names of characters, places, and events have been changed. Any resemblance to real people is coincidental.*
*18+*




*St. Dymphna,*
*patron of those who suffer from mental illness*
*and of those who care for them.*

*Ben calls this Icon his protection.*

*To St. Dymphna*
*and to all who have survived sexual abuse.*

*To the boy no one came to take out of the locker room.*
*You have been taken out. Now you are safe.*

*To all the men who have never cried in front of others.*
*You may cry now.*

# Ben's Foreword

It is a great honour to have been invited to write the foreword to this book. Anastasia and I changed a few details to protect survivors and those close to them. But I want to be clear: what you will read here is very real. It is my attempt to put into words what happened to me.

The icon you see at the beginning of this book is my patron saint, Saint Dymphna. She is the patron of people living with mental illness and of those who care for them: doctors, psychologists, therapists. She is venerated in both the Catholic and the Orthodox traditions. Although she was martyred for her faith more than 1,400 years ago, she still brings hope to many people through prayer. Whatever your beliefs, please take the time to read her story. She inspired me to become brave enough to seek justice and to share my past with all of you.

Some of what you read may shock you. It may stir up emotions you have never felt before or bring back painful memories from your own past. So, before you begin, I want to make sure you have support in place: someone you can call, a professional, a group, a helpline. This book is published in several languages and countries, and help looks different in each place. Please find out now what is available in your language and where you live.

This matters to me because many of my hardest moments became lighter only because I reached out for support. When I

was young, I often didn't know what to do when I found myself in crisis. Like so many boys, I was taught to man up and tough it out. I toughed it out for far too long.

Wherever you live, if you are in crisis or at risk of harming yourself, call your local emergency number and go to the nearest emergency room. If someone broke their leg playing hockey, nobody would tell them to walk it off. Suicidal thoughts are an emergency in exactly the same way, and they need professional help. Asking for help can be frightening. But it is the most important thing you can do for yourself and for the people who love you.

My goal with this book is to bring hope and support to anyone who has been, or is being, affected by sexual abuse. The shame that so many men and women carry after abuse too often leads them to drugs or suicide instead of treatment. I know that shame. I have felt it, and I still feel it. But I hope that by sharing my story, others will find the help that can change their lives for the better.

This book deals with many difficult issues. Still, I hope that mental health professionals, and people who have faced similar struggles, will finish it feeling better equipped to move forward. It is a story of hardship, but also of triumph and psychological growth.

For me personally, a combination of different approaches is what eased my suffering. I strongly encourage you to try everything you can with an open mind, and not to lose faith if one approach doesn't work for you. It only means your path is

still ahead of you.

Thank you for taking the time to read this foreword. I am deeply grateful for the chance to share this story and to help others.

Finally, I want to thank Anastasia, personally and from the bottom of my heart. She made this project possible and has worked so hard on this book. She is a remarkable woman who inspires me to become a better person and to keep working on my mental health. I am so glad to know her, and incredibly proud of everything she has achieved.

*Ben*

# From the Author

This book began with a single message that reached me at five thirty in the morning.

A man wrote that he had woken up drenched in sweat, that his heart was pounding, that he was ashamed of his fear, and that he was afraid of turning out to be "not the man" people saw in him. He wrote honestly. More honestly than men usually write. And I thought: how many mornings like this are there, for men all over the world? How many strong, grown, dependable people wake up in the dark with that tight throat and never tell a soul?

In this book his name is Ben. Names, cities, dates, and details have been changed to protect his story and the people who need protecting. Any resemblance to real persons is coincidental. But what he went through really happened. He shared his story himself, by his own choice, and he read what I wrote about him.

We began this book a long time ago. Then life pulled us apart. And when the writer in me began to open up, I found the courage, wrote to him first, and suggested: let's do this after all. My first book gave me that strength, along with the intention to keep writing. I wrote the second and third books almost at the same time. Ben's book is the one that completes the trilogy, and in it everything came together into one whole.

The first book of this trilogy, *Izmira and Adrian*, was about my own liberation. The second, *Freedom from Grief*, was about

the feminine half of humanity: girls who grew up without ever grieving what happened to them. This third one is about the masculine half. About boys who were told "Don't cry," and obeyed. About shame passed from father to son like a heavy old coat. About running away, which looks like coldness from the outside and is panic on the inside. And about the fact that there is a path out.

It matters deeply to me that this book helps men live through their grief. Heal what has hurt since childhood. Open up their sensitivity. And give them what so many men have never been given: permission. It's allowed. More than that, it's needed.

A man can be strong and remain a man. And he can also be weak where he is truly loved and where he will be accepted. That is not a contradiction. That is maturity.

Pain doesn't ask for permission, but wings do: do we allow ourselves to spread them and fly off our own small island?

I want to be honest. I don't fully know what real masculine behavior should look like. I have not yet seen it up close in all its fullness. I can only imagine it. Mature. Real. Honest. A man who doesn't run from a hard conversation. Who can say, "I'm scared" and still keep protecting. Who keeps his word, holds his boundaries, and knows how to cry. It is so hard and everyone is so afraid of it. But if I can imagine it, it is possible. And if it is possible, someone is already walking that path. Ben is. Maybe you are too.

This book is built like work in a psychologist's office. In

the novel, Ben moves to Nice, somewhere warm, to try living differently, and he comes to Izmira's small office in the old town. But Izmira is not his therapist, and I am not Ben's therapist and never have been. We were close, we loved each other, we hurt each other, and we managed to do a great deal of good for each other. So, the meetings in this book are not therapy. They are honest work on a book. Izmira, the heroine of my books, asks Ben the questions that the real Ben actually received and answered from me. His answers, his voice, and his words live on these pages. And the compassion he never received as a child, he receives here. And so do you, every time you open this book.

One more caveat, and a very important one. This book does not replace therapy. If, while reading, you recognize yourself and it becomes hard, please don't stay alone with it. Find a professional, a group, a person you can call. Ben says it better than I do in his foreword.

This book is dedicated to St. Dymphna and to everyone who has survived sexual abuse. Ben asked for that. I will add something of my own: and to all the men who spent their whole lives holding the family together, holding a straight face, taking the hits. You can lower your guard. At least here. At least for the length of one chapter.

*Anastasia Ocean*

How to Work with This Book

This book is a psychotherapeutic novel of healing. You can

read it as a novel, and that is fine too. But it was written for something else: to be worked with. Especially for those who will never go to a psychologist, who don't want to or can't yet, but who want to change. Who are tired of walking in the same circle and want, at last, to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

So, you have two paths.

*The first path:* read it as a novel. Follow Ben, his five-thirty mornings, his sessions, and how his story ends. If that is what you need right now, read it however feels right. Please do.

*The second path:* work. Then this book becomes your office. There is one rule here, a very important one: no more than one or two chapters a day. Not to be strict, but because healing happens not in the head but in the body, and the body needs time. If you "swallow" several chapters in one evening, you will be left with an interesting story, but not with change. The effect this book was written for is born in the pauses: when you have done the practice, answered the question, and slept on it.

How Each Chapter Works

Each chapter is one session. The order is always the same, so the body gets used to it and relaxes a little faster each time.

*The scenes.* Ben wakes at 5:30, then walks across Nice to Izmira's office, and the entrance is always described in the same words: a door, two steps down, the warm light of a lamp, two armchairs, and silence. The repetition is deliberate: the body learns the rhythm and relaxes faster with each chapter. In this office Izmira is not Ben's therapist; they were too close for that.

She is the one who asks the questions and stays as a witness. Then memory carries Ben back to his childhood. The hardest things are not described in detail: what matters is not what was done to the child, but what was happening inside him.

*Ben's Voice.* His own words. Not a psychologist's, not the author's, but those of a man who lived through it.

*Observer's Note.* Two or three lines in the margin. One thought worth taking with you.

*What Science Says.* A short section on how the brain, the body, and the family work, plus one quotation about men. If you're not up for it right now, you can skip this part. It explains why what is happening to you is happening.

*The Language of Meaning.* The image of the chapter: the Sentry, the road, the locker room, the armor, the rings, the roots.

*The Provocateur and the little coffin.* Sometimes an ironic male voice is heard in the office. He addresses everyone formally and points out the trap in a way that makes it funny: laughter dissolves shame faster than sympathy does. This is a technique from the provocative therapy of the American psychotherapist Frank Farrelly. And on a shelf stands a small wooden coffin. In each session Ben places in it a note with one old rule. You can have your own: any small box will do.

*The Practice.* This is the heart of it. Science shows what is happening to you; the practice shows what to do about it. So, each practice begins with what it answers and ends with the question: "What do I choose now?" Simple steps in the language of the

body: breath, feet on the floor, a palm on the chest. If it gets to be too much, open your eyes and name five things around you.

*A Man May.* The last line of the chapter. One permission. Read it out loud if you can.

What Is at the End of the Book

*Questions for Reflection* for each chapter, with detailed instructions on how to work with them: on your own, with a notebook, or together with an AI assistant. The choice is yours.

*Ben's Kit for an Anxious Day*, and a guide for those who survived sexual abuse. It is also useful for those with generalized anxiety disorders of any variety or CPTSD.

A *Glossary* by chapter, and *Names and Schools*: which scientists and psychologists speak in this book, plus a short reading list if you want to go further.

*Contents*, listing every practice in the book, so you can find the one you need on a hard day.

How I Suggest You Work

Day one: read the chapter and do the practice. Day two: answer the questions at the end of the book and return to the practice once more. Then the next chapter. That way, twelve chapters become about a month of work. That isn't long. It's exactly as long as the body needs to believe that things can be different.

And one more thing. This book will not heal you on your behalf; no book can. But it can show you that there is a choice, even if all your life you were told there wasn't: "Hold the family

together," "Don't air the dirty laundry," "Men don't cry." We don't choose what was done to us as children. But we do choose what we do with it now.

# Prologue. 5:30

*Back then, he stayed silent. Now he speaks.*

5:30.

Ben doesn't wake to an alarm. He wakes because his heart is already running and he isn't yet.

The sheet is damp. His T-shirt is stuck to his back. The room is dark; only the snow outside the window is faintly gray, and in that gray light everything looks flat, like an old photograph. The kitchen clock ticks. Somewhere far off, on the highway by the lake, a single car passes, and the sound of its tires stretches out for a long time, like an exhale.

He doesn't remember what he dreamed. He never does. He remembers only what is left behind: the feeling that something irreversible is about to happen. Nothing in particular, just something irreversible. It lies on his chest like a wet, heavy coat and won't let him take a deep breath.

He sits up. Puts his feet on the cold floor.

The floor is cold. That's good. That's real.

His body does what it has done since childhood. His breathing speeds up on its own. His chest tightens, as if someone has tightened a belt around it. His thoughts race so fast he can't make them out: they aren't even thoughts, they are sensations pretending to be thoughts. *You're weak. You can't handle this.*

*You'll never be well again. She'll find out what you're really like, and she'll leave.*

He knows this is a panic attack. He has known it for more than ten years. He has been through three rounds of therapy; he knows the right words for it. And still, every time, his body believes he is about to die.

*If you like, stop here for a minute with him. You don't need to do anything. Just notice how you are sitting. Where are your feet right now? Can you feel what they're resting on?*

Ben counts.

Breathe in for five. One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

Breathe out for five. One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

It isn't magic. It's just counting. But counting has something panic doesn't: order. One, then two, then three. A world where two always comes after one is not completely falling apart.

Breathe in for five.

Breathe out for five.

He lays his palm on his chest, right where the belt sits. His palm is warm. Under it, something rises and falls. Slowly. Again. The belt doesn't disappear, but under his palm it loosens a little, by one notch.

*This too shall pass,* he tells himself. He always says that. *This too shall pass.*

He picks up his phone. The screen is blinding. He squints and writes to a woman on the other side of the ocean, in another time zone, where it is almost noon and maybe the sun is shining.

He writes that he woke up in a sweat. That he's scared. That he feels weak, like a bad man, because he can't be stronger. That he's afraid she will hate him for telling her what he needs. That he's afraid of letting her down. That one day she will see him as he really is, messy, lazy, too sensitive, and fall out of love. And be angry that she ever believed he was the man she took him for.

He rereads it. His thumb hovers over the button.

All his life he has hidden this. All his life he has been the one who holds. Holds Mom when she cries. Holds Dad so he won't explode. Holds a straight face in the locker room. Holds the family together so it won't fall apart. The boy who held everyone never found out what it feels like to be held.

He presses "Send."

And right away, shame. Hot, rising from his neck to his ears. *Why did you do that. Men don't do that. Now she knows.*

The phone is silent for a minute. Two. He sits without taking his palm off his chest and listens to the kitchen clock tick.

Then the screen lights up.

She doesn't write "Pull yourself together." She doesn't write "Everything will be fine." She writes:

*I'm here. You're not weak. You're the first man who has ever told me the truth at five thirty in the morning. Breathe. I'll wait.*

Ben looks at those lines for a long time. Then he puts the phone face down, lowers his shoulders, which, it turns out, he hasn't lowered this whole time, and suddenly realizes he is breathing. Not by counting. Just breathing.

Outside, the snow grows a little lighter. Far away, over the lake, a thin pale strip appears. Morning hasn't come yet, but he already knows it will.

Later, a few weeks after they break up, when they are no longer together but still dear to each other, she will say to him:

"Let's write a book. Not about what happened to you. About how you're getting out of it."

"I don't know if I can talk about it," he will answer.

He will be silent for a long time. Then he will write about something else entirely:

"I'm tired of snow. For years I've dreamed of living somewhere warm. Where there's sun in the morning, not darkness at five thirty. I want to change my life. At least try. Give myself six months."

"Then come to Nice," she will answer. "Not to me. To yourself. To the sea and the warmth. And I have an office there: small, in the old town. A door from the street, two steps down, a lamp, and two armchairs. I won't be your psychologist; we were too close, and it wouldn't be honest. But I'll ask questions, and you'll answer them, and out of that we'll make a book. No one shouts there. No one leaves there slamming the door. There you can be silent, and you can talk, and you can cry, and no one will say it isn't manly."

Another long pause. Then one word:

"Okay."

A month later he will buy a one-way ticket. That is how the office will come to be.

*Back then, he stayed silent.*

*Now he speaks.*

*And where Ben first smelled fear, and why the boy's body remembered it before he knew the word: read on in Chapter One.*

# Part I. The Boy Who Held the Family Together

*"I grew up thinking my life was normal. Now I understand that it was deeply troubled."*

*Ben*

# Chapter 1. Inherited Anxiety

*The body remembers fear before the child learns the word "fear."*

5:30

Ben opens his eyes before the alarm.

The room is dark and quiet. Wellington is asleep at his feet, warm and heavy, twitching a paw in his sleep as if he's chasing something. In early December, a few days after the move, Ben took him from a shelter on the outskirts of Nice: skinny, sick, wary, his ginger fur matted. That was how he comforted himself back then, after the breakup he will talk about later: if you can't take shelter in a person, you can at least take shelter in a cat. In a little over a month Wellington has filled out, his fur has started to shine, his sides have grown round, and that cat alone shows how much he is loved here.

Outside the window it is January. Not the January he's used to: no snow, no twenty degrees below, no scrape of a shovel on the porch. The apartment is small, right under the roof of an old building, and if you lean out the window you can see a strip of sea between the rooftops, still dark. Ben has given himself six months. To live somewhere warm. To try living differently. He doesn't know yet whether it will work.

Today his heart isn't racing. Today it is just beating. He lies

there and listens to it the way you listen to rain.

His phone is on the nightstand. Yesterday his cousin sent a photo of her son: blond hair, a gap-toothed smile, in a soccer uniform. The boy is nine. Ben looked at the picture for a long time and never answered. There is a decision he keeps putting off. Not today.

Breathe in for five. Breathe out for five.

Silence.

He has known this silence since childhood. Only back then it was different. Back then, silence in the house wasn't rest. Silence was a pause. That brief gap when the voices behind the wall had stopped but hadn't started again yet.

At eleven o'clock he has his first meeting. He walks along the sea, past the empty winter beaches and the old men with their dogs, then turns into the narrow streets of the old town, where it smells of coffee and fresh bread. His heart starts to hurry again. He doesn't stop it. He just keeps walking.

The Office

A door.

Two steps down.

The warm light of a lamp.

Two armchairs and a silence in which no one is shouting.

It's allowed here.

The office is small, half below street level in an old building not far from the sea. Walls the color of caramel, with a wooden

floor that creaks a little by the window. It smells of wood, thyme tea, and salty sea air. The window is low, right under the ceiling, and through it you can see the feet of passersby, the steps of the neighboring stoop, and a scrap of sky. Izmira says it is the best kind of window for this work: everything that matters can be seen with your eyes closed anyway. On a shelf between the books stands a small coffin made of pale wood, the size of a person's palm, its lid fastened with a brass hook. Ben notices it and looks away. He doesn't know yet why it is here. Above the books, on a higher shelf, stand a few small icons. Izmira has been working with people for a long time, and each of these icons accompanies that work in its own way. Ben doesn't ask yet whose they are.

Izmira sits in the armchair across from him. She is wearing a dark sweater and an emerald scarf. She is in no hurry. She is never in a hurry here.

"Hello, Ben."

"Hello."

He sits down. The armchair is deeper than he expected, and for a second he wants to stand up so he won't sink into it. He stays on the edge. Back straight. Hands on his knees.

Izmira notices and says nothing. She only gives a slight nod, as if noting to herself: this is how he has sat all his life. On the edge. Ready to jump up.

"Before we begin," she says, "one honest thing. I am not your psychologist, and I won't be. We were too close. Here, I'm the one who asks questions and listens, and you're the one who answers.

A book will come out of that. And if one day you need real therapy, I'll help you find a good professional."

Ben nods in agreement.

"And I want you to know three things. First: you can stop at any moment here. Just say 'Stop,' and we'll stop. Second: you don't have to tell me anything you don't want to. Third: I'm not here to fix you. You're not broken. I'm here to be beside you while you look at the places you used to look at alone."

Ben nods. His throat tightens, and he doesn't understand why. No one has ever told him "You can stop."

"Close your eyes for a minute," Izmira says. "What is the first picture of home from your childhood that comes to you? What do you see, hear, smell?"

The Smell of Fear

He closes his eyes and expects to see the kitchen. Or his room. Or the porch.

But what comes isn't a room.

What comes is a feeling.

Fear. Uncertainty. Helplessness. They come before the picture, the way a smell comes before you see what's burning.

Then the voices.

The boy is about five. Or maybe four, or maybe seven: in that house, all the years look alike. He is sitting on the living-room floor, on a rug with a faded pattern, holding a toy car. He isn't rolling it. He is holding it still, the way you hold a pebble, just to

have something to hold on to.

Behind the wall, in the kitchen, are Mom and Dad.

Quiet at first. That's the scariest part: when it's quiet, but not the right kind of quiet. The boy can tell the difference better than any adult. There is the quiet when everything is fine. And there is the quiet when the air is already stretched so tight you could cut the tension with a knife. Mom's voice grows thinner and higher. Dad's grows shorter. The words are still ordinary, about bills, about relatives, about who is driving where on Sunday. But the boy doesn't hear the words. He hears something begin to tremble in Mom's words, something that is about to snap.

Then louder.

Then very loud.

A drawer slams. A plate clangs against the sink. Mom says what she always says when things get really bad, and at those words everything inside the boy goes cold.

He doesn't move. He already knows how not to move. He listens the way animals in a forest listen: with his whole body, his skin, the back of his head, his spine. His shoulders rise toward his ears. His breathing is small, somewhere under his collarbones, almost invisible, so that no one can hear him.

He doesn't know the word "anxiety." He only knows that this is what home smells like. Not like food, not like Mom's perfume, not like Dad's jacket. Like fear. Fear has a smell. It is sour and metallic at the same time, like a coin held too long in a damp palm. Thirty years later Ben will say, "I can smell fear." And he

won't be speaking in metaphor.

The boy waits for the door to slam.

The door slams.

After that, silence. That silence. The pause. The boy doesn't breathe out, because he knows: this isn't the end. This is the middle. The end is never final. The end is just postponed until next time.

He sits there. The toy car in his hand has become warm and damp.

No one comes to him.

No one sits down beside him on the rug and says, "Did that scare you? The grown-ups had a fight. It isn't because of you. You're safe." Mom is crying in the bedroom. Dad is banging around in the garage. His brother, Thomas, the younger one, is somewhere upstairs. And the boy on the rug is left alone with it. With this huge, nameless thing that has a smell.

So he does what children do when no one comforts them. He posts a sentry inside himself.

A small, serious sentry who never sleeps. Who stands at the door of the soul with a lantern and listens: Is it starting again? Is Mom's voice trembling? Has Dad's temper gotten too short? The sentry will stand at his post day and night. At school. At friends' houses. On vacation. Later in college. Later in a foreign country. Later in bed at five thirty in the morning. Thirty years later.

No one told him the sentry could be relieved of duty.

Back in the Office

Ben opens his eyes. The office is quiet. The lamp burns steadily. Through the window under the ceiling, someone shuffles past in house slippers, and somewhere upstairs dishes clink.

He didn't notice his hands curling into fists on his knees.

"Where do you feel it right now?" Izmira asks. "Don't think. Just show me."

He puts his hand on his chest. Then, after a pause, on his throat.

"Here. Like someone is always standing inside, listening."

"Someone is standing and listening," she repeats slowly. "Tell me about him."

Ben is silent. Then he speaks, uncertain at first, then more firmly:

"He's small. He's in a uniform, like a soldier. He's about five. He has a lantern. He doesn't sleep. He never sleeps. He's always listening for it to start."

"What's his name?"

"I don't know. The Sentry, I guess."

"The Sentry," Izmira says. "Good. Ben, listen to me carefully. The Sentry isn't you. He's a part of you that once took on a very hard job. In a house where no one could calm you down, someone had to watch for danger. And he did. He, a five-year-old, watched for danger in place of the grown-ups. Do you understand how much he did?"

Ben looks at her. Something in his face changes: his jaw, clenched this whole time, lets go just a little. The fists on his knees open.

"I always thought something was wrong with me. That I'm just anxious. Weak."

"You're not weak. You grew up in a house where danger was always lurking. The Sentry has been standing at his post this whole time. Thirty years. No relief. No vacation. Not a single 'thank you.'"

She leans forward slightly.

"Do you want to say something to him?"

Ben closes his eyes. He sees him: small, in a uniform too big for him, with a lantern, by the door. His face is serious and very tired, like an old man's.

"Thank you," Ben says. His voice catches. "Thank you for keeping watch. I know you were scared."

A pause.

"Can he rest?" Izmira asks. "Not leave altogether. He'll still be needed: real danger has to be noticed. But maybe he can at least sit down? At least here, in the office?"

Ben imagines the sentry setting his lantern on the floor. Sitting down on the bottom step by the door. His shoulders finally dropping.

He doesn't notice that his own shoulders are dropping too.

"Let's look at where your Sentry came from," Izmira says. "He

didn't appear out of nowhere. Who stood guard before you?"

She takes a sheet of paper and a pencil from the side table and hands them to him.

"Draw your family. Not pretty. Circles and squares. Three generations."

Ben draws. At the bottom, a square: that's him. Next to it another one, Thomas, his brother. Above them a circle and a square: Mom and Dad. Above Mom, another circle and square: his grandmother and her husband, whom he never met.

"Tell me about your grandmother," Izmira says.

"She was stern. But caring. Mom always said Grandma was a saint." He hesitates. "She left her husband when Mom was very little. He drank. He beat everyone. Grandma, the kids. She left and raised all the children on her own."

"So your grandmother was very brave," Izmira says. "To leave back then, alone, with children, took enormous courage. What did the little girl, your mother, have to do in a house where her father beat everyone?"

Ben is silent. He has never thought about that.

"Listen, I guess," he says at last. "For it to start."

"I guess so," Izmira repeats quietly.

They both look at the drawing. At the circle that was a little girl in a house with a drunken father. Who grew up, got married, gave birth to sons, and never learned that anxiety can be treated. Who cried in the bedroom while her son sat on the rug with his toy car. And who herself, once, sat on some floor in exactly the

same way and listened.

"Your mother didn't choose her anxiety," Izmira says. "She inherited it. Like you."

"But I don't want to pass it on," Ben says. And he is surprised at how firm it sounds.

"There," Izmira smiles slightly. "That's where the family code begins. Not with what you were handed. With what you decide to pass on."

Izmira takes the drawing and runs her finger from the bottom up, from Ben's square to his grandmother's husband.

"Do you know how it usually goes with men? I'll tell you about one chain. I've seen it many times."

She speaks slowly, the way you tell a fairy tale.

"There was once a father who was afraid. Maybe because of a war, maybe because of poverty, maybe because of his own father. He didn't know how to talk about fear. So when fear came over him, he drank, or he shouted, or he went out to the garage, or he simply went silent for the whole evening. And his son, a little boy, watched this and drew a conclusion. Not in words. In his body. The conclusion was: *Showing yourself is dangerous. Feeling is dangerous. If you're scared, hide.* 'Hush, hush,' they said in that family. Don't cry. Don't make a noise. Don't stick your neck out. The boy grew up. When a woman came into his life, alive and vivid, who talked about feelings and waited for him to respond, his body did what it knew how to do. It hid. He disappeared into

work, into his phone, into silence, into another city. The woman cried. His son watched this and drew a conclusion."

Ben listens and doesn't breathe.

"That is the code," Izmira says. "Not fate. A program. And a program can be rewritten. Not by the one who received it. By the one who dares to notice it."

A Safe Place

"You said there was no safe place in your childhood," Izmira says. "I believe you. There wasn't. So we're going to build one now. Not out of the past. Out of what you have now."

"Out of what?"

"Out of everything that calms you. Tell me."

Ben thinks.

"Wellington," he says. "When he's lying on my lap, purring."

"Good. More."

"A soccer field. In the morning, when the grass is wet and no one's there yet."

"More."

"The Trisagion. 'Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us.' When you sing, you can't be afraid at the same time. There isn't enough breath."

"More."

He hesitates. Then says, more quietly:

"The harbor. Dad and Uncle Philip and I used to drive there on Saturdays. Water and seagulls. My uncle smoked. Nobody

wanted anything from anybody."

"Good," Izmira says. "Close your eyes. Put all of it in one place. It doesn't have to be real. Maybe it's a field by the water, and at the edge of the field there's a bench, and on the bench a warm cat, and from the water comes the smell of salt and a little tobacco, and somewhere far away people are singing. Where are you in this place?"

"Sitting on the bench. The cat on my lap." A pause. "The sun on my back."

"The sun on your back," she repeats. "What does your body feel?"

"Warmth. Heaviness in my legs. Good heaviness. Like I don't have to get up."

"You don't have to get up," she says. "Here you don't have to get up. There's no one to hold here. Remember this place. It's yours now. You'll come back here every time it gets to be too much."

Ben opens his eyes. He is still sitting on the edge of the armchair.

"What do you choose now?" Izmira asks.

Ben glances at the armchair he's sitting in. Then he slowly slides back, toward the backrest.

"To sit deeper in the chair," he says. "It's allowed here."

Ben's Voice

*"Fear, insecurity, a sense of helplessness. Anger and*

*disagreements between Mom and Dad. A feeling of constant vigilance, of being ready for something bad. Deep sadness. I hear my parents arguing, loud voices. I can smell fear."*

*"There was no truly safe place. I was always on guard, always on high alert. To different degrees, but always."*

*"Mom always had untreated anxiety and depression. She still worries about a lot of things, and she passed those thoughts on to us. My father is a simple man, kind and hardworking, but emotionally forgetful. It was impossible to talk with him about feelings."*

*OBSERVER'S NOTE*

Trauma isn't always an event. Sometimes it is a climate: thousands of evenings when a child sat and listened for it to start. If it's hard for you to sit with your back to the door, and silence at home doesn't soothe you but puts you on alert, that isn't your personality. That's the sentry. He deserves gratitude, not war.

What Science Says. Anxiety as Climate[1]

*The Sentry.* A small child can't yet calm himself down: his nervous system tunes itself to the nervous system of the adult nearby. The British psychiatrist John Bowlby called this bond attachment. The American neuroscientist Stephen Porges described neuroception: below the level of awareness, the

[1] The scientists and authors in this book are introduced briefly. Who they are and what this book takes from them is explained in the section "Names and Schools" at the end of the book.

nervous system is constantly checking the world for safety, and a child gets the first news about the world from his mother's voice and face. If that news is anxious every day, anxiety stops being an event and becomes a climate. The British psychologist Paul Gilbert described three systems the brain uses to manage emotions: the threat system, the drive system, and the soothing system. The soothing system grows when a child has been comforted many times. If there was little comfort, a person grows up smart and responsible, the first to notice when someone else is hurting, but with almost nothing to calm himself with. Psychologists call this state hypervigilance.

*The family code.* The American psychiatrist Murray Bowen, the founder of family systems theory, was the first to draw maps of a family across several generations; he called them genograms. He showed that anxiety is passed down not through genes alone but through a way of reacting: how a family meets difficulty, what it talks about and what it keeps silent about. The Hungarian-American family therapist Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy called children's loyalty to their parents' fate, even when that fate wounds them, "invisible loyalties." Research by the American psychiatrist Rachel Yehuda suggests that the trace of severe trauma may be reflected in the stress system of the next generation as well. This field of science is young, and its conclusions are cautious. But one thing is already clear: what was learned can be unlearned.

*What they write about men.* The American family therapist

Terrence Real has worked with men for thirty years. He wrote that family pain rolls down the generations like a raging forest fire until, in some generation, one person has the courage to turn around and face the flames. That person isn't to blame for the fire. But he can stop it.

The Language of Meaning. The Sentry

The Sentry stands at the door with a lantern because once there was no one else in the house to stand there. This is an image, not a diagnosis. Psychologists call giving anxiety a name and a face externalization: the technique was developed by the Australian therapist Michael White and the New Zealand therapist David Epston, the founders of narrative therapy. Their central idea: "The person is not the problem. The problem is the problem." You can talk with something that has a name. You can thank it and seat it on a step. With something you believe is yourself, you can only fight, and in that war you lose to yourself.

Provocative Therapy: The Voice of the Observer-Provocateur

Before Ben leaves, Izmira takes the small wooden coffin down from the shelf. She sets it on the table between the armchairs. She lifts the brass hook.

Inside it is empty. The wood is pale, warm, and smells of wax.

"It's not scary," she says, noticing his look. "It's not about death. It's about saying goodbye. People in every culture say goodbye to what has ended. To those who are gone. To what is

no longer needed. But the old rules we carried inside us all our lives, those we usually don't say goodbye to. We just keep lugging them around. Let's try it differently."

She hands him a narrow strip of paper and a pen.

"Write down one rule the Sentry learned in that house. One. Something he told himself every day."

Ben thinks. Then he writes. His handwriting is uneven, the letters leaning to the right as if in a hurry.

*Something bad could happen any minute. Don't relax.*

He looks at those words, and suddenly it is funny and bitter at the same time. Thirty years. For thirty years he has lived by these eight words.

"Allow me to say a few words," says a voice.

Ben turns around. The voice seems to come from a corner of the office: male, low, solemn, and a little mocking. It is the Observer-Provocateur. He comes into the office when the most serious things need to be seen from the outside, and he addresses everyone formally.

"Dearly beloved," he intones like a funeral director, "we are gathered here today to bid farewell to the rule 'Don't relax.' It served its master faithfully for thirty years. It never missed a single morning. It woke him at five thirty without any alarm clock, free of charge, on holidays and weekends. Thanks to it, our dear Ben did not once in thirty years risk anything so dangerous as a sound night's sleep, a restful vacation, or the feeling that everything is all right. The deceased rule was hardworking,

devoted, and utterly unbearable. Rest in peace. And please, do not come back."

The voice pauses and turns to whoever is holding this book:

"And you, dear reader, I ask you to check your pockets. The very same rule may be lying there. It is long past time to see it off."

Ben laughs. Unexpectedly, briefly, out loud. And with that laugh something in his chest lets go, like a knot that has been pulled from both ends for a long time.

He folds the slip of paper in half and puts it in the coffin. Izmira closes the lid and lowers the hook.

"Now it's here," she says. "Not thrown away. Acknowledged. It happened. But you don't carry it in your pocket anymore."

She puts the coffin back on the shelf.

Practice: "Relieving the Sentry"

*The science above explained: if a child was rarely comforted, the soothing system stays weak, like a muscle that was never trained. A muscle can be trained. This practice is exactly that kind of training: a few minutes in which the body learns that the post can be left.*

You can do this practice sitting down, somewhere quiet, ideally in the morning or before bed. It takes five to seven minutes. If at any point it becomes too much, open your eyes, look around, and name five things you see.

Step one. Sit so that both feet are on the floor. Feel the floor.

It is solid. It holds you. Breathe in for a count of five and out for five. Again. A second time.

Step two. Ask your body: "Where in me does the one who is always watching live?" Don't think, just wait. Maybe your chest will respond, or your throat, or your shoulders, or the back of your head. Put the palm of your hand there.

Step three. Picture him. The one standing guard. How old is he? What is he wearing? What is he holding? What does his face look like? Don't make it up on purpose; just see who comes.

Step four. Say to him, silently or in a whisper: "Thank you. I know you kept watch when no one else did. I know how scared you were. I'm a grown-up now. I'm here. You can sit down."

Step five. See what he does. Maybe he sits down. Maybe he sets down his lantern. Maybe he isn't ready yet, and that's okay too: he has been standing too long to leave his post all at once. Just stay with him for a while. Feel the palm of your hand on your body. Feel how warm it is.

Step six. Tell yourself: *I am safe. Right now. In this room. In this body. I can rest.* Open your eyes. Silently name three things you see. And ask: "What do I choose now?"

The nervous system learns not from books but from experience: one time you let yourself sit down means more to it than ten pages read.

A Man May

A man may be afraid. Fear isn't weakness. It's an old sentry

no one has ever relieved of duty.

Ben leaves the office. Two steps up. The door.

Outside, the sun is shining. January sun, low, but warm in a way that back home it was only in May. He walks home through the market, where they are already selling mimosa, and buys a small yellow bunch without knowing why.

At home, Wellington is waiting by his bowl with the air of a creature seriously offended by the delay of his lunch. Ben laughs, pours the food, and stands by the window while the cat eats. The sea glitters between the rooftops, and it is no longer dark.

His shoulders are down. He doesn't notice right away. And when he does, he doesn't raise them again.

*The body remembered fear before words. So it can also remember calm before you believe in it.*

*And what a boy does when his mother walks out of the house and says "Choose now": read on in the next chapter.*

# Chapter 2. The Peacemaker

*A child cannot save a family. But he can spend his whole childhood trying.*

5:30

Today Ben wakes up to the wind.

February. The wind off the sea hits the window in short gusts, as if someone were knocking on the glass with an open palm, asking to be let in. The green wooden shutters on the building next door bang against the wall. Somewhere below, in the alley, an empty bucket rolls over the cobblestones, rattles, goes quiet, rattles again.

His heart is already beating fast. Not panic. His body has simply recognized the sound. A knock, a crash, a bang. In his childhood, something always followed those sounds.

Wellington is sitting on the windowsill, ears flattened, staring into the darkness.

“It’s just the wind,” Ben tells him, out loud. He hears that he isn’t saying it only to the cat.

Breathe in for five. Breathe out for five.

He gets up and puts the kettle on. While the water roars, he stands with his palms pressed against the edge of the table and feels the wood cool his skin. The wind knocks. The kettle boils. The world doesn’t fall apart.

Time to go. It's a twenty-minute walk along the sea to the office, and today the sea is gray and full of whitecaps.

The Office

A door.

Two steps down.

The warm light of a lamp.

Two armchairs and a silence in which no one is shouting.

It's allowed here.

Today a postcard is lying on the low table between the armchairs. An old one, with a bent corner: a long, empty road running to the horizon between bare maples, late fall, wet leaves on the asphalt. Izmira found it at the flea market on the square by the sea. Ben looks at it and freezes for a second.

"Is that the road?" he asks.

"Maybe," Izmira says. "If you want, I'll put it away."

"No, it's ok."

He sits down. A little deeper in the chair today than last time. Not much. A hand's width.

"Last time you told me your mother used to leave," Izmira says. "After a fight. That she'd say she wasn't coming back. I want to ask you about one of those days. If you're ready."

He nods.

"When your mother left and said she wasn't coming back, where were you standing? What was your body doing?"

The Basement

It happened many times. And everywhere in the house. In the kitchen, in the hallway, in the car on the way home from visiting. But one time he remembers as if it were yesterday.

He is eleven. Maybe twelve.

The basement. A low ceiling with pipes, a bare bulb that shines too white. It smells of damp, laundry detergent, and old carpet laid over the concrete floor to make it warmer, though it never got any warmer. In the corner the washing machine hums. Ben and Thomas are sitting on the floor in front of the TV, playing video games. Thomas is winning and laughing, and Ben pretends to be mad, but really he is glad his brother is laughing. It's a good evening. For a while there were voices upstairs, but they died down, and the boys decided it was over.

Then footsteps on the stairs.

Fast. Wrong. Ben recognizes them before he sees who it is: that's how someone comes down the stairs when he isn't watching where he's going.

Dad.

His face is white. His eyes are lost, like a child's who has gotten separated from his parents in a store. He stops on the bottom step and speaks, and his voice isn't Dad's, it's someone else's, high-pitched:

"Your mother left. She said she might not come back."

He says it to them. Two boys. Eleven and nine. As if they could do something about it.

The world stops.

The sound of the TV disappears. The hum of the washing machine disappears. Everything becomes very quiet and very far away, as if Ben were looking at the basement through thick glass.

And then he runs.

He doesn't decide to run. His legs decide for him. Up the stairs, two at a time, slamming his shoulder into the railing without feeling it. Through the kitchen, where unwashed dishes sit on the table. Through the front hall. The door. The porch. Cold air hits him in the face. He's in his socks, but he doesn't notice. He runs out into the middle of the road.

And he sees the car.

Mom's car is already at the end of the street. Red lights. The turn signal blinking. One second, two. The car turns the corner and is gone.

He stands in the road in his socks. Wet leaves stick to his feet. Wind. Somewhere a dog is barking.

He wants to shout. He opens his mouth. But his throat clenches as if someone has grabbed him by the neck. No air gets through. He stands there with his mouth open, unable to shout or breathe, and in his head there is one thought, huge as that gray sky:

*That's it. My life is over. I couldn't save my family.*

He is eleven.

Mom came back. That time she came back late in the evening. She didn't say anything. She put her bag down in the front hall and went into the bedroom. In the morning everyone had

breakfast as usual. Nobody talked about what had happened. Nobody asked the boy who had stood in the road in his socks what he had felt.

It was always like that. The storm. Then silence. Then everyone pretends nothing happened.

And there were other times. Other words. The most frightening words of his childhood, which Mom said standing in the doorway with her keys in her hand:

"Choose now."

It meant: either you come with me, or you stay with him. But if you stay, you might never see me again.

The boy couldn't choose. How can you choose between your mom and your dad? It's like choosing between your right hand and your left. He stood between them and felt himself being torn in half. And he didn't choose. And that felt like betraying them both at once.

Back in the Office

Ben opens his eyes. His breathing is fast and shallow. His hand is on his throat.

"You're here," Izmira says. Her voice is calm, steady, warm. "You're in the office. You're in your thirties. Look at me."

He looks.

"Feel the chair under you. The backrest. Your feet on the floor. Breathe with me. In for five."

He breathes.

"Out for five."

After a minute his hand slides from his throat to his knee.

"That was very frightening," Izmira says. She isn't asking. She's saying it. "The boy in the road was very frightened. And no one came."

"No one came," Ben repeats. His voice is hoarse.

"You said you thought: I couldn't save my family. Ben, I want to ask you one thing. How old were you?"

"Eleven."

"Eleven, and whose job was it to save the family?"

He is silent.

"Not yours," she says gently. "It was your mom and dad's job. The grown-ups'. Two people who decided to live together and have children. Not an eleven-year-old boy in his socks."

"But they weren't managing."

"They weren't, so somebody had to and you took it on. You took it on because nobody else did. Tell me what you did to make peace between them."

Ben tells her. Slowly, as if he were taking things out of a closet for the first time, things that had been lying in the dark for years.

He tried to ask for as little as possible. For nothing. Not a new jacket, not sneakers, not going to camp with everyone else. This was because he heard what his parents shouted about, and he knew: if he asked for too much, he would become a burden. A burden which could make the family fall apart. He, a child,

crossed himself off the list of people who needed anything.

During fights he stepped in. He walked into the kitchen and offered a solution. Like a little diplomat at the negotiating table. "Mom, maybe Dad's just tired?" "Dad, what if on Sunday we don't go to Aunt's, and go to the lake instead?" He tried to defuse things. He joked. He distracted. He stood between them.

He also became the one Mom complained to. About Dad. About the marriage. About her life. She would come into his room, sit on the edge of the bed, and tell him how hard it was for her. He listened, nodded, and comforted her. A ten-year-old boy comforting a grown woman who was telling him how lonely she was with his father.

"I thought that was good," Ben says. "I thought I was a good son. That Mom trusted me."

"You were a very good son," Izmira says. "Too good, even. You were a son, a friend, a psychologist, a peacemaker, a diplomat, and a bit of a husband. All at once. At ten."

Ben flinches at the word "husband."

"Not in that sense," she says calmly. "I mean that the place next to your mother where she can complain, where she'll be heard and comforted, is the place of a grown man. A partner. And you took it. Not because you wanted to. Because it was empty, and your mother needed it filled."

Big Ben Goes Out into the Road

"I want to go back to that road with you," Izmira says. "But

not the way you were there back then. Not alone. You'll go there as a grown man. Are you ready?"

Ben looks at the postcard. The same road is there, the wet leaves, the low sky.

"Yes."

"Close your eyes. You're standing on the porch. You, the grown man, the man you are today. You're in your thirties. You have strong legs; you play soccer. You have broad shoulders. You know what panic is, and you know it passes. You're standing on the porch looking at the road. What do you see?"

"A boy. He's standing in the middle. In his socks." Ben's voice breaks. "He's so small. I didn't remember he was so small."

"Go to him."

Silence. Ben sits with his eyes closed, and you can see from his face that he is walking.

"I'm there."

"What is he doing?"

"Looking where the car went. He doesn't see me."

"Stand where he can see you. You can crouch down. So your eyes are at the same level."

Ben slowly leans forward in the armchair, as if he really were crouching on the wet asphalt.

"He sees me."

"What do you want to tell him?"

A long pause. Then Ben speaks, and his voice sounds different, lower and softer:

“This isn’t your job. You hear me? It’s not your job to save the family. You’re a kid. It’s not your fault Mom drove off. It’s not your fault they fight. You don’t have to choose. You shouldn’t have to choose.”

“What is he doing?”

“Crying.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Pick him up.” A pause. “Can I?”

“You can.”

Ben sits motionless, eyes closed, holding the air. His arms are folded in front of his chest the way you hold a child. His shoulders shake.

“Take him into the house,” Izmira says quietly. “Put dry socks on him. Give him something warm. Tell him what he needs to hear.”

“I’m with you,” Ben whispers. “I’ll always be with you now. I’m grown up. I can handle it. You can be little.”

He sits like that for a long time. Izmira doesn’t hurry him. The lamp burns. On the postcard is the road, and now there is no one on it. The car is gone. The boy is home.

Ben opens his eyes. His gaze falls on the shelf above the books, on a small dark icon. He hadn’t noticed it before.

“What do you choose now?” Izmira asks.

Ben looks at his palms.

“To give my mom back her load. It’s hers. Not mine.”

Ben's Voice

*"It was a very strong feeling, like I was being choked. I physically couldn't breathe normally. Absolute terror that my life was over and that I hadn't been able to save my family."*

*"I tried to ask for as little as possible, because if I became a burden to my parents, it could destroy my family. During fights I tried to step in and offer a solution. I tried to be the person Mom could vent to about her grievances with the marriage. And just do whatever I could to defuse things."*

*"Mom, it hurts me that you fought with Dad and then dragged my brother and me into it. We shouldn't have been threatened with being abandoned if we didn't take your side. You should have taught us that conflict can be resolved, not that you can walk out and win. Why did you and Dad only make peace after I left home?"*

*OBSERVER'S NOTE*

No one chooses the role of peacemaker. It is assigned, not in words but by circumstances: when both adults are caught in a storm, the child decides he will have to hold things together. If it is still hard for you to ask for even a small thing, remember the boy who didn't ask for a new jacket. He wasn't being modest. He was on duty.

What Science Says. A Child in an Adult's Job

*Freezing and parentification.* To a child, the threat of his mother leaving is experienced not as an unpleasant event but as

a threat to his life, and the body answers with its most ancient program: it catches the breath, clenches the throat, stops the world. This is the freeze response: a child can neither fight nor flee from what is happening between the adults. Young children are also certain that everything around them happens because of them. That belief has a flip side: if it's all because of me, then I can fix everything if I'm very good, quiet, and easy to deal with. When a child becomes a parent's emotional support, psychologists call it parentification. The term was introduced by the Hungarian-American family therapist Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy, and the American psychologist Gregory Jurkovic described it in detail in his book *Lost Childhoods*. From the outside, such a child looks mature and dependable. On the inside, he learns three rules: my feelings don't matter, I am responsible for other people's feelings, I have no right to ask for anything.

*What manipulation that holds a boy in place sounds like.* Manipulation is when an adult covers their own anxiety, guilt, or fear by using a child: his fear, his guilt, his love. The child can't recognize it. He just starts holding.

"Choose now." The child is placed between two adults. Any choice will be a betrayal, and he learns never to choose himself.

"Your mother will get sick because of you." An adult's feelings become the child's job.

"You're our big boy." Praise that comes with a job title, not with love.

"Don't tell anyone, it's a family matter." Silence gets called loyalty.

How to tell the difference: look not at the words but at the actions. Love says "I'm with you" and stays. Manipulation says "I love you" and leaves the child holding what an adult should hold.

*What they write about men.* The French-Canadian Jungian analyst Guy Corneau, in his book *Absent Fathers, Lost Sons*, wrote about men whose fathers were physically present but emotionally absent. Such a father can be kind, hardworking, and come home from work every day. But you can't talk to him about fear, and the son, never given the key to his own feelings by his father, takes them to his mother instead. The American poet Robert Bly, in *Iron John*, called this longing "father hunger": a hunger for a man who will show a boy how to be a man without shaming him. Ben's father wanted to protect the family. But he didn't know how. He himself was a boy whom no one had taught.

The Language of Meaning. The Road

The road in this chapter is the place where a child was left alone when the adults drove away. Going back to it as a grown man and crouching down in front of your younger self isn't a fantasy; it is a method. It is called imagery rescripting, developed by the Dutch psychologist Arnoud Arntz and his colleagues, and it is well researched. The memory of the event remains, but its charge changes: "Back then no one was with me, but now I have myself." Deep trauma work with this method is best done

together with a professional.

On the shelf in Izmira's office stands an icon of St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco. He gathered abandoned children from the streets of Shanghai and built an orphanage for them. For Izmira, it is an icon about the children no one came for, and about the adults who come after all. You may have an image of your own: a person, a place, the sea. What matters is that someone appears on the road.

Provocative Therapy: The Voice of the Observer-Provocateur

"Attention, please," a voice announces from a corner of the office, in the tone of a train-station announcer. "A position is now open. Wanted: CEO of the family. Duties: preventing divorces, settling conflicts between adults, providing round-the-clock psychological support to the mother, crisis management in the basement. Candidate requirements: age five to twelve, no needs of one's own, ability to stop breathing in tense moments. Salary: none. Vacation: not provided. Career growth: panic attacks by age twenty-three. Apply at any time. Especially at night."

Ben snorts.

"Some job."

"Some candidate," the voice replies. "You passed the interview at age four. No competition."

"I never sent in a résumé."

"No one does," the voice grows a little softer. "Children who

take this job never send in a résumé. They are simply appointed. But the good news is that you can resign. Even without two weeks' notice. And remember: if love requires you to choose between your mother and your father, it isn't love. It's a job opening."

Izmira sets the little coffin on the table again. She lifts the hook. Inside lies the folded slip of paper from last time.

"What rule did the boy in the road learn?" she asks.

Ben thinks for a long time. Then he writes:

*I have to save the family. If it falls apart, it's my fault.*

He looks at the words, and his hand trembles slightly.

"Read it out loud," Izmira says.

He reads it. His voice gives out on the word "fault."

"Now say what's true."

He is silent. Then he speaks slowly, as if weighing each word:

"The truth is that I was a child. Saving the family wasn't my job. If it had fallen apart, it wouldn't have been my fault."

"Again."

"It wasn't my job. It wasn't my fault."

He breathes out, long, all the way, and his hand stops trembling.

"Resignation accepted," the voice in the corner announces solemnly. "You may collect your final paperwork from the coffin."

Ben folds the slip of paper and lays it on top of the first one. Two notes. Two rules. The lid closes.

Practice: “Giving Back the Load”

*The science above called this parentification: a child carries what the adults should carry. Understanding it isn’t enough; the body keeps holding. Someone else’s load is released when your arms literally come down. That’s what this practice is for.*

This practice is for those who, as children, carried what belonged to the adults. It takes about ten minutes. You can sit or stand. If it gets to be too much, lower your arms, open your eyes, and name five things around you.

Step one. Stand or sit up straight. Feet on the floor. Take three slow breaths, in for five and out for five. Feel how you are standing.

Step two. Stretch your arms out in front of you, palms up, as if you were holding something heavy. Ask your body: “What am I carrying that isn’t mine?” Wait. Maybe an image will come: a stone, a sack, a box. Maybe a phrase: “Mom’s tears,” “Dad’s anger,” “my parents’ marriage,” “their fights.” Feel its weight in your hands. Where does it land in your body? In your shoulders? Your lower back? Your neck?

Step three. Picture your mom and dad in front of you. Not the way they were when things were bad for you. Just them. Grown-ups.

Step four. Hold out your arms with this weight toward them and say, silently or out loud:

*Mom, Dad. I carried this for a very long time. I carried it*

*because I loved you, and because I was little and didn't know it could be any other way. But it's yours. Your marriage. Your fights. Your anxiety. Your pain. I'm giving it back to you. With love and with respect. You are grown-ups. You can handle it and I am your son. Only your son.*

Step five. Imagine them taking it from your hands. Maybe reluctantly. Maybe in surprise. It doesn't matter. Lower your arms. Feel how light they have become. Shake out your hands the way you shake off water. Roll your shoulders. Feel your back straighten.

Step six. Tell yourself: *I am a son, not my parents' parent. I can ask. I can want. I can be little next to the people who love me.* And ask: "What do I choose now?"

Once the body has felt, even one time, how the arms become light, it will remember: this is possible too.

A Man May

A man may stop rescuing everyone. He may be a son, not his mother's husband and not his parents' judge.

Ben leaves. Two steps up. The door.

The wind died down while he was in the office. At home, Wellington is asleep on the windowsill, curled into a ginger ring. On the table, the tea has gone cold. Ben picks up the cup, drinks it cold, and doesn't notice that it's cold. He is thinking about the boy in dry socks. About the fact that the boy is home now. That

he is warm.

He picks up his phone and opens the chat with his mom. Types: *Hi. How are you? How's your heart?* Deletes it. Types it again. Sends it.

Not because he must but because he wants to.

Then he texts Thomas: *Playing on Saturday?* Almost every Saturday they sit down to the same game, each at his own place, in headsets, and talk about anything and everything. Like in the basement. Only now nobody comes down the stairs with a white face.

Thomas answers a minute later: *Get ready to lose.*

*A child cannot save a family, but a grown man can save himself. That is the first step toward loving your family instead of serving it.*

*And about the boy who was always being compared, about a lisp, about schoolyard mockery, and about what it means to "sell your dignity for presents": read on in the next chapter.*

# Chapter 3. The Boy Who Was Always Compared

*Shame says: you're not good enough. Laughter answers: let's look at it together.*

5:30

March. It's Saturday, and there is a whole morning ahead before the meeting at the office, but he still wakes up at five thirty. His body doesn't know the word "weekend."

He lies there and listens to the building. The refrigerator hums. Down in the alley, the baker rolls up his metal shutter with a crash. Somewhere in the kitchen Wellington is batting a bottle cork across the floor, and the cork clatters as it bounces off the baseboard, and the cat grumbles at it in a bass voice, like a grumpy old man.

Ben smiles in the dark.

Yesterday at soccer, on the amateur team his neighbors talked him into joining, he let in an easy ball. A simple roller that any schoolkid would have stopped. And the team said nothing; nobody even gave him a look, only someone shouted in French, "*Pas grave!*" No big deal, but the whole way home a voice in his head kept saying: *Klutz. Loser. Can't do anything right.* And the voice wasn't his. The voice was familiar. Someone else's. A

grown up from his childhood.

Breathe in for five. Breathe out for five.

Whose voice is that?

That is the question he takes with him to the office.

The Office

A door.

Two steps down.

The warm light of a lamp.

Two armchairs and a silence in which no one is shouting.

It's allowed here.

Across the alley from the office there is an elementary school. On Saturdays it is closed, and through the low window under the ceiling you can see its gates and a piece of the empty schoolyard behind the bars. The asphalt is still wet from the night's rain, and clouds are reflected in the puddles. Something white is blooming by the fence. No one on the swings. Ben looks at it longer than he needs to, and he imagines that somewhere far away a bell is ringing, thin and rattling, like the one at his school.

Ben sits down. Today he leans back in the armchair right away. He doesn't notice.

Izmira notices. She says nothing.

"You said you let in a ball yesterday," she says. "And that a voice started up in your head. Whose?"

Ben rubs his forehead.

"I don't know. Lots of people's." A pause. "My uncle's,

probably. My aunt's husband."

"All right. We'll get to him. But first I'll ask about something else. What did you laugh at as a boy? What did you love doing when no one was watching?"

Ben looks up in surprise. He was expecting a different question. A heavy one.

And suddenly he smiles.

Laughing Under the Covers

He is nine. Thomas is seven. Their cousin is sleeping over, and all three of them are lying on the living-room floor in sleeping bags. It's late. The grown-ups went to bed long ago. They're not allowed to make noise.

And that's why everything is funny.

Thomas whispers an imitation of their math teacher, who talks through his nose and keeps pushing up his glasses. Ben picks it up and acts out the teacher trying to open a window that won't open. Their cousin clamps his hand over his mouth and shakes. Ben shakes too. They laugh until their stomachs hurt, until tears run down their faces, until they have to stuff their heads into their sleeping bags so they won't be heard upstairs. And that makes it even funnier.

Ben remembers that laughter with his body. Warm, tickling, rising from the belly. Laughter without a drop of fear in it. One of the few places in his childhood where the sentry fell asleep.

He also loved comedies. Old movies where somebody falls

into a cake, where cops chase somebody across the rooftops, where everything is ridiculous and loud and everyone makes up at the end. He watched them in the evenings and laughed. And he learned to find something funny in a lot of things. In almost everything. Even in things that weren't funny at all.

*What science says: laughter is one of the oldest tools of self-regulation. When a person laughs, stress hormone levels drop, muscles relax, and the brain gets a dose of endorphins. Shared laughter also bonds people: it tells the nervous system that we are among our own and there is no danger. For children who grew up in anxiety, humor often becomes the main way to survive. It gives them what the adults didn't: brief islands of relief. Psychologists sometimes call humor a mature defense: it helps you bear what is hard without denying it.*

"You see," Izmira says when he finishes. "You had your own medicine. You found it yourself. No one gave it to you, and you found it."

"I never thought of it that way."

"You should. We'll use that medicine again later." She smiles. "Now let's look at what you needed medicine for. Tell me about school."

Ben's smile fades.

School

He had a lisp. Since early childhood he'd had a speech

impediment: his *s* and *sh* ran together, and some words came out soft and funny, as if he were talking with a candy in his mouth.

The other kids noticed right away.

They mimicked him. Repeated every word with his lisp, on purpose, loudly, at recess and in the hallways. They made up nicknames. They lay in wait for him by the locker room. When the teacher called him up to the board, the class went still in anticipation, and he felt that silence on his skin, the way you feel eyes on your back. He learned to say very little. To choose words without the hard sounds. To keep quiet whenever he could.

He was bullied harshly. Not once, but for years.

At home they hardly ever talked about it. Mom was too fragile. Ben knew that as surely as he knew winters were cold. If he told Mom he was being bullied, she would get upset. If she got upset, it might start. So he kept a straight face. Didn't show anything. Came home from school and said, "Fine." It was the most common word of his childhood. Fine.

*What science says: research by the American neuroscientists Naomi Eisenberger and Matthew Lieberman has shown that social pain, when a person is rejected, ridiculed, or excluded from a group, activates some of the same brain regions as physical pain. The brain doesn't distinguish very well between "I was hit" and "I was laughed at." For a child who is bullied for years, this means he is in pain for years. Literally. And if there is no one at home to tell, that pain builds up in the body.*

Sundays

On Saturdays they drove to the harbor with Dad and Uncle Philip. But on Sundays they drove to see Mom's sisters. And Ben didn't like Sundays.

The younger aunt's house was beautiful. A big house, a bright living room, expensive china that came out only on holidays, and for them every Sunday was a holiday. It smelled of roast meat, furniture polish, and the older aunt's perfume, sweet and heavy.

The younger aunt's husband was an engineer. He was successful, loud, and self-assured. Everyone listened to him. When he talked, the table went quiet. And almost everything he said about Ben's father came with a smirk: Dad worked at a factory, and that seemed to be something to be ashamed of.

The uncle had a daughter. Ben's cousin. She was praised for everything. For every A. For every card she drew. For the way she played the piano, for how nicely she sat at the table. Ben did well in school. Very well. But his achievements could never measure up to hers. His "good" was "well, okay." Her "good" was "Look, everyone, what a clever girl." He was never quite enough.

The uncle loved sports. He played tennis almost at a professional level and loved to play against the boys. He played at full strength, as if against adults, giving no allowance for their age. He beat them in straight sets. And then he mocked them. "What, can't hack it? What kind of men are we raising?" On walks along forest trails he always went first, never waited for anyone, and tossed something cutting over his shoulder at

whoever fell behind. When they went on vacation together, he took the car and stopped only where he himself wanted to.

Later, when Ben enrolled to study political science, his uncle would say that the humanities were for losers. That their generation was lazy and ungrateful. That real men become engineers. The boys were supposed to feel like nothing. A disappointment. The family's disgrace.

But there was one more thing. The quietest and the heaviest.

The uncle was generous. Very generous. He paid for trips Ben's parents would never have dared to take on their own. He gave expensive gifts. He helped the family, so everything he said and did had to be endured. Ben was told outright: Be grateful. Don't take offense. He does so much for us. Put up with the mockery to keep the peace. Keep quiet.

The boy learned this rule very well. Later, as an adult, he would put it in words that make your blood run cold:

*I was told I had to sell my dignity in exchange for gifts from the extended family.*

*What science says: the American psychotherapist Susan Forward described a mechanism she called emotional blackmail. At its core are three feelings that one person uses to control another: fear, obligation, and guilt. In English they spell FOG. In that fog, a person stops seeing that he is being treated badly, because he constantly feels he owes someone something. When Ben grew up, he saw this fog in his own family and named it with the same three words. He knew nothing about Forward's book. He*

*simply lived it.*

Back in the Office

Ben falls silent. He sits with his head down, looking at his hands.

"What are you feeling right now?" Izmira asks.

"Shame," he says quietly. "I'm ashamed. I don't understand what for, but I'm ashamed."

"Where?"

He points to his face. His cheeks. His neck.

"It's burning."

"That's very accurate," Izmira says. "Shame almost always burns right there. The face, the neck, the ears. As if the body wants to hide and has nowhere to go."

She waits a little.

"Ben, I want to show you a difference. A very important one. There is guilt. Guilt says: I did something bad. And it can be fixed: you apologize, repair it, do it differently. And there is shame. Shame says: I am bad. All of me. Entirely bad, and it can't be fixed by an action, because the problem isn't the action, it's you. Or so it seems."

"Yes. That's how it seems."

"When they mimicked you at school, did you do something bad?"

"No. I just had a lisp."

"When they compared you to your cousin, did you do

something bad?"

"No. I got good grades."

"When your uncle beat you at tennis, a grown man against a child, and laughed, did you do something bad?"

Ben is silent.

"No," he says at last. "I was just a kid."

"Then the shame burning on your face isn't yours," Izmira says. "You didn't earn it. It was handed to you. Like worn-out clothes that don't fit you. You wore them for so many years that you got used to them. But they belong to someone else."

*What science says: the American psychologist June Tangney spent many years studying the difference between shame and guilt. Her research shows that guilt usually pushes a person toward repair. He apologizes, makes amends, changes his behavior. Shame pushes toward something else: to hide, to disappear, to defend, or to attack. People prone to shame suffer more often from anxiety and depression and lash out in anger more often. A child who was shamed for a long time learns to live in shame rather than in guilt. He doesn't think "I made a mistake"; he thinks "Something is wrong with me."*

"What do you choose now?" Izmira asks.

Ben passes a hand over his face, as if wiping off the heat.

"To take off someone else's clothes. The shame isn't mine."

Ben's Voice

*"I was bullied pretty harshly at school because I had a lisp and*

*a speech impediment as a kid."*

*"My cousins were always praised for every little thing, and my achievements could never compare. I was doing well, but it was never enough."*

*"I was advised to put up with verbal abuse from relatives to keep the peace. My aunts and uncles used gifts and purchases to justify their cruel behavior. My parents did nothing to protect me. I felt helpless and humiliated."*

*"I laughed at silly jokes with my brother and my cousin. Comedies made me laugh too, and I tried to find humor in a lot of things."*

What Happens to a Boy at This Age

As a psychologist, I want you to look closely at these years. From seven to twelve.

The German-American psychologist Erik Erikson, who described the stages of personality development, named the central task of this age "industry versus inferiority." These are the years when a child learns to be capable. He learns to read, to count, to play on a team, to make things, to win and to lose. And out of all this grows one feeling, the most important one for the rest of his life: I can. I can manage. I am good enough.

If during these years a child is supported, praised for effort and not only for results, and helped through failure, he develops an inner foundation. He knows he can make a mistake and it isn't the end of the world.

If during these same years he is ridiculed, compared, shamed, if his successes are "never enough," the child draws a different conclusion. Not "I played tennis badly." But "I am inferior." Not "I have a lisp that can be corrected." But "Something is wrong with me."

That conclusion doesn't stay in childhood. It travels on with the boy. To college, where he will study as hard as he can, to the point of exhaustion, because any grade less than perfect will feel like failure. Into a profession where he will be tormented by shame over "unworthy work." Into relationships where he will be afraid that one day he will be seen for who he really is and found disappointing. Into five thirty in the morning, when a voice inside will repeat in his uncle's tone: Klutz. Loser. Can't do anything right.

One more thing. Notice how shame and gifts are tied together in this story. The boy was taught that generosity must be paid for. With what? With silence. With endurance. With his dignity. This is a very dangerous lesson because a child who has learned that his dignity is for sale becomes defenseless against any adult who gives his family anything at all. We will come back to this in Chapter Five. There, this lesson will turn into the worst thing of all.

If you were compared as a child, if your "good" was never enough, if you were shamed in front of everyone, you may notice it in yourself today. Maybe you don't know how to enjoy your successes: they seem accidental or insignificant. Maybe any

mistake brings on a burning shame out of all proportion to it. Maybe it's hard for you to accept gifts and help, because it feels as if you will have to pay later. Maybe you still hear someone else's voice in your head telling you that you're not good enough. That voice isn't yours. You can ask it: "Whose are you?"

What They Write About Men

The American researcher Brené Brown has spent twenty years studying shame and vulnerability. At first she talked almost exclusively with women. And for a long time she didn't understand why. Then one man came up to her after a talk and said something like this: "You talk about shame. What about us? My wife and daughters have your books. They say they want me to be open, to show my feelings. However, the truth is, they'd rather see me die on top of my white horse than watch me fall off."

That conversation changed her work. Brené Brown began studying men's shame. And this is what she found. Women's shame is like a web: a tangle of conflicting expectations that can't all be met at once. Be beautiful, but not vain. Work, but don't neglect the kids. Men's shame, though, is like a box. A tight one. With one main rule on the lid: *Don't be weak.* Don't be weak. Never, in front of anyone, in anything. Everything inside the box is allowed to a man. Everything outside its walls, fear, tenderness, sadness, need, uncertainty, is forbidden.

The boy who was mimicked for his lisp, who was beaten and

mocked, who was compared to the "clever girl," was pushed into that box every time. Deeper and deeper, he learned to live in it. He learned to say "Fine."

But Brené Brown also found a way out. Shame, she wrote, can't survive three things: being spoken out loud, being met with empathy, and being given a name. Shame grows in secrecy, silence, and judgment. Then it melts when it is brought into the light, to a person who won't turn away.

That is exactly what Ben is doing now. In the office. On these pages.

Provocative Therapy: The Voice of the Observer-Provocateur

"One moment," says a voice from the corner. "Allow me to sum up. So, what we have here is a boy who had a lisp, got the best grades in his class, made peace between his parents, comforted his mother, never asked for anything, put up with the mockery of an uncle who beat children at tennis, and after all that, he was 'not enough.' Have I got that right?"

"Well… yes," Ben says.

"Splendid, and tell me, please, dear Ben, who exactly found it not enough? You, at nine years old? Or the grown uncle who propped himself up by beating children?"

Ben opens his mouth. Closes it.

"Here is what I will tell you," the voice continues with the air of a professor at a lecture. "A man who needs to beat a nine-year-old boy at tennis and then laugh at him is a man who is very

much not enough for himself. He is the one with a hole inside the size of a tennis court. For thirty years you have carried his hole in your own chest, thinking it was yours. You are, if I may say so, a very noble person. You even carry other people's holes free of charge."

Ben laughs. Reluctantly at first, then louder.

"He really was…" Ben says. "He really always had to go first. Even on a trail. Even when everyone was falling behind."

"Of course," the voice replies. "Just try walking second when there's that kind of emptiness inside you. It's frightening. Someone might notice."

A Note for the Little Coffin

The little coffin is on the table again. Two slips of paper inside.

"What rule did the boy learn at those Sunday dinners?" Izmira asks.

This time Ben writes quickly, without stopping to think, as if the words had long been waiting to be let out:

*I will never be enough. For what I am given, I must pay with my dignity.*

He looks at the note. Then he picks up the pen and, after a moment's thought, adds at the bottom in small letters:

*It was not my shame.*

"Can I leave the last line?" he asks.

"You can," Izmira says. "That isn't a rule. It's the truth. Let it lie there alongside."

The third note goes into the little coffin.

Practice: “Good Enough”

*The science above explained: shame says “I am bad,” and a brain that was often shamed gets used to searching itself for mistakes. Arguing with shame is useless. However, attention can be trained to notice what went right as well. This practice is exactly that kind of training.*

The English pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott coined the phrase “the good-enough mother.” He said that a child needs not a perfect mother but a good-enough one. One who sometimes makes mistakes but is, on the whole, there. This practice is about becoming good enough for yourself.

Step one. Sit comfortably. Take three breaths in for five and three breaths out for five. Feel how your feet are planted.

Step two. Remember one moment from childhood when you were told, or made to understand, that you weren’t good enough. Not the worst one. A medium one. Ask your body: “Where does this moment live now?” Maybe your cheeks will burn. Maybe your stomach will tighten. Maybe you’ll want to lower your head. Just notice.

Step three. Put one palm where it responded. And the other palm on your heart. Feel the warmth of both hands.

Step four. Remember the person who shamed you back then. You don’t need to argue with him. Just, in your mind, give his words back to him, the way you return something that belongs

to someone else: “This is yours. This is your dissatisfaction, your emptiness, your fear. I’m giving it back to you. It doesn’t fit me.”

Step five. Now say to yourself, slowly, one sentence at a time, taking a breath in and out after each one:

*I was a child.*

*I tried.*

*I was good enough.*

*I am good enough now, too. Not the best. Not perfect. Enough.*

Sit with this. If an argument rises up inside, “What do you mean, enough?”, just smile at it. That’s an old voice too. It also belongs to someone else.

A Man May

A man may be good enough. Not the best. Not first on the trail. Enough and that is plenty.

Ben leaves. Two steps up. The door.

After lunch he goes to the field. Saturday practice, the boys from the youth team where he volunteers. A ten-year-old goalie lets in a ball and stands there with his head down, red to the ears. One of the other boys starts to snicker.

Ben goes over to the goalie. He crouches down so that their eyes are at the same level.

“Listen,” he says. “Yesterday I let in one exactly like that. Even worse. A grown man, can you imagine?”

The boy looks up. Doubtful.

"Really?"

"Really. You know what I figured out? Letting in a ball isn't about you. It's just about the ball. Come on, you'll get the next one."

The boy smiles. Crookedly, still unsure. But he smiles.

And Ben, walking back to the sideline, suddenly realizes that he has just told this boy what no one ever told him. And that in saying it to someone else, he said it a little to himself too.

*Shame is passed down. But something else can be passed down too. You can crouch next to someone who let in a ball and say: this isn't about you.*

*And about the grandmother the family called a saint, about Uncle Philip, and about how one story about a cat showed Ben the code of his family: read on in the next chapter.*

*Before you move on, do the "Good Enough" practice and remember one thing that went well for you today. A very small one. A brain that spent thirty years searching for mistakes has to be retaught to notice what worked. This isn't self-deception. It's attention training.*

# Chapter 4. The Saintly Grandmother and Uncle Philip

*The family code doesn't live in big words. It lives in small decisions: to stop or to keep driving. To tell the truth or to spare someone.*

5:30

Today Ben wakes up with a smell.

Tobacco. That particular bitter, warm smell of cheap cigarettes that soaks into car upholstery and jackets and stays for years. He opens his eyes, and the smell vanishes. It was never there. Ben doesn't smoke. No one in the apartment smokes. It came from a dream.

He lies there and tries to remember the dream. He can't, but something good is left in his body. Something soft. Like after a long drive, when you sit in the passenger seat, look out the window, and nobody expects you to talk.

Outside it's the end of March. It rained in the night, and now the gutter is dripping. The drops fall on the same spot on the outside sill, and their sound is bright and ringing, like a metronome. Drip. Drip. Drip. Back home he would have said: spring. Here spring started back in February, with the mimosa, and he still can't get used to it.

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