

The Weight of a Person

Conversations Beneath the Stars

Book Two

Knowing who I am does not mean I can be treated as nobody.

Prologue - The Firewood

He arrived carrying an armful of firewood.

"You're late," I said.

"You're welcome."

"For what?"

"The firewood."

"I haven't thanked you yet."

"That's precisely my complaint."

I watched him drop the logs beside the fire ring. A few pieces rolled loose, and he nudged them back into place with his boot.

"You've been here thirty seconds, and you're already demanding recognition?"

"I'm beginning to think it's a basic human need."

"To be thanked for carrying sticks?"

"To be appreciated for carrying them."

I handed him a cup.

"Tea?"

"Now you're learning."

He settled into his chair while I arranged the logs. The evening was cool, and the first stars were appearing above the trees. Somewhere behind us, a branch moved in the wind, and then was still.

"Have you ever wondered," he said, "why people need other people to notice them?"

"To help carry firewood?"

"You're going to make this difficult, aren't you?"

"Probably."

He smiled.

"Good. I brought enough wood for a long argument."

Chapter One - Who Am I?

"Let's start with something simple," he said. "Who are you?"

I told him my name.

"That's what people call you."

"Fine. I'm a father, a husband, a friend."

"Those are your relationships."

"Would you prefer my driver's license?"

"That would tell me even less."

I looked at him. The fire had caught properly now, and the light was moving on his face.

"Where are you going with this?"

"Imagine you were born somewhere without another human being. No mother teaching you your name. No father telling you you're his son. Nobody calling you smart, foolish, kind, or stubborn."

"I'd still be human."

"Of course. But would you know who you were?"

"I'd know when I was hungry."

"That's not what I'm asking."

"I might recognize my own reflection."

"Would you know what it meant?"

I watched the flames climb around a small branch. A knot in the wood popped, and a spark landed on the stones.

"Perhaps not in the way I know myself now."

He nodded.

"A child doesn't arrive knowing his name. His parents teach him. They tell him he's their son, that he belongs to their family, that he is loved."

"And eventually he believes them."

"More than that. Eventually he tells other people the same things about himself."

"So what began in someone else's mind becomes part of his own."

"Exactly."

I thought for a moment. The kettle began to murmur, and neither of us reached for it.

"Then much of what I call myself began with somebody else."

"Doesn't it?"

"That could explain why my mother still thinks I'm a child."

He laughed.

"Perhaps she knows something you don't."

We sat quietly for a moment. The fire cracked, and a coal rolled to the edge of the ring.

"There's something I've been thinking about," I said.

"Only something?"

"Solitary confinement."

He looked at me.

"I read about it once. A man can be kept alive in a cell for years. Food, water, a bed. His body is cared for. But nobody speaks to him. Nobody sees him. Nobody uses his name."

"And?"

"And he goes mad. Not because his body was neglected. Because he was starved of something else."

My friend watched the fire.

"Recognition," he said.

"Yes."

"That's a heavy way to make your point."

"I know. But it's the truth. A person can be kept alive and still be starved."

He was quiet for a moment.

"That doesn't make identity social," he said. "It makes it real."

Chapter Two - The First Mirror

"Watch a little child," he said. "What does he do?"

"Usually something that requires cleaning afterward."

"Before that."

"He watches."

"And copies."

"A smile, a gesture, a word."

"Exactly. He begins by mirroring the people around him."

I took another sip of tea. The cup was too hot, and I set it down again.

"So?"

"So imagine what happens when those same people begin telling him who he is."

"You're a good boy. You're clever. You're our little troublemaker."

"And he begins repeating those descriptions."

"Until they become his own?"

"Perhaps."

I moved a log with the poker. The coals shifted, and a thin flame appeared between them.

"Then what happens if someone else gives him a different description?"

"Like calling him stupid?"

"Or worthless."

"He gets upset."

"Why?"

"Because someone is challenging what he already believes about himself."

I thought about that.

"The strange part is that he didn't establish those beliefs entirely on his own."

"No. But now he defends them as though he did."

"Well, I suppose if somebody spent five years convincing me I was a prince, I'd be upset when the neighbors called me a peasant."

"Especially if you'd already ordered a crown."

We laughed. A log collapsed in the fire, sending up a small shower of sparks, and he waited until they had faded.

Then I asked, "What if the first mirror was wrong?"

He looked at me.

"What do you mean?"

"What if the people raising the child were cruel? What if they convinced him he was worthless?"

He didn't answer immediately. The fire had settled into a steady glow, and the cold was beginning to reach my hands.

"Then he may grow up carrying that conviction."

"Even when he leaves them?"

"Possibly."

"And if he meets people who treat him differently?"

"He might learn that what he was taught wasn't true."

"Does that erase what he learned?"

"Not necessarily."

I watched a spark rise from the fire.

"Maybe the old voice remains. But he learns that he doesn't have to obey it."

My friend nodded slowly.

"Then growing up isn't simply collecting new descriptions of ourselves."

"What is it?"

"Learning which voices deserve authority."

He was quiet for a moment. Then he asked the question I had been waiting for.

"But if identity is formed by others, what's left that's mine?"

I did not answer at once.

"That's a harder question than the one I asked," I said.

"I know."

"I don't have a clean answer."

"Try anyway."

I looked into the fire.

"Perhaps what's left is the choosing. The voices speak. The descriptions arrive. But I decide which ones to keep."

"That sounds like a lot of credit to give yourself."

"Maybe it is. But I don't know how else to explain the fact that two brothers can grow up in the same house and become different people."

He considered that.

"That's not a proof."

"No. It's a picture. And maybe the picture is incomplete."

He nodded slowly.

"Then we should not pretend it is finished."

Chapter Three - The Voice Within

"Let me ask you something," I said. "When does a child stop needing people to tell him who he is?"

"At eighteen, according to the government."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one I could give without thinking."

"Try thinking."

He leaned back. The fire had burned down enough that I could see the stars through the branches above us.

"Maybe when he becomes mature."

"And when does that happen?"

"Not necessarily at eighteen."

"Or forty."

"Or seventy."

We both laughed.

"Some people," he continued, "spend their whole lives needing someone to tell them they're important, intelligent, attractive, or successful."

"And others?"

"They eventually develop enough conviction about themselves that they don't need constant reassurance."

"So maturity means I stop depending on other people's voices to define me."

"That sounds reasonable."

"But suppose someone insults me."

"What kind of insult?"

"Let's say he calls me a fool."

"Shouldn't be difficult to imagine."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Even if I know I'm not a fool, it might still hurt."

"Of course."

"Then what did maturity accomplish?"

He considered the question. A branch cracked somewhere beyond the firelight, and he glanced toward it before answering.

"Perhaps it changed what you do with the hurt."

"Not necessarily what you feel?"

"Right."

I stared into the fire.

"When I was a child, I needed others to tell me who I was."

"And now?"

"Now I know."

"Then why does it still hurt when someone tells you otherwise?"

I looked at him.

"Because knowing who I am doesn't mean I can be treated as nobody."

He didn't answer immediately. The fire snapped, and a coal rolled to the edge of the ring.

"That's different," he said.

"Different from what?"

"Needing someone to define you."

I nodded.

"Knowing who I am doesn't make me stop wanting to matter."

Chapter Four - I Matter

He threw another log onto the fire. The sparks went up, and for a moment neither of us spoke.

"So that's what we're really talking about."

"What?"

"Mattering."

I waited. The new log had caught, and the light was brighter now, pushing the dark back a few feet in every direction.

"Think about it. A child wants his parents to watch him. He builds something out of blocks and calls everyone over."

"And an adult?"

"Builds something more expensive and calls everyone over."

I laughed.

"Sometimes considerably more expensive."

"Why?"

"Because achievement feels good."

"Of course it does. But why do we want people to see it?"

I thought about the question.

"Perhaps because their attention confirms that what we've accomplished has significance."

"And what we've accomplished reflects on us."

"So when people admire the achievement, we feel that we matter."

He nodded.

"Now consider everything people spend their lives pursuing. Status. Position. Possessions. Influence."

"Not everyone pursues those things for attention."

"True. Some people genuinely enjoy what they do. But can those same things also help a person feel significant?"

"Certainly."

"And what happens when society decides some people matter more because of what they possess?"

I watched the flames.

"Others begin trying to acquire the same things."

"To become like them?"

"Or to receive the same recognition."

He smiled.

"There it is."

"What?"

"The difference between who I am and what I have."

I thought for a moment. A log shifted, and a thin column of smoke rose between us.

"Suppose I spend my whole life acquiring things so people will recognize me."

"And they finally do."

"But now they recognize my possessions, my position, and my accomplishments."

"Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Perhaps it was how I hoped to get what I wanted."

"Which was?"

"To matter as myself."

He leaned forward. The firelight made his face sharp, and then the flame settled and it softened again.

"So a man could get everything he thought would make him somebody and still wonder whether anyone sees him."

"Especially when he begins wondering what would happen if he lost it."

We sat quietly.

"That's a rather expensive way to discover a problem," he said.

"Depends on how much the car cost."

He laughed, then grew quiet.

"There's something I want to ask you," he said.

"Go ahead."

"You've been talking as though recognition is something we need. But I've seen people who would rather be attacked than ignored."

I looked at him.

"That's a strange thing to prefer."

"Is it? A hostile reaction at least means someone noticed you were there. Being treated as though you don't exist - that's worse."

I thought about that. The fire had settled into a low, steady burn, and the night had grown quieter.

"Yes," I said. "I think that's true. And it's terrible."

"Why terrible?"

"Because it means we would rather be hurt than be invisible."

He nodded slowly.

"That's not a compliment to human nature."

"No. But it's honest about what we need."

Chapter Five - The Weight of a Person

"There's something else," I said.

"What?"

"We keep talking about people wanting to be noticed. But I don't think attention is the whole point."

"What is?"

"Weight."

He glanced at the logs.

"We have enough firewood."

"Not that kind of weight."

"I was hoping."

"Imagine two people discussing something important. One speaks, and the other completely dismisses him."

"Perhaps he's wrong."

"Then explain why he's wrong."

"What if he's talking nonsense?"

"Then disagree. But why treat him as though he has no right to speak?"

He considered that. The fire had burned low, and the cold was pressing in from behind me.

"Because disagreement and dismissal aren't the same thing."

"Exactly."

I shifted in my chair.

"A person doesn't stop being somebody because you disagree with him. His thoughts may be mistaken. His actions may be wrong. But he's still there."

"And he still expects to be treated as somebody."

"Yes."

"So you're suggesting that we aren't always fighting to establish our identity."

"Sometimes we already know who we are. We're fighting for that identity to carry weight in someone else's world."

He stared into the flames.

"Does everybody need that?"

"I think we seek it throughout our lives."

"Even when we're mature?"

"Especially then, perhaps. Maturity doesn't make us invisible."

He smiled.

"Then I'm glad you noticed I brought the firewood."

"I noticed."

"And?"

"And you're still going to have to chop more next Sunday."

He shook his head. A log settled, and the coals beneath it glowed brighter.

"My significance in this relationship appears dangerously close to unpaid labor."

He was quiet for a moment. Then he asked the question I had been dreading.

"But if recognition doesn't create significance, why does its absence still hurt so much?"

I did not answer at once. The fire cracked, and a spark rose and died.

"Because knowing something is true doesn't make it feel true," I said.

"That's not an answer."

"No. It's the beginning of one."

"Then finish it."

"I can't. Not tonight."

He looked at me for a long moment.

"Then we'll come back to it."

Chapter Six - The People We Love

"Why do people who love each other sometimes become so cruel?" he asked.

"That's a rather large question."

"We've got a large fire."

"Not anymore."

"Then answer quickly."

I smiled.

"Perhaps because the people closest to us have the greatest ability to make us feel that we matter."

"And the greatest ability to make us feel that we don't."

"Exactly."

He adjusted his chair. The fire had settled into a low, steady burn, and the night had grown quieter.

"Think about two people falling in love."

"All right."

"They pay attention to each other. They listen. They accommodate each other's wishes. Each tries to be the best version of themselves."

"Sometimes better than they can sustain."

"And the other person feels wonderful."

"Because they feel important."

"They matter."

I nodded.

"But eventually they become comfortable. Old habits return. They stop making the same effort."

"And each wonders what happened to the person they fell in love with."

He laughed.

"Perhaps that person is still there. They're simply tired of performing."

"Then what happens?"

"One begins asking for the attention they used to receive."

"And the other feels pressured."

"So one demands."

"And the other resists."

"And eventually both feel unappreciated."

I watched the fire. A coal collapsed, and a small flame appeared and then died.

"They entered the relationship wanting to matter to each other."

"And now each feels the other no longer recognizes their significance."

"That could explain a great deal of arguing."

"Not every argument," he said.

"No. People can disagree for perfectly good reasons."

"But sometimes the subject of the argument isn't what's hurting them."

"What is?"

"The feeling that their voice doesn't carry any weight."

He leaned back.

"So what would fix it?"

"Maybe they could begin by listening."

"Even when the other person is wrong?"

"Especially when they think the other person is wrong."

He looked suspicious.

"Are you suggesting I should agree with you more often?"

"Not at all. Just listen before explaining why I'm wrong."

"That could take all evening."

"It usually does."

He was quiet for a moment. Then he said something that made me look at him.

"You said earlier that a hostile reaction is preferable to being ignored."

"I did."

"I've been thinking about that. It's not just about strangers. It's about people we love."

"What do you mean?"

"If my wife stops arguing with me - if she stops caring enough to be angry - that's worse than the argument. The argument means she still thinks I'm worth the effort."

I nodded slowly.

"Then silence is the worst thing."

"Not always. Sometimes silence is peace."

"But sometimes it's the end of something."

"Yes."

We sat with that for a while.

Chapter Seven - The Crooked Mirror

"There's a problem with everything we've said," he remarked.

"Only one?"

"Let me finish."

I raised my cup.

"Suppose a child grows up in a home where everyone treats one another badly."

"All right."

"That becomes his normal."

"Perhaps."

"Then he becomes an adult and enters a relationship."

"And behaves the way he learned."

"Even if he wants something better."

I thought about that.

"Maybe he doesn't even recognize that his behavior is harmful."

"Until somebody challenges it."

"And then?"

"He might feel that his identity is being attacked."

"So he defends the very behavior that's damaging his relationship."

My friend nodded. Somewhere behind us an owl called, and he waited until it had finished.

"Can that change?"

"I think people can learn different ways to respond."

"Does that mean the original impressions disappear?"

"Not necessarily. They may remain familiar for a long time."

"But the person can learn not to follow them."

"Yes."

He looked thoughtful.

"Then the past can explain someone's behavior without requiring them to continue it."

"That's how I would put it."

"And what if they spend their whole lives examining everything that went wrong?"

"They may learn something useful."

"Or?"

"Or become so occupied with yesterday that they stop moving toward tomorrow."

He watched the coals glowing beneath the logs.

"I can't walk forward while constantly looking backward."

"You can glance behind you."

"I can. But I'd rather see where I'm going."

"Especially in the woods."

"Why?"

"Because you almost fell into that creek last Sunday."

He pointed at me.

"I was examining my past."

"Your past was about six feet behind you."

He laughed, then grew quiet.

"There's something I haven't told you," he said.

"What?"

"My father was not a kind man."

I did not say anything.

"He told me I would never amount to anything. He said it so often that I believed him for a long time."

"And now?"

"Now I know he was wrong. But sometimes I still hear his voice."

"What does it say?"

"The same thing it always said - 'You're weak'."

"And what do you do?"

"I don't obey it anymore. I'm trying to be a good father to my own children. I can't undo him."

I watched the fire.

"That's not a small thing."

"No. It's not. And mother supported him."

We sat in silence for a while. The fire had burned down to a bed of coals, and the cold was pressing in from all sides.

Chapter Eight - The Thing She Believed

The fire had burned down to a bed of coals. Neither of us had spoken for a while.

Then he said, "There's one more thing."

"Only one?"

He didn't laugh. That was how I knew it mattered.

"My mother," he said.

"You told me about her."

"I told you she supported him. I told you she kept the family from becoming a war. But I didn't tell you what she believed."

"What did she believe?"

He looked at the coals. The red light moved on his face, and then it settled.

"She believed that people usually protect the weak. And she believed they forget something."

"What?"

"That the weak becomes weaker when there is nothing to fight for."

I waited.

"She used to say it in her own way. She didn't use those words. She said, 'A child who is never allowed to struggle never learns how to stand.' She said it like it was obvious. Like everyone should know it. Like it was the most ordinary thing in the world."

"Was she right?"

"I don't know. I think she believed she was. And I think she acted on it."

"Which means?"

"She didn't remove my father. She didn't remove the difficulty. She didn't take us out of the house and raise us alone. She let us struggle. She let us fight. Not each other. Not her. But the situation. The thing that was wrong. She gave us something to push against."

"And that made you stronger."

He shook his head.

"Not stronger," he said. "More understanding. I don't think the struggle made me stronger. I think it made me understand something. And understanding is a kind of strength. But it is not the same thing."

"What did you understand?"

"That my father was wrong about me. That my mother was wrong about some things and right about others. That the family was not simple. That no one was entirely innocent. That I could love people who had hurt me and still be angry at them. That I could be angry and grateful at the same time."

He paused.

"I don't think I would have understood those things if I had been protected from the struggle. I think I would have been a simpler person. Maybe a happier one. But not a wiser one."

I looked at him.

"So the struggle was worth it."

He was quiet for a moment.

"I don't know how to explain it," he said. "But yes, I guess it was necessary. I learned later that she was trying to break the cycle, allowing us to go through. I think she had hoped that we would learn and not repeat, especially me."

He looked at the fire.

"I think I've been a better father. Better than he was, anyway."

I did not say anything.

"I don't know if that makes it worth it," he said. "I don't know if the cost was justified by the result. But I know the result. I know what I became. And I know she had something to do with it."

"She broke the circle."

"I think she did. She couldn't break it for herself. But she thought she could break it for us. And she did."

I watched the coals. They were almost gone.

"That's not a small thing," I said.

"No. It's not."

We sat in silence. The fire had burned down to almost nothing, and the cold was pressing in from all sides.

Then he said, "There's one more thing."

"Only one?"

He almost smiled.

"I don't know if I can hold both. I don't know if I can be angry and understanding at the same time. I don't know if that's possible."

"Maybe it doesn't have to be at the same time."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe you can be angry some days and understanding on others. Maybe the holding is not a single act. Maybe it's a practice."

He considered that.

"That sounds like something she would have said."

"Maybe she would have."

He looked at the coals. The red light was almost gone.

"Then maybe that's the question," he said. "Not whether I can hold both. But whether I'm willing to keep trying."

I nodded.

Chapter Nine - Who Gives Whom Importance?

"Let me ask you something," I said. "Do you need me to agree with you to feel that you matter?"

"Certainly not."

"Then why do we keep arguing?"

"Because you keep being wrong."

"Naturally."

He grinned.

"Seriously," I continued. "We disagree all the time."

"And?"

"Yet neither of us seems particularly threatened."

"Perhaps because neither of us is trying to make the other smaller."

I considered that. The fire had burned down to a bed of coals, and the cold was beginning to settle in earnest.

"That's interesting."

"What is?"

"We've been discussing recognition as though it's something people compete to obtain."

"Often it is."

"But does it have to be?"

He looked at me.

"If I acknowledge that you matter, does that make me matter less?"

"No."

"If I listen to your opinion, does that mean I must surrender my own?"

"Of course not."

"Then why do people behave as though only one voice can carry weight?"

He held his cup between his hands. The tea had gone cold, and he set it down without drinking.

"Maybe because they mistake being heard for winning."

"And disagreement for defeat."

"Or acceptance for approval."

I nodded.

"I can accept you as a person without approving of everything you do."

"And I can disagree with you without denying that you matter."

The fire snapped.

He looked at me.

"Then perhaps recognizing someone else isn't as expensive as people think."

"Unless they bring their own opinions."

"Those are always costly."

We laughed. The coals shifted, and a small flame appeared between them.

He was quiet for a moment. Then he asked:

"What about when no one sees? Does that mean you don't matter?"

I looked at him.

"That's a different question."

"I know."

"Is it a question about God?"

"Maybe. Or maybe it's a question about whether there is anyone who sees everything, even when no human does."

I thought about that for a long time.

"I don't know how to answer that tonight," I said.

"Then don't. Just leave the question here with us."

"All right."

We sat in silence. The fire had burned down to almost nothing.

Chapter Ten - The Person Behind the Voice

The fire had settled into a steady glow.

"Do you think we ever completely stop needing recognition?" he asked.

"No."

"Even when we know who we are?"

"Knowing who I am doesn't mean I want to live in a world where nobody acknowledges me."

"Then maturity doesn't eliminate the need."

"Perhaps it changes how we seek it."

He waited. The night had grown quieter, and the stars above the treeline were sharp and cold.

"A child needs others to establish and reinforce his identity. As we mature, we can begin to establish that conviction within ourselves."

"But we still want our existence to carry weight among others."

"Yes."

"So the need remains, but the relationship to it changes."

"That's one way to understand it."

He watched the flames for a while.

"Then why do people spend so much effort trying to become somebody?"

"Perhaps because they confuse becoming significant with being recognized as significant."

"Is there a difference?"

"I think so."

"Explain."

I looked at him.

"If you ignore me, do I stop existing?"

"No."

"If you disagree with me, do I lose my identity?"

"No."

"If you don't admire what I've accomplished, does that erase the accomplishment?"

"Of course not."

"Then perhaps your recognition doesn't create my significance."

"What does it do?"

"It lets me experience that significance in a relationship with you."

He thought about that. A log settled, and a small shower of sparks went up between us.

"So you don't need me to tell you who you are."

"No."

"But you still want me to acknowledge that you're here."

"Wouldn't you?"

"Of course."

"Then maybe neither of us is as independent as we sometimes pretend."

He smiled.

"That's a rather uncomfortable conclusion for two grown men."

"Especially ones who can't even agree on how to make tea."

Epilogue - One More Log

The fire was getting low, but neither of us seemed eager to leave.

"Do you think people will ever stop trying to prove they matter?" he asked.

"Would you?"

"Probably not."

"Then why should they?"

He considered that for a moment. The last log was burning unevenly, and the light was no longer reaching the trees.

"After everything we've talked about, that sounds almost disappointing."

"Why?"

"Because we spent the whole evening discussing how people try to get others to recognize them. And tomorrow they'll be doing it all over again."

"Probably."

"So what did we accomplish?"

I picked up the last log and placed it on the coals. The fire caught it slowly, and a thin flame began to climb.

"Did you enjoy tonight?"

"Of course."

"Did I agree with everything you said?"

"Not even close."

"Did you feel you needed to prove anything to me?"

He smiled.

"No."

"Neither did I."

He watched the flames begin climbing around the new log.

"Then what was different?"

I leaned back in my chair.

"Maybe we weren't trying to make ourselves matter."

"What were we doing?"

"Making room for each other to matter."

He looked at the fire for a while. The new log had caught properly now, and the light was reaching the trees again.

"That sounds almost too simple," he said. "And hard. Harder than it sounds."

"I know."

"Why is it so hard?"

"Because making room for someone else means giving up the space you were using to prove yourself."

He was quiet.

"That's not a small thing."

"No. It's not."

He looked at me.

"Then maybe that's the question. Not whether we can make room. But whether we're willing to give up the space."

I nodded.

"That's a better question than the one we started with."

"Do you have an answer?"

I reached for the bucket of water. The fire hissed, and the small orange glow vanished.

"Not one I'm ready to hand you."

He stood beside me, watching the smoke disappear into the dark."

"Next Sunday?"

"If you bring the firewood."

"And if I bring another question?"

I picked up my chair.

"You always do. But I don't think we're done with the last one."