

Conversations Beneath the Stars

The Person in Me

Book Four

The Scale

The fire had settled down.

Not dying. Just comfortable.

There was enough heat left in it that neither man felt the need to add another log, and enough light that their faces appeared and disappeared whenever the flames moved.

One of them leaned back in his chair.

"I learned a word a few years ago," he said. "I'd heard it all my life, but I didn't know what it meant until I caught myself doing the opposite."

His friend looked across the fire. "That's an unusual opening."

"The word was integrity."

"And?"

"Being true to yourself."

The other man waited.

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"People wrote entire books about integrity."

"They wasted paper."

His friend laughed.

"Being true to yourself," he repeated. "Sounds easy."

"It probably is until you want something."

That stopped the laughter.

The fire cracked between them.

"Then what?"

"Then you know what you want. You know why you want it. And usually you already know how you're going to feel after you get it."

"You calculate all that?"

"Not like you're sitting there with a spreadsheet. It happens instantly."

He pointed toward his head.

"The scale is already there."

"And if the scale says don't do it?"

"You can listen to it."

"Or?"

"Or step over yourself and do it anyway."

His friend looked into the fire.

"And that's losing integrity?"

"Maybe. Depends. But if you keep stepping over yourself, eventually you stop feeling yourself under your feet."

"That's cheerful."

"I didn't say it was supposed to be cheerful."

"You usually wait until later before ruining Sunday."

"Trying something new."

They sat quietly for a while.

Then the second man said, "What if you're wrong?"

"About what?"

"About what you believe. About what the scale tells you."

"Then I'm wrong."

"That's it?"

"What else should happen?"

"You don't think integrity means staying with what you believed?"

"No. That's stupidity."

His friend laughed again.

"Good. At least we separated those."

"If I find out I'm wrong, being true to myself means admitting I'm wrong. Pretending I still believe something because I said it yesterday would be lying to myself."

"So integrity isn't being right."

"No."

"Being perfect?"

"No."

"Being consistent?"

"Not exactly."

He picked up a stick and moved one of the coals.

"Just don't become something you know you're not because it's convenient."

Recognition and Appreciation

The fire burned higher that night.

His friend watched it for a while.

"There's a difference between being noticed and being appreciated."

"Yes."

"How much difference?"

"A lot."

He held up one hand.

"Recognition is simple. I send something out. You respond."

"Even if I say no?"

"Especially then. You still answered."

"So rejection is recognition."

"Yes."

"And appreciation?"

"You don't just see what I sent. You value it."

His friend thought about it.

"So if I offer to do something for you and you say no, I was still seen."

"Correct."

"If you say yes, now I was seen and what I offered had value."

"Correct."

"What about silence?"

"Depends."

"You used to say silence was the problem."

"I was mixing things."

"What changed?"

"Silence hurts when you expected an answer."

His friend nodded slowly.

"So silence itself isn't bad."

"No. Sometimes silence is exactly what you want."

"Like when people won't stop talking."

"Precisely."

"Or when everybody around you keeps telling you what you should think."

"That's worse than silence."

His friend looked at him.

"Why?"

"Because silence doesn't interfere with who you are. Noise can."

"Noise."

"Constant signals coming at you. You're supposed to believe this. You're supposed to want that. You're supposed to be offended by this. You're supposed to support that."

"And eventually?"

"Sometimes you just want everybody to shut up so you can hear yourself again."

His friend smiled.

"That's almost poetic."

"Don't tell anybody."

The Mother

They had talked before about the mother.

Neither one mentioned her name anymore.

Maybe she did not need one.

She was simply the mother who had been left with two bad choices.

For a long time one of the men had thought she chose badly.

Then one evening he said something different.

"I think I judged her using choices she didn't have."

His friend looked over.

"That's progress."

"Don't enjoy it."

"What changed?"

"I kept imagining what she should have done."

"And?"

"I wasn't asking what she actually could have done."

The other man leaned forward.

"That's different."

"Very."

There had been no clean road in front of her. One option hurt immediately. The other seemed likely to hurt longer.

She chose the one she believed might eventually help.

It did not become good because she chose it.

It simply became the damage she was willing to accept.

"That's the part people don't like," the first man said.

"What?"

"Sometimes there isn't a good choice."

"People want one."

"Of course. Makes the story easier."

"Good person picks good thing. Bad person picks bad thing."

"Real life doesn't cooperate."

His friend stirred the fire.

"So what do you do?"

"Pick the lesser damage."

"How do you know which one that is?"

"You don't always know."

"Comforting."

"You make the best calculation you can with what you have."

"And if you're wrong?"

"You live with it."

The Father

Later the father came back into the conversation.

The strict one.

For years the story had been easier when he was simply the father who had been too hard.

Then his son grew older.

Older sons sometimes discover that fathers were dealing with boys the sons no longer remember accurately.

"I think I gave him some reasons."

His friend looked over.

"Your father?"

"Yeah."

"For being strict?"

"I'm not saying he was right about everything."

"Good."

"But I wasn't exactly a peaceful little philosopher sitting in the corner reading Scripture."

"I find that extremely difficult to believe."

"Shut up."

His friend laughed.

"I pushed. I hid things. I argued. I tested where the line was."

"And he moved the line closer."

"Probably."

"So who was wrong?"

"Why does somebody have to win?"

His friend smiled.

"There you go."

"I can say his strictness affected me. I can also say some of it was a response to me."

"Both can be true."

"That's annoying."

"Reality has terrible customer service."

Marriage

The conversation moved from parents to marriage without either man noticing exactly when.

"Relationships are choices," one said.

"Everything is a choice with you."

"Because it is."

"Very profound."

"You choose someone."

"Yes."

"Then you stick with what you chose."

"Even if someone better appears?"

"Better how?"

"Prettier."

"There will always be prettier."

"Smarter."

"There will always be smarter."

"Richer."

"Definitely richer."

"Less irritating."

There was a pause.

"That one needs consideration."

They laughed.

Then he continued. "If every person who appears with one better feature causes you to reopen the decision, you never actually chose anybody."

His friend nodded. "You just keep shopping."

"Exactly."

"So choice closes the auction."

"Mostly."

"Mostly?"

"Don't be stupid. If somebody starts destroying your life, you don't say, 'Well, I chose them in 1998, so apparently this is eternity.'"

"Where is the line?"

"The scale."

"Again."

"Always."

He held his hands apart.

"You have what the person gives to your life. Feelings. History. Participation. Trust. What you want from them. What you need from them. On the other side, damage. Cost. Pressure. Whatever they take away."

"You've actually turned marriage into accounting."

"Everything is accounting if you're sufficiently boring."

His friend laughed.

"So your eighty-twenty survives?"

"As a picture. Not arithmetic. It just means if someone gives me most of what matters, I can live with some part that doesn't align."

"And feelings?"

"The biggest weight."

"So it isn't rational."

"Feelings are part of the data."

His friend paused. "That's actually fair."

They sat for a while.

Then the first man said, "There's another problem."

"What?"

"If you accepted that mismatch when you chose them, you can't spend the next twenty years demanding they eliminate it."

His friend looked at him. "Why not?"

"Because now you've changed the agreement."

"They can't improve?"

"Of course they can improve. That's different."

"How?"

"Improvement is welcome. Requirement is different."

"So if I choose someone knowing who they are..."

"You don't get to spend the relationship punishing them for being the person you knowingly chose."

His friend leaned back. "Women are going to like that sentence."

"Wait five pages."

"Oh no."

Acceptance

Five pages later, metaphorically speaking, the conversation turned.

"What if she keeps saying she accepts him," his friend asked, "but every argument is another attempt to redesign him?"

"Then she doesn't accept him."

"So women can be wrong?"

"Occasionally. Medical journals are reviewing it."

His friend laughed hard enough to cough.

"And him?"

"He can be wrong too."

"How?"

"He can call stubbornness integrity."

"That's good."

"He can say, 'This is who I am,' when what he really means is, 'I don't want to put effort into changing something that's hurting you.'"

"So both sides lose."

"No. Both sides get to look at themselves."

"That's worse."

"Usually."

Participation

Participation became the next subject.

Not love.

Not promises.

Participation.

"If you want to know what a relationship is doing," one said, "look at participation."

"What does that mean?"

"Are they still in it?"

"They live in the same house."

"That's geography."

"They say they love each other."

"That's vocabulary."

"They're married."

"Paperwork."

His friend stared at him.

"You are going to get us both in trouble."

"Do they participate?"

"Meaning?"

"Do they still invest? Do they listen? Do they respond when concerns are raised? Do they try? Do they still choose the relationship in their actions?"

"And when that becomes unequal?"

"You say something."

"You don't just leave?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because perception isn't enough. I see something. I express the concern. Then I hear the answer."

"And if the answer is nonsense?"

"Compare reasoning against reality."

"What if reality wins?"

"It usually does."

"And another chance?"

"Chance belongs to people willing to take it."

His friend repeated that quietly.

"Chance belongs to people willing to take it."

"Giving someone a chance they refuse to participate in is just you doing more work."

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"What if you already know what they're going to do?"

"I usually do."

"That's arrogant."

"Maybe."

"Then why give them the chance?"

"Sometimes I'm not giving it to learn who they are."

His friend looked over.

"Then why?"

"To let them see who they are."

That sat between them for a moment.

"And if they surprise you?"

"Then my effort succeeded."

"You don't think your prediction was wrong?"

"It might have been. Anything can be wrong."

"But?"

"If I spent time helping them see another choice and they actually choose differently, that's good."

"Permanent change?"

"Who knows?"

"That's not very optimistic."

"Humans are prone to temptation. Nothing is permanently guaranteed."

"So what are you trying to accomplish?"

"Improve the relationship. Not rebuild the person."

The Shelf

They let the fire settle again.

His friend stared at the coals for a long time.

"You keep saying, 'be true to yourself.' Fine."

"That sounded dangerous."

"What is the person in you good for if all he does is protect himself?"

He looked across the fire.

"Who said he only protects himself?"

"Then what does being strong inside actually produce outside of you?"

He smiled a little.

"Sometimes it lets you get out of the way."

"That sounds suspiciously wise."

"It was a shelf."

His friend blinked.

"A shelf."

It was not an important shelf.

That was probably why he remembered it.

His daughter had been small enough that the tape measure looked oversized in her hands.

He had mounted the shelf slightly wrong.

Not badly wrong.

Just wrong enough.

His friend narrowed his eyes.

"You mounted it wrong on purpose?"

"Yes."

"That's disturbing."

"She wanted to help."

"So you sabotaged your own shelf?"

"I created employment."

"For a child."

"Family business."

His friend smiled.

"What happened?"

"I called her over and gave her the tape measure. Told her I needed help getting the shelf straight."

"Wasn't there a level?"

"Of course there was a level."

"So you lied to the child."

"No. The shelf actually needed adjustment."

"Because you intentionally mounted it wrong."

"Details."

The man was smiling now.

"She held the tape measure and started telling me, 'Higher. No, lower. Little higher.'"

He moved his hand in the air as if adjusting the shelf again.

"And I listened."

"Did she get it right?"

"Eventually."

"With the tape measure?"

"With great authority."

They both laughed.

"Then she stood back looking at that shelf like she'd built the house."

"And you?"

"I looked at her."

The smile changed.

"She was proud of herself."

"Because she fixed the shelf."

"Because what she did mattered."

His friend said nothing.

"I could have fixed it myself in thirty seconds. That wasn't the point."

"What was?"

"I wanted her to experience herself."

His friend looked at him.

"Explain that."

"She made a decision. She told me higher. I moved it higher. She told me lower. I moved it lower. Her signal changed something outside of her."

"And that told her she mattered."

"Yes."

"Manipulation."

"Absolutely."

His friend laughed.

"At least you're admitting it now."

"I never said manipulation was automatically bad. I used the situation to influence an outcome I wanted."

"Which was?"

"For her to feel useful."

"And you got something too."

"Of course."

"What?"

"I got to see my daughter realize she had value."

"So you manipulated yourself too."

"Apparently I'm very talented."

His friend kept looking at him.

"But you already knew you could fix the shelf."

"Of course."

"So you didn't need to prove you were the useful one."

"No."

He looked down at the fire.

"Maybe that's part of being true to yourself. When you know what you are, you don't have to occupy every inch of the room. You can leave some of it for somebody else to discover who they are."

His friend was quiet for a while.

"So the shelf wasn't really about her seeing you."

"No. It was about reality answering her back."

"Higher."

"I moved it higher."

"Lower."

"I moved it lower."

His friend smiled.

"And somewhere between higher and lower, she found herself."

"Something like that."

"That is annoyingly good."

"Don't get used to it."

The Tree

The shelf left them with one more question.

"What does strength grow into?"

One of them pointed toward the darkness beyond the fire.

"Tree."

His friend looked.

"What about it?"

"That's better."

"Better than what?"

"Seed."

"I liked the seed."

"The seed has one obvious job. Grow more seed."

"Fair."

"A tree is better for maturity."

"Go ahead, professor."

"A tree gets bigger."

"Excellent start."

"Stronger. More stable. Roots deeper. Can survive more weather."

"Fluffier."

"What?"

"You said bigger, stronger, stable. I wanted to contribute."

"Fine. Fluffier."

His friend smiled.

"So maturity is becoming a bigger, stronger, fluffier version of what you already are?"

"That's disturbingly accurate."

"And what happens to the part that doesn't align?"

"If I'm stronger, the same burden weighs less."

"So maturity doesn't mean, 'I'm better now, therefore I deserve a better person.'"

"No."

"It means..."

"I can carry more."

His friend became quiet.

"That's different."

"Very."

"I deserve better."

"Entitlement."

"Childish?"

"Usually."

"I grew stronger."

"Capacity."

"And capacity means obligation?"

"No."

"So if I'm strong enough to carry somebody else's burden, I have to?"

"No. I'm not responsible for carrying the world."

"Then what's strength for?"

He looked toward the tree again.

"Maybe fruit."

His friend followed his eyes.

"Helping somebody weaker."

"If you can."

"If you choose."

"Yes."

The Person in Me

The fire had burned low again.

It had become one of those nights when neither man wanted to be the first to stand up.

His friend eventually said, "So after all this, what is the person in you?"

"I don't know."

"That's inconvenient. We have a title."

"I didn't promise answers."

"Then what do you know?"

He thought for a while.

"I know I'm not trying to be perfect."

"What are you trying to be?"

"True to what I am."

"And what are you?"

"Still working on it."

His friend smiled.

"That sounds suspiciously like an answer."

"No. It's an excuse to come back next Sunday."

They looked at the remaining coals.

Somewhere beyond the light, the trees moved in the wind.

None of them looked particularly worried about being perfect.

They just stood there.

Growing.

Holding what they could.

Dropping what they couldn't.

And somewhere in the darkness, perhaps, bearing fruit that neither man could see from the fire.

"Next Sunday?" his friend asked.

"Probably."

"You always say probably."

"Being true to myself."