

Letter to Dad

words I didn't have time to say,
but finally wrote



for those who lost early,
but never stopped loving

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Letter to Dad

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There are conversations we postpone because we think there will still be time. Words that stay stuck in our throats for years. Questions that no one will ever answer. This book is not about neat conclusions or a beautifully polished story. It is an honest letter to a father. About memory, pain, resentment, love, and everything that remains inside when the right words were never said in time. - a personal letter that became a book - memories people rarely speak about out loud - an honest story without embellishment or excuses - words many readers may recognize as their own

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Владимир Липинский

Letter to Dad

Глава

This book is not about my dad.

Nor is it only about my past.

This book is about the conversation that so many of us never manage to have.

It is about the feelings we always tend to bury deep inside — it may feel too scary, too painful, or simply "too late". It is about the anger, the resentment, the shame, and the love — all of them at once, and they are captured in one person. In one childhood. In one memory.

I did not write this letter because I had all the answers.

I wrote it because I realized that if I did not speak these words out loud, they would continue to live inside of me for the rest of my life.

This book may be helpful to those who:

- lost their parents at a very young age;
- failed to say important words when there was still some time left;
- bury unspent emotions deep within;
- live with the never-ending internal dialogue.

Perhaps, you will recognize yourself within these lines.

Perhaps, you will recall some things, which you've been trying to erase from your head.

Or perhaps — for the very first time — you will allow yourself to feel these emotions to their fullest extent.

This book provides zero instruction.

Instead, it provides the space.

The space where you can:

pause,

admit and acknowledge your pain,

stop running from your past,

and finally say the words that were once meant to be spoken.

If, after reading this, you feel like writing your own letter — then it was all worth it.

Dear father...

Oh God, that's nonsense — I never called you that way. Dad, I miss you so much. Just so you understand *how much*: by the time I reached the words "I miss you", I could barely hold my emotions back and nearly burst into tears. To my regret, we never truly had a real conversation — not even once in your entire lifetime. Or maybe that is just how it is now framed in my memory. Yet, I still believe we never shared an honest deep conversation about everything. I've always heard people say — and I used to think so myself — that only kids are the ones who need both mom and dad; but that simply isn't true. I need you a lot. Even now. I have a feeling that the number of times we actually talked about every single thing on Earth could be counted on the fingers of one hand. I still carry your guidance with me throughout my entire life; I do it subconsciously, it feels like I have some kind of a built-in mindset. It was after yet another argument with Mom: you took me somewhere, stopped walking, bent down, and said: "Look at me. Look at our family. Look at how we live... If you like what you see, then do exactly what I do, and you will end up living just like this. If you don't like it — then keep learning, grow, and do not repeat my mistakes. Do not follow any of my footsteps." And for my entire adult life, I have been asking myself the very same question: Am I back at that

same place? Am I not making the very same mistakes? Am I not living that exact same life — all while deluding myself into thinking I am different, and that I have everything under control? Hence, I never managed to ask you for advice once I got older. I never got to show you what I had built, what I had lost, what challenges I had overcome, or when I had completely fallen apart. I never got to share the joy of my victories with you, didn't ask for your support when I had no strength left to fight and just wanted to give up. I wanted to ask you: What should I do next? How can I fix this? I tried talking to you a few times at places where you were buried, but that just didn't feel right to me at all. I felt like it was a cheap imitation of those who talk to marble slabs or to crosses in cemeteries. As soon as I opened my mouth to ask how the things were, I would answer myself immediately — *Seriously? He isn't there* — and even if he were, the answer would be obvious. Everything I do relies on logic; if there is no logic, I see no point of it. Then, usually, I would utter a short phrase: "Everything's going great for me; don't worry". Or: "You can be proud of me — and stop worrying — because I've achieved more and didn't follow any of your footsteps". Nonsense... Then, I would walk away saying goodbye to you. Oh, how much I miss you. I'm a grown man now, but I still really need you. I want to show off to you so badly, to hear you say: "Voha, man, just look at you..."

And here I am, lying on the beach, writing this letter to you, and tears are just rolling down my cheeks. It feels just like I'm talking to you. What a fool I've been — what a dolt... Why didn't it come to me sooner — to talk to you in this way? I remember you were the only one who ever called me "Voha". You left this world — it wasn't too early — and it yet felt as if you've been gone for ages. I never told you that I was ashamed of you, or that I wanted to be proud of you but since you were a junkie, that made me, in the eyes of the neighbors, a junkie's son; and so, for everyone else, it seemed better to remain incognito. It felt so much easier for me: simply being a "nice, friendly teenager"; when friends brought me over to their houses and their parents didn't know who I really was. And yet, I want to tell you this: you were always the most respected man in the entire world to me. You knew how to do absolutely everything. Whatever I asked you about — you knew the answer; whichever task you take up — you knew how to get it done. I used to be angry at you, and perhaps that anger is still with me today. I was angry because you could have achieved anything — absolutely anything you set your mind to. But you simply didn't care to. I loved and hated you at the same time. I remember always wanting to grow up so I could hit you back — to protect my Mom. My childhood felt like a real challenge: mother, who is an alcoholic and a drug-addicted father. You two seemed to be constantly fighting; all the neighbors could hear it, and many could even see it, since our yard was completely exposed to everyone through the rotten planks of the fence. Now, sitting here thinking, trying to put it all together, it seems that perhaps you never actually hit Mom at all; maybe you were simply defending yourself against her attacks and insults. Or maybe not. Everything in my memory might be nothing more than just an illusion now — a figment of my imagination, or simply a child's perspective on the situation, etched into my mind for life exactly as my young consciousness was able to perceive it at that time. Mom is crying — it means Dad is bad. Back then it was that simple. I wanted to grow up so badly, to punish you, to put you in your place... You were the ones who told me: men must protect women — it meant Mom needed protection.

I don't remember seeing a single bruise on Mom's face; that is exactly what I would ask you now: was everything that I remember real, or do I remember only things which I wanted to remember? I was really afraid of you. Yet, I felt really proud of you and admired you, I believe these feelings were equal. I never discussed with you how things truly were. You didn't want to, and I didn't realize that, perhaps, reality wasn't quite as my childish eyes perceived it. And now, you will never answer any one of my questions. It seems now I can only reason everything myself, taking one or another side, choosing the interpretations that strike me as the most objective. Honestly, I simply choose the version, which I want to believe. Until this day, I have nightmares involving your aggression, our family rows, and myself — a helpless child who just needs to grow up a little more so he can finally fight back. Something always holds me back. I cannot fathom the reason behind this repetitive

nightmare, but I have it again and again. Your phrase "Don't get into a fight unless you believe you can win" has stayed with me throughout my entire life. Maybe that is exactly why I never did enter into a confrontation with you. How foolish it all seems now. As a child, I did nothing but judge my parents. Hundreds of times, I was so ashamed when I had to wear winter clothes in the middle of the summer. When every time I had to go to the neighbors' yard to pick cherries just to earn the right to take a small share of them for myself. I really wanted you to simply buy me some cherries instead. I felt such shame whenever my peers saw me walking by, carrying buckets full of cherries. They would be sitting on their bicycles in the shade by the fence, chatting with the very girls I had a crush on. But when they saw the actual barn, such a ruined house I was walking into, I simply wanted to sink into the floor. I was sitting in the kitchen and sobbing uncontrollably. I cried out at the top of my lungs: "Why did you bring me into this world, into such poverty? What did I do to deserve this shame? Now I'm too ashamed to even step outside of this house or to show my face to the girls I liked so much. I'll never be able to ride bikes with them like a normal kid. And if they ever find out who my parents are, they'll look at me like I'm a leper."

It felt torturing.

I just want to tell you what was going through in my life and how I was perceiving it. I hated you because you never bought me a bicycle — I mean I never got to ride around with the girls in their group. I realize now that, as a father, you didn't owe me anything — just as I didn't owe you anything as well. You lived your life as you could, as you wanted, or as the things turned out. If only you knew how thrilled I was about that sporty purple bike — the one with the 9 or 12 gears. I was so overjoyed when uncle Igor, or maybe it was Vitalik, showed up at your place riding that bike that I nearly burst with excitement. But it was my birthday, and I saw right through your plan. I couldn't believe that you had decided to "wish me a happy birthday" in such a way. To be honest, I don't remember a single gift you ever gave me for my birthday or for New Year's. My mood had been high all morning long. Every single second, I was waiting for you guys to finally spit it out and say something like: "Well, happy birthday! Go on! Ride it for God's sake!" I kept wondering: why the hell did uncle think he had the right to take *my* bike — the one that was, technically, already mine — and ride it to the store? But when uncle didn't come back, my world crashed down once again. I don't think I ever told you about this back then; I was probably too scared. But when I met my uncle again, I asked him how he could have done such a thing — bringing a bicycle only to take it away immediately on my birthday, when everyone knew how much I dreamed of having one. And do you know what he said? He asked why I hadn't told him it was my birthday. My uncle. I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't remember back then, either. I am up in boohai: some things I remember clearly, while others seem like a dream from someone else's life — and the most painful part is that, for the most part, I seem to remember only the bad things.

I felt ashamed that, for years, there was a huge pile of garbage in our yard, it felt like a landfill and it was truly awful. I can only imagine what kinds of diseases might have festered there, or indeed, what illnesses we might have caught. The strangest thing is that neither you nor Mom ever scolded us for continuing to dump our trash there every day; in fact, you and Mom did the very same thing. In my memory — or perhaps in my imagination — you were both grown-ups, aware individuals, people for whom existing in such an environment, let alone creating it, should have seemed completely out of normal living. I judged you and Mom numerous times, and in doing so, I took on the role of a parent. Now I realize that nature works in a little different way: parents are meant to be parents, and children are not meant to teach their parents. I don't know, maybe you were such a thoughtful strategist that you bet your very own life on the line in exchange for my upbringing and development; or maybe it was simply a set of circumstances; or maybe I'm just overthinking it all — simply trying, as usual, to find logical answers to the questions swirling in my mind. But Fate seems to have a different opinion on this, and it is unlikely I will ever receive the answers I seek, at least not in this physical world.

I wanted to be just like you in every way — only a better version of you. It seemed impossible. I must have wanted this so intensely (and I still do) that I didn't even notice when it became my natural state: to be better, stronger, faster, kinder, and more caring.

If I failed at something — it could literally be anything — I couldn't rest; I was completely unsettled. And that trait is still with me today. Even now that I have a child of my own, I've passed this character trait, this "programmed feature", on to her. No matter what we play, even if it's a game like tag, if Michelle doesn't beat me, she'll cry uncontrollably. I almost never know true peace of mind. If I'm not in a rush somewhere, or thinking about my work or personal growth for at least an hour, I start feeling uneasy. Yet, those rare sixty minutes when I don't have to rush anywhere are the moments of incredible happiness. Can you imagine the level of stress I live in? My wife, Kristina, practices quantum psychology; there's a technique in it where you "step into" another person's energetic field to sense their conditions and emotions. She actually started crying because she felt such an overwhelming amount of anxiety and restless thoughts. She asked me, "What was *that*? Where have all those thoughts come from? Where was all that fear and anxiety born?" I breathed a sigh of relief back then, feeling grateful that even for only for a couple of seconds someone had finally been able to truly feel what was going on inside me. I explained that this was my default state of being; now she can understand me a bit better when I am lather or sometimes intemperate over trivial things. I'm still carrying so many negative patterns and "programs" from my childhood that I have enough inner work to do to keep myself busy for a very long time: things to process, to bring to awareness, and ultimately to let go. I wouldn't say that's a bad thing, no — in fact, I'd say it's a good thing.

Recently, a quiet realization dawned on me: life isn't measured by the number of goals you achieve or victories you rack up. It's not about crossing the finish line in your sunset years, surrounded by love or a specific sum of money you've managed to save. It's about experiencing an extreme number of smiles, moments of joy, and diverse emotions *every single day*. And when you look at it at that angle, the finish line itself ceases to be that important. After all, a lifetime can span thousands and thousands of hours — yet that finale, that happy ending, might last for only a very brief moment. And that is when I finally realised why a samurai has no goal — he has only the way. I have been possessed by worrying for the biggest part of my life, I even used to dream of going phoneless for at least one day. I bear so much responsibility — my family, my business — everything rests on my shoulders, so being in silence, without a phone, now feels like an impossible luxury. How ironic — back when I was thirteen, I was ready to sell my kidney just to buy some basic, black-and-white keypad phone so I could text my friends late into the night! We used to call each other for just a couple of seconds before hanging up, because anything longer than that would cost big money. I would think people were foolish if they talked for six or seven seconds and actually spent money doing so. Why waste cash when you could make three or four two-second calls for free? Now, I dream of going "off the grid" for a couple of days — just to get some rest, spend some time alone with my own thoughts, and answer all the questions I have for myself. I discovered such a practice that lets you do it — it's called Vipassana. What it does is it refrains you from speaking or making eye contact with anyone for a specific number of days. Once, I traveled to the south of France and found a small cottage deep in the mountains — in the absolute middle of nowhere — where there was nothing around but forests, peaks, and fields. There, I had my own personal Vipassana retreat. I lived there without a phone, television, other people, or any technology whatsoever for three days. I didn't even have a clock in the house. During the first 24 hours my stress levels were at their limits. By the second day, however, I felt calmer and more at peace than ever before. By the third day, I had learned to truly appreciate everything I have in my life. I clearly saw everything I had already achieved — things I had and which, in my daily rush, I started taking for granted and, in some ways, started to lose. I redefined that true essence of life — the very thing that every sensible human being strives toward throughout their existence. I realized that in fact I had achieved one hundred percent happiness and boundless joy in this life. Amidst the daily hustle and the endless rat race, I had stopped seeing clearly

just what a wonderful, beautiful, loving — and beloved — wife I have. And my child — my little angel, whom I adore more than words can describe. A house, a car, business, traveling, trips — I have absolutely everything in the world that one could need, yet, possessed by anxiety and stress, I devalue it all. I devalue it so thoroughly that, after writing my own book, I felt ashamed to even tell people about it. How is that even possible? How? It's all because of the thoughts running through my head: "Who do you think you are, and where do you come from? Do you think you can publish a book? Do you expect people to actually read it?" These are the kinds of issues I'm grappling with in my mind — issues I wish I could discuss with you, Dad. It's all been so complicated. There's no one I can even talk to about it, because I know that hardly anyone would truly understand unless they had experienced something at least somehow similar to my own childhood.

Right now, I am in a state of such intense emotional condition and tension that I simply cannot put it into words. I find it incredibly difficult, both mentally and emotionally, to bear the burdens and responsibilities currently resting on my shoulders — or, perhaps, the ones I've rested there myself. People without the knowledge of my life context see how successful I am and likely assume it all came easily to me; yet today, I feel like bursting in tears from sheer exhaustion. It feels as if today, out of all days, is the day everything is going to crash down. The people around me have never, not even somehow, walked in my shoes. I don't feel as if there is anyone else in this world who can truly understand me — anyone to whom I can pour my heart out and get that paternal support I crave back. The day before yesterday, I was sitting in a bar with a friend, watching football. It was Real Madrid VS Barcelona. During every tense moment, my friend Seriozha — who is 45 years old — would call his father and say, "How on earth can they referee like that?" or share his joy over a scored goal. I wanted to weep with longing; oh, how I wished I could do the very same thing: call you and shout, "GOAL! Dad, a goal!" I simply told Seriozha how incredibly cool that was. Of course, he didn't understand me, for him, it was just a typical afternoon watching football with his dad.

I remember a couple of times when you were home and everything seemed to be going well — you would tell stories about your childhood. I'd have to beg you to stop, just to let me catch my breath; I was laughing so hard that I couldn't even straighten up because my stomach hurt so badly. I still remember those stories until now. There were good moments, too. But then I remember your sister, Sveta, sitting on the couch behind me while I was sitting on the floor, nodding off because she had gotten hooked on drugs right alongside you. I had already learned to ignore the bad things and tried not to react to what was happening around me; but when her snot dripped onto my favorite athletic sweatshirt, I ran to you in tears to complain about it. I didn't understand what was going on — not even when I saw with my own eyes how you tried to resuscitate her, to bring her back to life, because by the time I had called you over, she had already choked to death from an overdose.

I was so traumatized — and I realize only now just how inadequate it was — I worried about a sweatshirt while a human being was dying right before my eyes. I think I was about six years old at the time. It was simply horrific. How could you — someone I viewed as so intelligent, self-aware, and capable — allow such things to happen? How could you let me see you bring your friends into the bedroom my sister and I used to share, pull the curtain shut (since there were no doors) and shoot up in there, while Mom was out at the market, working herself to the bone, only to drown her sorrows in alcohol later out of sheer exhaustion? Do you even realize that every time your friends left that bedroom, pushing the curtain aside, my sister and I would see you or your cronies tying off your veins, injecting into your fingers, groins, heels, or other places where the police were unlikely to spot the needle marks? Do you understand that, as I look back on everything that happened to me during my childhood, I don't believe that anyone would willingly sacrifice their life just to serve as a cautionary tale? These are lifelong traumas. I've just recently told my wife about the incident involving my aunt, and she was absolutely shocked — meanwhile, I had simply forgotten it ever happened, because I had witnessed things that were far more terrifying. You know, my wife once told me that she's afraid of big money because she doesn't want to end up dead. I didn't understand what she meant, so she

explained that, in her mind, if she were to acquire a great deal, someone would definitely want to kill her for it. And she actually thought that everyone felt that way. I can only imagine how many similar false beliefs I have — beliefs that seem perfectly normal to me, yet are anything but that. And since we cannot fix a problem without first acknowledging its existence, we end up living with these traumas throughout our entire lives, “maiming” those around us — our spouses, our children, our grandchildren — without even realizing we’re actually doing it. It is what it is now; I understand that there is no changing to the past. I have really hard times today, and I just want someone to listen to me — without having in mind the thought that I’m a crybaby or a wimp. I simply wish I could live like I star in a movie: driving out to my parents’ ranch or country house, where you and I spend years restoring an old car — screw by screw, bolt by bolt — slowly bringing it to perfection; maybe a 1967 Shelby Mustang. And we’d know that, soon enough, we’d be taking it out for a spin with wind brushing our hair. But, you know, some dreams are destined to remain just that — dreams. I’ll never get to introduce you to my family now, nor will I ever hear you tell me what a good job I’ve done. We could have been sitting at your place, and you would have been frying up your signature potatoes with onions and eggs — sprinkling fresh dill over the top — just like that time when we were stuck with power outages or lack of heat, and you brought out a portable stove, lit the flame, and cooked a meal which taste I still remember to this day — a taste I’ve never once managed to perfectly recreate myself. I wish I had at least one photograph of you. When will technology finally advance enough to reconstruct your image, even if it’s only from my memories?

I still can’t wrap my head around how, after suffering so many emotional traumas in my childhood, getting wounds that never truly healed, I still find myself longing for a Dad. And I’m not even sure if that is what I want: the real you, or the idealized image of you that I’ve created in my own mind. It almost makes me laugh to recall the time Mom asked you to teach me how to play cards — you were so reluctant that you only agreed on it on one condition: that we play for “flicks”. If I’m not mistaken, I played two games before my survival instinct kicked in and forced me to abandon the whole idea. I doubt any normal person could tell a story about giving their son such huge forehead flicks that, to this day, I can still literally hear the ringing in my ears. I think I’ll just pour out everything I remember about our life — well, the parts where you were present — so that I’m left with no sense of things left unsaid. I wonder: are you truly watching over me from somewhere, seeing it all yourself, or do I actually need to tell you everything about it? I remember back in 2000, when the police caught you at the neighboring factory — the place we used to sneak into all the time to get some scrap metal and earn some money for sweets. You were given a three-year suspended sentence; all you had to do was to check in once a month. I was convinced you wouldn’t end up behind bars. But after a while you, of course, got carried away, stopped checking in, and they sent you away for three years. One question has always haunted me: did you really end up in prison in such a stupid way, or did Mom lie to us, was there something else involved? You know, I actually managed to outdo you in this. It’s doubting to be proud of it, but I’ll tell you anyway. While the other guys were climbing over the fence to drag out a bit of scrap metal, I would walk right through the main gates, have a deal with the security guard, and haul out entire carts full of metal in broad daylight — right there, so everyone can see us. My friend and I could barely drag them. Thank God I didn’t go any further down that path. Otherwise, I might not have even lived to reach the age you were when you died.

I loved our neighborhood a lot and thought it was the safest place on earth: a residential area with detached houses, absolutely no major roads or highways to speak of — everyone knew everyone, and there was no one and nothing to fear. Except for the thousands of junkies who trudged past our house on their way from “Palermo” to the trolleybus stop — junkies who were laying sprawled under every fence, overdosed; junkies who would fall asleep standing up with syringes still clutched in their hands — and we saw it all. Do you have any idea how many of my neighborhood friends ended up with needles from the street stuck in their legs? We used to say our goodbyes to them, telling them they’d die of AIDS — and, I believe likely, that is something that happened to some of them. I watched my

godfather, "The Elephant," we called him, come storming out into the street and beat those junkies half to death right outside our house; yet they never seemed to run out — new ones would appear, and sometimes the same old ones would get beaten up multiple times as well. We thought of my godfather as nothing short of Superman. It was as if he were purging the earth of evil spirits. Remember our favorite game? We'd head down to "The Pit" (that's what we called the abandoned construction site) where we'd snap branches off trees to find the straightest sticks and fashion them into batons. We made sure it looked modern, too — after all, we were superheroes ourselves: we'd strip the bark off the sticks, let them dry in the sun, wrap them in duct tape, and then immediately put them to the test. The place was constantly swarming with junkies hiding in the bushes to shoot up; sometimes guys would even bring prostitutes there — so, at the innocent, as it must be, ages of ten, eleven, and twelve, we were already getting an uncensored, adults-only view of the world. It wasn't until I finally left the neighborhood that I realized it wasn't nearly as cool as I'd thought — nor as safe — and that the games we played were actually pretty twisted. We were like little wild animals, like hyenas. We watched people literally fading away like a song on fast-forward — once they got hooked on the needle. I honestly don't know how anyone could view that as normal. And I certainly don't know how, once trapped in the midst of it all, people ever manage to find their way out.

I remember the times you tried to give up drugs — several times, in fact. Does that mean you realized it wasn't normal at all, but simply couldn't pull yourself together to quit? Or were those attempts just for pretending in front of everyone else? You would lie there for three days without your usual drug solution — that five-dollar solution — literally dying before our eyes, and we saw it all. I was only seven or eight years old back then; to get to our bedroom, we had to pass through yours — the room where you laid writhing, with foam at your mouth. Mom didn't know what to do; she was ready to go buy that solution for you herself just so you wouldn't die right there in front of her, but she was terrified to leave you alone. I'm sure you don't know this, but even back then, I was already making a little money by buying sunflower seeds and chocolate bars at the market and selling them to the addicts hanging out at the entrance to the "Gypsy Alley" — a place where, at any given moment, there were always over a hundred junkies gathering around. I used to burst with pride knowing that I was on good terms with one of the top Gypsy drug lords there — and that he took care of me. I was the only kid doing that kind of business there — aside from that old Gypsy woman who actually lived in the alley. That was the moment I told Mom: "I'll go buy the drugs myself so Dad doesn't die." I explained to her that I had connections there and that there was nothing to be afraid of. So I went, bought the drugs for you, you shot up, and just like that, you were back to being "sweet Sasha": the kind, healthy, intelligent man to whom his eight, maybe nine, year-old son had just delivered a loaded syringe. Just like that. How is it even possible to miss a father when you know and remember all of that? Or maybe what I miss is just an illusion of my own making — something that has nothing to do with you at all, but is simply an idealized image lifted straight out of a movie? Or perhaps I miss you because I know that you weren't always this way. There was a time, after all, right when you first started using, when Mom wanted to leave you. I don't know if that's actually true, or if Mom was simply shifting the blame onto me for not leaving you before we'd suffered hundreds of emotional traumas; but she used to tell me how, for a while, we lived in Tairova with her fiancé, Seriozha, and how she was tired of my tears. She said that I would cry for you every single night until you finally showed up and puffed out your belly like it was a balloon, just so I would laugh and fall asleep after. Then again, whether it was true or not, will remain a mystery to me. You know, very few people — those who aren't overweight — can actually do that with their bellies. I can do it, too. Many times, I was dreaming about how we might have lived, and where we might have ended up if we had stayed with Uncle Seriozha back in Tairova.

Maybe then my godfather, Elephant wouldn't have received my Holly Supper dishes (an actual tradition of bringing food to God parents in Ukraine) the day after he had already hosted all his other godchildren at his table. I only brought my dishes once everyone else had left — the time when there

was no one left to see him welcoming a godchild who happened to be the son of a junkie. But still, it's a good thing he welcomed me. I heard it so many times: other godparents whispering about how I was there visiting right alongside all the "normal" kids. Or maybe that was just my own twisted illusion and trauma playing tricks on me, even back then. I often share stories from my childhood with my friends; and when I used to feel ashamed to reveal who I was and where I came from, now, with each passing day, I am filled with an overwhelming sense of pride at how I managed to steer my life in a completely different direction. When I imagine the alternative scenario — what would have happened if I had followed your footsteps — it terrifies me. The only thing I truly fear in this life is ending up with nothing behind me: returning to the ruins we used to call home, drowning in debts just like you did, and having to hide in a closet while your children tell everyone that "Dad isn't home." You have to admit, that's not exactly a pleasing picture. And yet, there were several times when people didn't believe us — and actually found you hiding in that closet. Or is that just my imagination? And how did you even manage to fit in there? It could hardly be called a closet. I am happy with the person I've become today, and I am proud of myself. Thank you for the few pieces of advice you actually gave me. They are engraved into my mind, like a tattoo on my arm. Even if you did it unconsciously, I am deeply grateful for that.

To boast a little, I wanted to share a story with you — about the first time I traveled to France to live there. It was in 2019, the year your granddaughter was born, and I went with my wife and her brother, whom we had taken in because her parents, too, were struggling with their own issues. We settled in Antibes, on the French Riviera. That was when the coronavirus first emerged, and we found ourselves stuck in the midst of a severe global crisis. Yet, it was precisely during that difficult year that I ascended to a new rung on the career ladder. I transitioned from the ranks of small-scale entrepreneurs into the realm of major business owners. During the crisis, I sold a portion of our clothing company for 350 or 400 thousand dollars, and in doing so, I realized how to think and act on a much larger scale. Of course, I had always dreamed that *you*

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