

THROUGH MEN, *to* MYSELF

A JOURNEY
FROM RELATIONSHIPS
TO SELF-LOVE,
BOUNDARIES
AND FREEDOM



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PSYCHOLOGY & PERSONAL GROWTH

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Through Men, to Myself

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I want to write the truth about myself - the very truth I have carried inside me for so long, afraid that it was somehow too much.. Within the pages of this book will settle my experiences, memories, and feelings. I will write about the decisions I am proud of, the way one is proud of a hard-won child. And about the things I have done that I am still ashamed of - those that left scars on my memory and still bring bad dreams.. I am writing this for myself, and for the woman who may now be standing at the edge of her own abyss, searching for someones hand. Perhaps she will recognize herself in my confession. Perhaps she will find the very answer. And if, among these lines, you suddenly encounter your own reflection, I will be happy. If you find an answer, then I will have fulfilled my purpose. And if you do not, let this book simply become someone elses experience for you. A testimony that even the most winding road is not endless. That everything begins with a choice..

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Uliana Sunny

Through Men, to Myself

Truth

I want to write the truth about myself - the very truth I have carried inside me for so long, afraid that it was somehow too much...

Within the pages of this book will settle my experiences, memories, and feelings. I will write about the decisions I am proud of, the way one is proud of a hard-won child. And about the things I have done that I am still ashamed of - those that left scars on my memory and still bring bad dreams.

You will see a girl from a village who, every evening, made a wish upon a star and asked it for a different fate. You will see a woman who shattered into a thousand pieces, yet gathered herself back together piece by piece, becoming stronger each time. You will see the journey of a person who wandered through dark rooms until she learned to hear her own voice.

I know that memory is a liar. It fills in details, confuses the order of events, and paints the past in shades that are convenient for us. But I will leave that game behind. I will preserve what matters most: the salty taste of emotions I have lived through and the calluses on my heart left by the lessons that mattered.

I am writing this for myself, and for the woman who may now be standing at the edge of her own abyss, searching for someone's hand. Perhaps she will recognize herself in my confession. Perhaps she will find the very answer she has been searching for in the darkness.

And if, among these lines, you suddenly encounter your own reflection, I will be happy. If you find an answer, then I will have fulfilled my purpose. And if you do not, let this book simply become someone else's experience for you. A testimony that even the most winding road is not endless. That everything begins with a choice. With that very moment when you decide not to suffer, but to act. With the decision not to wait for the pain to pass, but to choose yourself. To choose to live and keep moving, even when the road is nowhere in sight.

This is my true story. Pride in what I have done and pain for what I have endured. Paragraph by paragraph.

I begin...

A Girl from the Village

Imagine a world capital. London. Tokyo. New York. Paris. Beijing. New Delhi. Cities where people rush to work in expensive suits, where skyscrapers reflect the sun, where restaurants are filled with people discussing deals, travel, investments, and future plans. Now imagine a place about fifteen hundred kilometers south of such a capital. A village. That's where I was born. Where the child has practically closed opportunities. I was born into a family of a simple driver and an accountant. Our house was a small, old, clay house built of reeds. The toilet was outside. We carried water in buckets from a pump. Mom and Dad practically lived at work. They didn't work for travel, a beautiful life, or big purchases. They worked to feed me and my brother. So we would have food. So we could go to school. So that one day our family would have a normal brick house. While my parents were at work, I became the lady of the house. I was a child, but I stopped feeling like just a child very early on. A girl who was supposed to play, go for walks, and wait for her parents. I cleaned, helped around the house, and looked after the household. It was so natural for me that I didn't even question why it was happening. Probably because there was no other option in our lives. These were the nineties. Crisis, poverty, lack of normal work, uncertainty. It was a difficult time for many families. For ours, too. My parents tried for years to escape that life. But there was never enough money. Throughout our entire childhood, they managed to save almost only for the construction of a brick house. Brick by brick. Year after year. And everything they managed to earn went there. So there was practically never any money for us, the children. No expensive clothes. No computer. No phones. No sweets. No

opportunity to buy everything we wanted. Sometimes we lacked the most ordinary things that other children took for granted. But back then, I didn't understand that. I just lived. And I understood one thing very early: if you don't have money, the only thing no one can take away from you is knowledge. So I studied at school with incredible persistence. I was sure: education was my only ticket to a different life. I didn't miss a single lesson. I tried hard. But at the same time, I didn't consider myself smart at school. On the contrary. My friends got straight A's. I was the "dumbest" among them—at least, that's how it seemed to me. I had two B's. Only two. But next to girls who had practically all A's, I felt like I was far behind. Only much later did I realize that this environment was a huge gift to me. I looked at them and thought, "If they can do it, then I should too." I tried to keep up. That's when I first understood how much the people around us shape us. Sometimes you don't need someone who will constantly say, "You can do it." Sometimes it's enough just to see someone who already has. And you feel ashamed to give up.

The Ugly Duckling

At school, I considered myself ugly. One day I told my mom about it. She looked at me and said, "You're an ugly duckling for now. But soon you'll turn into a beautiful swan." I didn't believe her then. Not at all. I was very thin, with long black hair and thick, bushy eyebrows. I didn't have any bright, memorable facial features. An ordinary face, an Asian appearance, dark skin. But I wanted to be different. I wanted to be Slavic. It seemed to me that this was what true beauty looked like. Now I think about that little girl and smile. How cruel we sometimes are to ourselves. How many years we can look at ourselves through the eyes of other people's standards and not notice our own beauty. Back then, I didn't know that beautiful people don't exist in just one standard. Beauty comes in different forms. And, perhaps, there are no ugly people. There are people who haven't yet learned to see themselves. I was one of them.

University

At seventeen, I received my diploma. Two B's, the other A's. And I left to study in the regional center. I entered a state university to become a math and computer science teacher. I was seventeen. I left the village for the city practically on my own. My parents rarely could give me money. My grandmother helped. When she received her pension, she would set aside a small amount for my expenses. And that was it. There was practically no other help. My brother was also studying at university—the same one as me. My grandfather sometimes helped him. He lived with him because my grandfather's apartment was not far from the university. I, however, had to rely mostly on myself. And then I understood another thing: if there's no money, you have to earn it another way. So I tried to study well enough to receive two scholarships. I literally had to earn the opportunity to continue my education. It still wasn't enough. But I continued. Studying. Part-time jobs. Saving. And studying again. In the summer, I worked at a factory, in a grocery store. The money was small. But it was mine. In parallel, I helped my parents with their first small business. At some point, Mom and Dad quit their jobs and decided to try working for themselves. Dad bought a red cheap car. Several milk cans. A separator—for processing milk and cream, making cottage cheese. Our family had a little of its own livestock—it was practically impossible to survive in the village without it. But it wasn't enough. So my parents bought milk from neighbors, from the farm, from ordinary people. And they started selling dairy products in courtyards in the city center. It sounds almost romantic now. But back then, it wasn't romance. It was a struggle. There were pennies. And these pennies were enough for food. Sometimes—for clothes. And they saved for building the house. That's all. No more savings. No big plans. Just another day.

First Love

The first year of university ended. I was promoted to the second year. I was eighteen. And one day, my friend and I went to a famous local bar called "Prado." I wasn't thinking about boys at all then. Not even a little. I had other plans. To study. And to study again. I loved music and dancing (I went to choir and dance classes in school). The music ended, the next song started, and I moved

away from the crowd of girls and headed for the exit—just to get some air. And there I met him. My first boyfriend. The man with whom I was to spend the next five years. I didn't know then that I was meeting my first love. And do you know what first love is? It's when a person becomes part of your life so quickly that you stop understanding where he ends and you begin. He was handsome, well-mannered, interesting. He worked as a deep-sea captain and often went to sea. And that sounded almost like a life from a movie to me then. He was only two years older than me. I was eighteen. He was twenty. He had had many girlfriends before me. I had never had a boyfriend. He was my first in everything. And he knew how to charm. Very well. He took care of me. Helped me financially. Supported me morally. Was there for me. And I loved him as, perhaps, only a person who has truly opened their heart to someone for the first time can love. I was faithful to him. Even when he went to sea. Even when we were far from each other. I waited for him. Back then, it seemed to me that this was love. That this person would definitely become my husband. That this was my destiny. I didn't yet know that destiny sometimes first gives us a person we love with all our heart, and then takes them away to make us meet ourselves.

Five Blows

Time passed. I finished university. Received my diploma as a math and computer science teacher. Entered graduate school. Had already studied for a year. And then something happened in my life that I still remember as one of the most terrible periods. Not one tragedy. Several at once. One after another.

First. My mother fell ill. A brain tumor. The disease progressed rapidly. She lost her memory. Lost her health. Gradually became practically incapacitated. I looked at my mom and didn't understand how this could even be happening. Just yesterday she was a person who worked, took care of everyone, held the family together. And now her health was fading right before our eyes. A lot of work. Stress. Poverty. Years of constant tension. All of it, it seemed, finally caught up with her.

Second. My grandmother died. The very grandmother who helped me. She died in my arms and in my uncle's arms. I still remember that moment. I remember the foam from her mouth. I remember the fear. I remember the feeling of absolute helplessness. I loved her very much. And at that moment, I lost a person who had been one of my pillars for many years.

Third. My brother was far away. After university, he served in the army. Many guys went through this. And he also had to do his duty. But for me, it meant one thing: he wasn't by my side.

Fourth. Dad went to another city to work. Selling milk no longer brought the same income. More and more stores appeared, selling cheaper, albeit not the highest quality, milk. The small family business began to fade. And my father again left to find work.

Fifth. And it was then that the most painful thing happened. My first love betrayed me. He cheated on me. I saw a message from another girl. I remember that moment. And the most terrible thing is—he knew what I was going through. He knew about Mom's illness. Knew about Grandma's death. Knew that Dad was far away. Knew that my brother was in the army. He knew everything. And I, in my third year, had once waited for him for a whole year while he was in the army. I was faithful to him. And now, at this very moment, he betrayed me. He asked for forgiveness, apologized for a long time, got down on his knees, but I couldn't forgive him. He "died" in my eyes. And then he left on another voyage.

And I was left alone with my blows. I stood on the ruins of my life. And I was dying inside. To say that I experienced extreme stress is an understatement. Before this, I thought I had already seen a lot in life. Relatives' illnesses. My parents' quarrels and fights. Their almost-divorce. The betrayal of "friends." My own fight with five girls at school, after which there was blood practically all over my body. The absence of everything a normal child would want. Now all of this could be called trifles. But for a child, these are not trifles. However, all of this, compared to what happened then, truly seemed like a trifle. Because five blows came almost simultaneously. And they almost killed me. But only almost. Because there was nothing left for me to do but gather all my strength and act.

Salvation

First—Mom. I decided I would save her. I didn't know how. I didn't know where I would get the money. I didn't know who would help me. But I had to do something. With enormous difficulty, I managed to wrestle a quota for an operation at a capital research institute with the best neurosurgeon. I went to the department of health. There, they showed me an entire office piled high with sheets, where everyone was waiting for their turn for surgery. I understood everything, but I had no choice but to—beg. To cry. To ask for help. I gathered documents. And I asked again. We were approved for a surgery quota. Money for Mom's other expenses was raised not without the help of people. Relatives. Neighbors. Acquaintances. Everyone helped in any way they could. And the operation finally took place. Mom was operated on. Gradually, over six months, she returned to the state of a healthy person. Not immediately. Not easily. But she came back. Of course, there were consequences from the operation; an artery in her brain was damaged, and she lost vision in one visual field. But she is alive, she made it. And it was something she could live with. And then, for the first time, I felt very clearly: sometimes a person doesn't have to be strong alone. Sometimes strength is admitting that you need help. And allowing people to help.

Grandma. We buried Grandma. With relatives. The whole village. I loved her very much. May the earth be light upon her.

Father and brother. Then Father returned. My brother finished his service and also returned. They returned in turn. And with each return, I felt a little lighter.

Finally, there were people at home again. Mom was alive. Father returned. Brother returned. But that didn't solve the fifth problem. My love was destroyed. And then I made the first truly important decision for myself. I decided to move to the capital. To my aunt, my mother's sister. She rarely visited us. But in our understanding, she was almost a person from another world. She was from the capital. And the capital, for us, was something enormous, distant, and almost unattainable.

Two Diplomas and a Ticket to the Capital

By that time, I was finishing my master's degree. Writing my master's thesis. Taking state exams. At that time, I was simultaneously working two jobs and pursuing my master's degree. At the university—as a leading specialist in the scientific department, a lecturer of mathematical analysis for first-year students. And on Fridays, I went to a boarding school for children with disabilities—teaching them math. I successfully completed my master's degree; thanks to my hard work, I managed to pass my state exams with top marks and successfully defend my thesis. Then I quit all my jobs and immediately bought a plane ticket to the capital. That evening was very tearful in my house. I announced to my parents that I was leaving. Mom was already home by then and feeling well. My brother had gotten a good job and had just gotten married. His pregnant wife moved in with us. I, however, borrowed a little money from my parents, who sold a couple of cows to provide me with some funds, and then packed my suitcase. I took my two diplomas and flew to conquer the capital. Alone. That, in essence, was all I had. Two diplomas. A small suitcase. And an enormous desire to change my life. I thought the worst was behind me. How wrong I was... The worst was just beginning...

The Capital I Never Saw

I arrived in the capital with two diplomas, my small suitcase, and the certainty that my life would now definitely change. I immediately wanted to work at a university. It seemed logical to continue an academic career: mathematics, computer science, education, and science. I had studied for so many years precisely for this. But the capital quickly explained one simple thing to me: here, no one cared how much you had dreamed. You had to start from the place they gave you. And they gave me a school. A local school on the outskirts of the city where my aunt lived. I remember my first impression. I came from a small village where everyone knew each other, where children could greet their teacher on the street, and adults knew which family each child came from. Here it was different. The capital's children were aggressive and arrogant. Some of them, in fifth grade, knew swear words better than the multiplication table. I came there as a math and computer science teacher. But I very quickly realized that they wouldn't let me be just a teacher. I had to be everything at once. A teacher. A psychologist. A social worker. A curator for several classes. Sometimes—a mother. Sometimes—a person who just had to listen to a child. I arrived at school an hour before lessons began. And sometimes I left at ten in the evening. I was working two full-time jobs. I bought children candy with my salary, trying to establish some kind of contact. Sometimes they took the candy and were still ungrateful. There were children from disadvantaged families. Yes, such families exist in the capital too. I got angry. I cried. I got tired. I returned home. And in the morning, I went there again. It was like a nightmare from which it was impossible to wake up. And the most terrible thing—I barely saw the city. I came to conquer the capital. But I only knew the route: home—school—school—home. No walks, no theaters or museums, no restaurants, no beautiful streets—no city life at all. I was so busy surviving that I didn't even have time to understand exactly where I was living. But the school was only half the problem. The other half was waiting for me at home.

Aunt

My aunt, my mother's sister, turned out to be a very difficult person. Capricious. Demanding. Controlling. She had her own rules, her own beliefs, and a huge number of complaints about me. This wasn't done right. That wasn't right. You can't go there. Don't socialize with these people. Don't go anywhere. Only the apartment and school. All the money I earned went towards food, the apartment, and her expenses. Sometimes I managed to buy myself some clothes. And that was all. At the same time, I understood her. She herself was from a village. She also once broke away to the capital. Got married. Then her husband died young. She had been disabled her whole life and didn't work, living on a disability pension. Perhaps her life was also not at all easy. When I arrived, her life became a little easier. But along with that, she began to control me even more strongly. After eight months, she said: "Choose. Either you live like this and I'll bequeath my apartment to you, or go back to the village and you'll be left with nothing. And don't come back." She manipulated me. And I cried. I wanted to be with Mom. I didn't want to live under such total control, to see dissatisfaction and strange looks every day. I didn't want to live only for her and wait for manna from heaven. I was already in a difficult emotional state; I was mentally unstable. And her constant pressure. She was killing me even more from the inside. I wanted to go back home. I lived with her for nine months. I worked at the school for one academic year. And I returned. I didn't truly see the capital. At least, not the city I had imagined. And then I decided that, perhaps, the capital just wasn't for me. I thought that some special people lived there. Strong. Tough. Confident. And I, perhaps, was too weak. I thought: "I won't become part of this world." I was wrong. But then I didn't know it yet.

The First and Last Return

When I flew back home, I literally kissed the ground of my village. I felt so good. At last, I was truly home again. I repaid my parents' debt, helped my brother with money (a wedding gift from me), and even had a bit left for me. So I decided: this is it. I'll live near my parents. I immediately got a job as a teacher at the district lyceum. The work was much calmer. The salary was average. And I thought, "Maybe I don't even need this capital?" I was near my parents. Mom was alive and well. Dad was home. My brother had returned from the army, gotten married, and his wife had already given birth to a child. I had a job. What else did I need? But inside, a feeling gradually emerged that I initially tried to ignore. I started to lose interest in this kind of life. Not as a human being, but as the person I was, who wanted more. I had an education. I had experience. I knew I could do more. But every day the same thing happened. School. Home. Village. And school again. After a while, I started asking myself questions. "Is this all?" "Do I really want to live my whole life here?" "Will I work in a village school, earn a small salary, live with my parents, my brother, his wife, and their children?" "Will I spend my whole life serving the family and forgetting about myself?" There was only one answer. No. But what to do next—I didn't know. I had already experienced the betrayal of love. Letting him go was incredibly difficult. I suffered literally physically. I continued to kill myself from the inside with loneliness and memories. But over time, the pain began to quiet down. Another year passed. I gained experience as a teacher at the lyceum. I put together a good portfolio. And I finally understood: I needed to move on.

The First "Business"

And then I decided to open a business. The first in my life. I took out a decent loan. I bought a car. I bought a stall at the market. It seemed to me that I had thought everything through. My mom and I went to buy clothes. She helped me. I hired a salesperson. And on weekends and holidays, I stood behind the counter myself. I looked at my stall and thought, "This is it. Now I'm an entrepreneur." But the business didn't take off. Not at all. Not the right clothes. Not the right location. Not the right audience. People came in. Admired. Looked. Asked the price. And left. It was too expensive for them. People were used to buying things at the lowest possible price. And I brought in goods that cost two or three times more than what they were used to. I understood everything in about three months. I had to close the stall. I sold it for half the price. And I was left with the loan. End of summer. I sat and thought, "Well, that's it. Now nothing is going to work out for sure." I called myself stupid. Untalented. A failure. I thought I had messed everything up again. It was good that I continued to work as a teacher in parallel. Otherwise, I simply wouldn't have had anything to live on. But it was this failure that unexpectedly did something very important for me. It forced me to stop for the first time and analyze my own life. I asked myself, "What do I want?" Not my parents. Not my relatives. Not society. Not a man. Not school. Me. What do *I* want? How do I want to live? Is this the end? Or can I start over? I looked at myself and realized, "I don't want to live like this." But what to do next? I didn't know. But I decided: at least *something*.

Social Network

I registered on a well-known social network. For me, it was almost an event. My first boyfriend forbade me from using social networks. While my friends spent hours online, I couldn't even communicate properly with people there. But now I was free. And one day I turned on the computer, not for work, I opened the social network. Just to see. What was going on there anyway? Who was living what kind of life? What was interesting? And it was there that I started communicating again with one of my friends. He was from my village, but lived in the capital. He worked as a manager at an oil company. He wrote first. I replied. We had known each other for a long time, but before, our lives had run in parallel. Now they unexpectedly intersected. He asked how I was doing. I told him. About the business failure. About work. About life. And after a while, we agreed that I would

fly to him. He offered me to live with him and try my luck a second time. Of course, I agreed. At the time, I didn't yet understand how much this decision would change my life. But I wanted to try to return to the capital again, moving there permanently.

Second Conquest of the Capital

I quickly sold my car. Paid off part of the loan. Registered on a job search website. And in literally one day, I found a job as a math teacher at a good school in the capital. This was no longer the outskirts. And although it wasn't the city center, which I didn't even dream of, for me it was a huge step forward. The salary promised was about three times higher than my previous one. I wasn't hoping for a miracle. I just decided to try again. I got on a plane. I flew in. He met me. We started living together. As friends. On weekends, we could go somewhere. On weekdays, we worked. But to say it was easy for me would be a lie. It was very difficult for me morally and psychologically. Because he was hoping for a relationship. And I wasn't. He was a good person. Good job. Good salary. Apartment. Upbringing. Care. But inside me, there was emptiness. I already knew that love couldn't be invented. I didn't want to use him. But I also didn't want to pretend, especially with someone who grew up in the same yard as me. I understood: he needed a different woman. And at that time, I didn't need anyone. I needed to survive. I needed to cling to the capital. With my hands. My feet. My teeth. Whatever it took. I didn't want to repeat my old life. I didn't want to go back to the village. I didn't want to depend on circumstances again. And I certainly didn't want to look for a man just to get married. If that's what I wanted, I could have done it back home. But my inner voice didn't even hint at marriage. It said something completely different: "First, become yourself."

The Billionaire

Before flying to the capital to my friend, I met a very wealthy man. This was my first billionaire acquaintance. True, I found out about it much later, by chance, when I once started reading articles about him online. We met in the most famous bar in a neighboring town. He flew there with friends for a big fishing trip. There was indeed large and delicious fish in those parts, and, it seems, that's why the company chose this place.

That evening, we just had a good time. There were my friends, his friends, lots of conversations, laughter, and good spirits. He wished me a happy birthday and, unexpectedly for me, covered all the expenses. We exchanged contacts. The next day, he flew to the capital. And we continued to correspond. After a while, he invited me. I said I would fly later. And I did fly. Just not to him. I flew to my childhood friend.

But. It so happened that, while living with my friend, I sometimes met with this man. He was a foreigner, from Germany. I knew a little German from school and university, so I spoke to him in my rather broken German. Sometimes he sent a driver for me. I would arrive at one of the most famous hotels in the capital, get ready there, after which the driver would pick me up and take me to a private party. We spent time together. He gave me gifts. First ordinary ones, then increasingly expensive ones. One day he offered me a road trip through Europe with him and his friends. It sounded beautiful. Very beautiful. But I refused. Not because I didn't like to travel. And not because I didn't understand how unusual this offer was. It was simply that I found out he sometimes used drugs. And that was enough for me. I didn't want to go on a trip with a man next to whom I could find myself in a situation I couldn't control. Whatever money, opportunities, and beautiful places were behind this offer, for me, this was more important. He calmly accepted my refusal. We continued to communicate sometimes on social networks, but the relationship never became anything more.

And, to be honest, I didn't even perceive this story as anything special. Because I didn't fly to the capital for him. I wasn't looking for a rich man. I wasn't making plans around his money. I wasn't trying to get into his world. I just flew to build my new life, staying with a childhood friend. But I never thought I would fly to the capital to my friend with the goal of then meeting a billionaire. No. I had no such plan at all. I just continued to live my life. And then, completely unexpectedly, a billionaire,

a driver, private parties, expensive gifts, and an offer to travel through Europe appeared in that life. And, perhaps, the most interesting thing in this whole story is not even that he was a billionaire.

But that I clearly saw for the first time: money can open almost any door for you, but not every door is one you need. I continued to search for my life. Not someone else's. My own. And I didn't yet know that very soon it would change again.

Escape from My Friend's Apartment

Two months passed. September. October. And I kept asking myself the same question: “What next?” I knew I didn’t want to live like this anymore. I didn’t love this life, my dependence on someone else’s space, or the feeling that I wasn’t where I was supposed to be. And more and more often, I caught myself thinking: *He’s a good person. But this isn’t my life.* And then I came up with something. I wrote to my third cousin and invited her to the capital—just for a vacation, for a week. She gladly agreed. I knew she also wanted to change something in her life. And suddenly I thought: “Why don’t we do it together?” She arrived. And that’s when I truly saw the capital for the first time ever. Before that, I had barely noticed the city. I worked. Constantly worked. I didn’t have time to just walk around, look at things, go into beautiful places, examine buildings, feel the atmosphere of the streets. But now I had someone with whom I wanted to do all of that. We walked every day after my work. We walked around the center. Looked at old buildings. Discovered beautiful places. Laughed. Talked about everything. And gradually, I started to see the city through different eyes. I suddenly realized: *The capital isn’t so harsh. People aren’t so cold. The city is beautiful. And there really are many opportunities here.* It was just that before, I hadn’t had time to see it. It wasn’t the city I was missing. It was my own life within this city. And with my cousin, we simply clicked. And during that week, we made a decision: she would move in with me. She went home to work for two more weeks, quit her job, and finish her affairs. And I was left alone. And that’s when, I think, something clicked inside me. One day I came home earlier than usual. And suddenly I was scared. Not what would happen if I left. But that if I stayed now, I would change my mind again. So I didn’t think for long. I packed my things. Ordered a taxi. And left. I just left. Without explanations. Without long conversations. Without trying to bring things to a graceful close. I simply packed my life into my bags and walked out of that apartment. And in the evening, from my new apartment, I called him and said: “I’ve left. And I’m not coming back.” This was the first plan in my life that I didn’t just come up with. I came up with it—and executed it. And with that, I felt both lighter and more terrified. Lighter—because I finally did what I had wanted to do for a long time. More terrified—because now the decision was made. There was no turning back. Inside, there was anxiety. Fear. Overwhelming stress. And a total lack of understanding: “What now?” I didn’t yet know where I would live next. I didn’t know what I would live on. I didn’t know what would happen to my job. I didn’t know how my life would change. But for the first time, I knew one thing for sure: now this was my life. And, perhaps, it was from this moment that it finally began to truly belong to me.

Five Girls, One Apartment

When I left my friend's place, I didn't have an ideal plan. I didn't have ideal conditions at all. I started living with four girls I barely knew, in a two-room apartment almost in the center of the capital. Five girls. Two rooms. One kitchen. One bathroom. And completely different lives that somehow had to fit into one space. While my cousin was finishing her affairs in her hometown, the apartment was crowded. The prices for decent housing were too high, and I couldn't afford a separate apartment. So I had to live like that. Although, to be honest, I chose it myself. I chose freedom instead of comfort. I continued to work as a teacher. I came home to four almost unfamiliar girls, noise, conversations, other people's things, and a constant feeling of crampedness. This was nothing like the beautiful new life I had imagined. But it was my life. And one day, something happened that I then perceived almost as a miracle. One of the girls was unexpectedly offered a job abroad. She had been waiting for it for a long time. And she almost immediately agreed. She left. And I looked at the empty space and thought: "God helped me." Now my cousin had a place to come to. She finished her affairs, flew to me, and almost immediately found a job. And we started living together. On weekdays, we worked. After work, we sometimes went for walks. On weekends, we went to the center again. And gradually, I started to get to know the city. Not the one I used to see from the window of a school bus. Not the one I drove past on the way to work. But the real one. With its beautiful streets. With people. With cafes, squares, parks, and old buildings. With opportunities that I simply hadn't noticed before. I started to feel not like someone who accidentally ended up in the capital, but like someone who truly lives here. Of course, I was scared. Of course, sometimes I wanted to give up everything. But every day I told myself the same thing: "Just work. Just keep moving." There was no need to know immediately how this path would end. No need to have an ideal plan. I just needed to live today. Then the next. Then another. And gradually, from these ordinary days, a new life began to form. Not the one someone offered me. Not the one I got through a relationship. Not the one someone built for me. I started to build it myself. Even if it was in a two-room apartment for now. Even if it was with four unfamiliar girls. Even if it was with anxiety, uncertainty, and very little money. But this was my first real step into an independent life. And back then, I didn't yet understand how important it would turn out to be.

Two Years

It took me two years. Two years not just to change my life on the outside, but to start changing myself on the inside. A new place. A new job. A promotion. New people and acquaintances. Books. Learning. Psychotherapy. And an enormous amount of self-work. I changed externally—completely changed my style, started to look different, to carry myself differently. But the internal changes were much more important. I started working on my speech. On my behavior. I learned to control my emotions. Not to throw tantrums. To listen. And most importantly, to truly hear. I learned to be empathetic. To observe interesting people. To notice how they talk, how they react to difficult situations, how they behave with others. And if I saw something good in a person, I tried to emulate it. I gradually stopped reacting to life automatically. I began to think. To observe. To choose my reactions. And one day I caught myself with a very simple feeling: I had grown up. I hadn't become perfect. I hadn't become a person who never makes mistakes again. I just felt whole for the first time. I let go of the past. Not because I forgot it, but because it no longer controlled me. Enough time had passed for me to be able to look at myself and other people in a completely different way. I started to read. A lot. A great deal. Sometimes, closing another book, I would sit and think: "My God... why didn't I do this before?" I extracted specific ideas, tools, and thoughts from books that truly resonated with me, and began to apply them in life. Some of them I still use today. And the more I read, the more I understood one amusing thing. I once truly believed that I already knew everything: that I was old enough, experienced enough, that I already understood people, relationships, and life. How naive I was. But over time, I realized: there's nothing wrong with that. Because what matters is not who you were. Not how many mistakes you made. Not how many times you chose the wrong person. And not even how much time you lost. The main thing is what you do after you've understood it. I kept moving forward. And for the first time in my life, I no longer needed to run from the past. I was simply walking towards becoming myself.

I Learned to Win

Gradually, the capital began to change for me. Or perhaps I changed. Because the city remained the same. The same streets. The same buildings. The same people. It was just that now I no longer looked up at the capital from below. I started to grow. First, I was promoted to deputy director for operations. Essentially, it was an assistant director position, but with an enormous amount of responsibility. But even that wasn't enough for me. I continued to study. Two diplomas no longer seemed sufficient, so I decided to get a third. I enrolled in a metropolitan institute for a specialty related to managing an educational organization. A year later, I graduated with a red diploma. After that, I was appointed deputy director for student affairs. Additionally, I oversaw the extracurricular education program at the school. My salary was increased. And I remember that feeling. I was proud of myself. Once, I had arrived in the capital with a small suitcase and two diplomas. And now I was a manager. I had a good salary. I was able to take out a mortgage on an apartment. I started furnishing my space, creating coziness in my apartment. I could travel, go to the cosmetologist, buy myself what I wanted without asking anyone for permission or explaining why I needed it. I was gradually becoming the person I had once imagined myself to be, sitting in a small village house. Back then, it seemed to me: if I could ever live exactly like this—then I had won. And I really did win. I learned to survive. I learned to earn money. I learned to work. I learned to lead. I learned to make decisions. I learned not to be afraid of a big life. And one evening, I caught myself with a completely unexpected thought: "And that's it?" I stopped. Everything seemed to have worked out. I had conquered the capital. I secured a good job. I attained a position. I earned a third diploma. I bought an apartment. I created a life I could only dream of once. I accomplished everything I had promised myself. But why did that question, "And that's it?" resonate within me again? Something was missing. I didn't yet understand what exactly. It wasn't ingratitude. There was no feeling that my life was bad. On the contrary. It was good. I just suddenly understood one thing: a goal that seemed like a summit one day becomes just another point on the route. I had achieved what I had been working towards for a long time. And now I needed to figure out: where do I go next? I didn't know the answer. But this time, it didn't scare me. I just told myself: "We'll see." And I continued to live. Because I already knew: sometimes the next turn appears precisely when you stop looking for it.

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