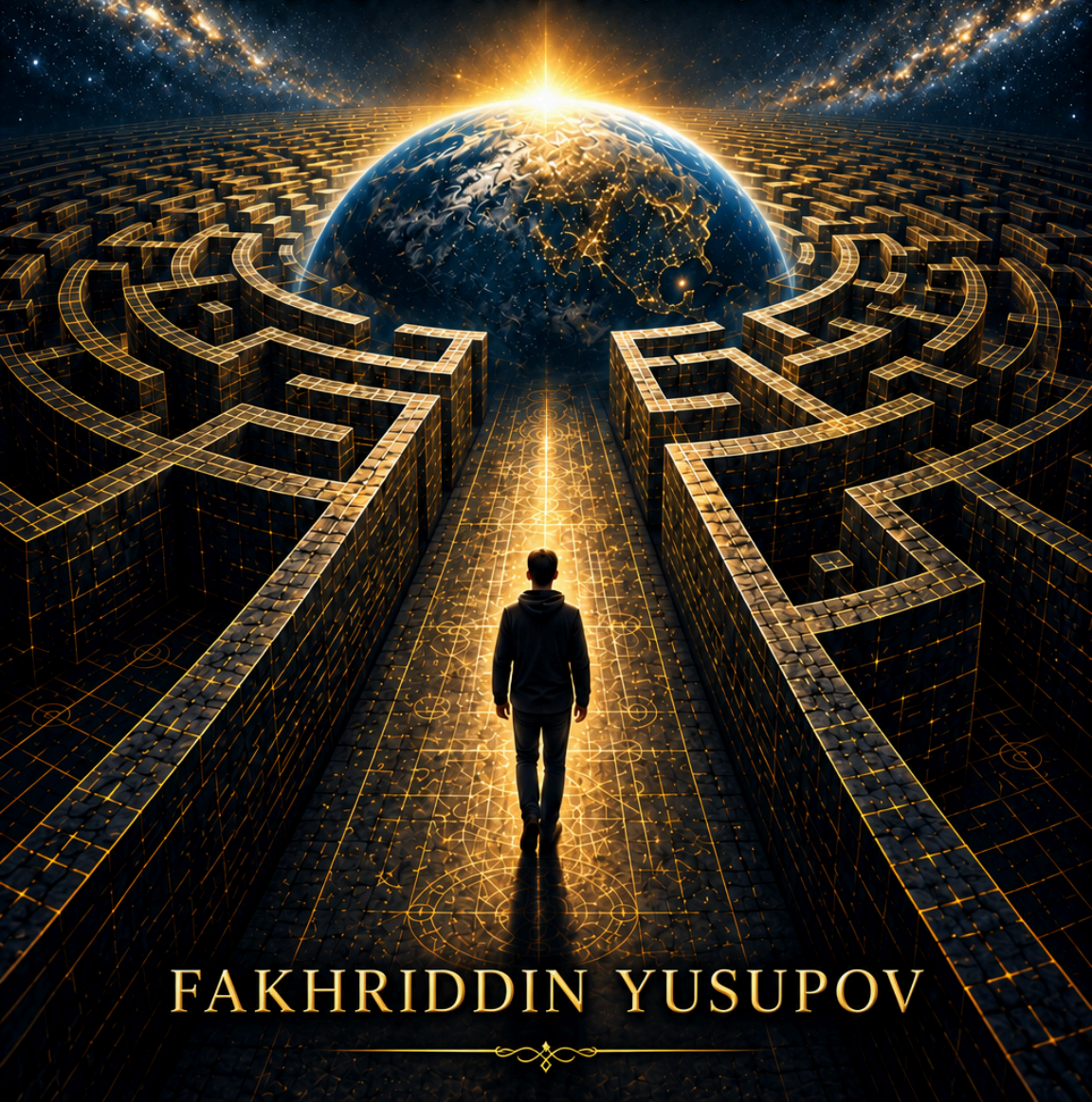


BORN WITH THE RIGHT TO HAPPINESS

A NOVEL ABOUT WHO WE ARE
AND WHY WE CAME INTO THIS WORLD



FAKHRIDDIN YUSUPOV

BORN WITH THE RIGHT TO HAPPINESS

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Fakhriddin Yusupov

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REVIEWS

Born With The Right To Happiness is a work of fiction in the philosophical and inspirational sub-genres and was penned by author Fakhriddin Yusupov. The book explores life, death, happiness, the human soul, and the many mysteries surrounding our existence.

Author Fakhriddin Yusupov instills a powerful message of happiness and hope into this sometimes surreal and sometimes poignant journey. The hero's journey of the novel gives us plenty of pause for thought, as Tony's past actions and ideas of being trapped by fate and circumstance are overthrown for a powerful new perspective on taking action in the universe. The full philosophy is broken down into narrative form, which makes it a lot easier to understand the lessons and shamanic principles at play. I also thought the dialogue work was well utilized to deliver both story and concept. Overall, I would recommend Born With The Right To Happiness to readers seeking deeper meaning from their everyday lives and an inviting narrative that sparks new philosophical meanings moving forward.

K.C. Finn, author of "Caecilius Rex," "The Secret Star," and "The Book of Shade"

I have read some writings on New Age and material like the Law of Attraction, but Tony's story is one that opens the reader's eyes to facts about our world that are known to only a few people. The author shows readers how they can tap into the abundant power and energy of the world and have the universe respond to their deepest desires. While the novel tells an interesting and entertaining story, it reads like a spiritual odyssey, filled with insight and light. At the heart of this novel's message is the truth that we have the power to change our destiny, to create the happiness we want, and to shift reality. It is magical. It is inspirational. It is filled with light. The book features exceptional characters and while it deals with extraordinary things, the characters are people who are steeped in the monotony of everyday life.

Ruffina Oserio, Readers' Favorite

Born With The Right To Happiness by Fakhriddin Yusupov was extremely fascinating. I admit, I forgot it was a novel sometimes. I thought it was such a unique way to explain what laws of the universe are. I loved the fact

that even though I did not always agree with Tony, I still wanted to ponder on his point of view because it was so fascinating. Thanks to Fakhridin Yusupov, I had an a-ha moment of clarity. I liked that you have to have an open mind and it gives you a lot to think about. I do wonder what happened to one of the characters but that is a good thing because I am hoping this means there is a sequel. It was such a bittersweet ending, you wanted to cry, but then you realize it was a good thing that happened. If you are soul searching or fascinated by the laws of the universe, then I would definitely recommend this book. Even though it is in a novel form, it is a unique way of explaining how things work.

Renee Guill, author, writer, book reviewer

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Suffering and joy, love and disappointment, life and death — perhaps they are all merely parts of an extraordinary game unfolding within the reality we have grown accustomed to believing is the only one that exists.

But have we ever stopped to consider how well we truly know the world we live in? Who are we, really? Where do we come from, and where do we go? And why, possessing an almost limitless capacity for discovery, do we so rarely ask ourselves the questions that matter most?

Before you is the story of Tony Snyder — a seemingly ordinary man destined to experience trials, loss, love, and extraordinary revelations. His journey begins long before the moment we first meet him and extends far beyond the familiar boundaries of human perception.

Some events in this story may seem unbelievable. Certain ideas may challenge your beliefs, while some questions may remain unanswered. That is perfectly natural.

I did not set out to convince readers of the truth of any particular philosophical concept. My intention was simply to open another door and invite you to look at familiar reality from a slightly different perspective.

You may read this book as an adventure novel, a love story, or a philosophical journey. Each reader will discover something different within its pages, depending on their own life experiences, worldview, and perhaps their willingness to consider the existence of something beyond the boundaries of what we ordinarily perceive as reality.

And if, after reading this book, you find yourself pausing even once amid the rush of everyday life to ask a question that has never occurred to you before, then this book has already found its own meaning for you.

And now, let us join the characters of our novel. They have been waiting for us.

Fakhriddin Yusupov

PROLOGUE. FLAMES AND ASHES



The United States, the 1960s. In a small hamlet, a house is burning. The villagers, still trying to put out the flames, already realize there is little left to save. A young woman, late in her pregnancy, lies on the ground, motionless with exhaustion, tears streaming down her cheeks. Struggling, she opens her eyes and sees through her tears several people bending over her.

"What will become of her now?" one woman asks.

"Don't know," a man replies. "She has nothing, and no one left."

"Let's take her to the Amish. Surely they will accept her."

The next time the young woman manages to open her eyes, for a brief moment, the faces she sees above her look unfamiliar. She can barely make out women dressed in traditional Amish clothing and a man wearing a black hat, a long-sleeved shirt, and pants with suspenders. They gather around, eyeing her closely.

Soon, she goes into labor. Drenched with sweat, she screams, cursing her life. A few weeks later, with the baby swaddled safely on the ground close by, she works in the field alongside other women, wearing the same traditional clothes. One day, her little son starts whimpering. Before long, she can no longer soothe him, and he cries throughout the day.

The local doctor examines the baby and says nothing seems to be wrong, unable to find the cause of the baby's incessant crying. The young mother is desperate. At night, one of the other women comes to her and

tells her in a soft whisper about an old medicine man who lives alone in the grasslands.

"We Amish people are forbidden to talk to the likes of him," she says, "but you are a stranger and maybe you can take your child to him. You won't be able to make that journey on your own though – it's more than a four-hour ride. Ask the deacon in the morning – I think he won't refuse to help you."

Meanwhile, the baby gets so weak, he starts to pass out. In the darkness broken only with the light of a lone lamp, with tears welling in her eyes, she watches his life ebbing away. This little being is the only one who gives meaning to her existence on Earth, and she knows she has nothing to lose except time. She decides to find the medicine man at all costs – or die trying, together with her little son. Under the cover of night, she harnesses a horse into a buggy and leaves.

The moon is full and bright. Trying to chase away her fears and her helplessness in the face of the unknown, the woman speaks to the moon. She feels that only the moon can help her and her son. "Thank you, Mother Moon, for lighting our path," she whispers. "Help us quickly reach the place where we will be safe from danger." The baby is shrieking and wailing, never able to fall asleep. When his mother loses all hope of finding someone, she sees a campfire. An old Native American man is sitting by the fire, staring steadily into the flames. A small patch of land is surrounded by a fence, so old it is almost entirely lying flat on the ground. Farther down, she spots a gate, just as rickety as the fence yet standing upright, against all odds. Inside, not far from the old man, two wolves are resting peacefully on the ground. They look at the woman once, then lower their heads again and, it seems, forget about her presence.

The dawn is breaking. The woman picks up the crying child and walks along the half-broken fence to the gate. The moment she steps inside, the baby abruptly stops crying and even smiles. She approaches the old man and sits down near him by the fire.

The old man remains still and silent, as if she isn't there.

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At length, without turning his eyes away from the flames, he says, "Not long ago, you saw a full Moon in a dream. Two elders were looking from the Moon right at you. Their clothes seemed strange to you."

"Yes," the woman says, remembering an almost forgotten dream.

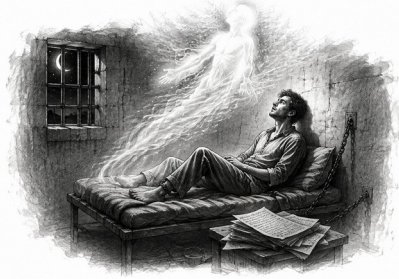
"These were your ancestors. They watch over you and your son, protecting the two of you."

"How is this protecting?" the woman cries out in exasperation. "I lost my entire family. Everything I had burned to ashes. My husband went to war and never came back. Is this how they are protecting me?"

"You are taking life too seriously," the medicine man says in a calm, even voice. "Life arises from ashes, and to ashes it turns in the end."

In a single smooth motion, he picks up a pinch of dust from the ground and throws it in the fire. The flames flare up. The young woman flinches away, covering her face with a hand. When she lowers her hand an instant later, the medicine man isn't there; he has disappeared without a trace. She looks back and sees the horse slowly turning around and walking away. The woman quickly takes her child and starts after the horse, but suddenly the two wolves bar her way. They don't seem threatening – merely lying down between her and the horse. Desperate, she turns around, looking for the old medicine man... and sees another wolf – an enormous one – standing behind her. He looks her squarely in the eye. She freezes with fear, feeling ice running down her spine, unable to turn away from the bottomless eyes which seem to reflect a world totally unfamiliar to her, mysterious and inexplicable.

CHAPTER ONE: THE AWAKENING



My name in this world is Tony Snyder. I am serving a long sentence at a Federal prison.

Prison is a horrible place. You could say it's a special kind of hell, designed and built by humans, and for humans. It gets particularly grim here when darkness falls, and inmates' voices fill the freezing-cold air. At night, you can hear the wails of those who still haven't accepted the fact they have been locked up here. They blame and curse everyone around, unable to bear the suffering they have been subjected to within these walls. Before long, the souls of these people will rush to heaven. First, one will break free from the body and fly away, then another, then more and more souls will take flight.

Right now, having left my body as well, I am in another reality. While out of the body, I am not dead, as you might have thought. Like so many others at this time of day, I am merely asleep.

Physical death isn't the only moment when human souls leave mortal flesh; something similar happens every night when we fall asleep. At that instant we travel to another – higher – reality where we help create the future. But when awake, we don't remember any of it. After all, the insane slipstream of our mundane reality takes us on such a merry ride we don't have the time to deal with abstract spiritual matters. Sad, but true. At that point we isolate ourselves from the life forces of the Universe and completely forget why we were born on Earth. Still, I think we are lucky to live in one of the most remarkable periods of humankind's existence on this

planet. This is the time of greatest opportunities that come about once in many millennia. In our times, literally everyone can obtain the knowledge needed for steering one's life in whatever direction one wants.

Today, we humans consume an unnecessarily large amount of planetary energy resources, justifying our wastefulness with the need to survive. But destroying nature endangers our very existence as a species. To compensate, the Universe has been sending more and more energy of enlightenment to Earth, trying to help us save our home. Of course, an inquisitive mind might wonder – why not simply remove from the face of the Earth those who make and perpetuate wrongful laws of existence – those who literally force people to live by primitive animal instincts? Well, the truth is, according to the rules of our game, nothing and no one should interfere with our reality directly.

The eternal question: "Who designed things to be that way?" has an answer, and it is simple. We did. More precisely, our higher selves. As I said, waking up in the morning, we don't remember it, just as we don't remember what happened before our birth and don't know what will happen after our death. What's more, we'll never know as long as we exist in the reality called Life. Yes, these are the rules – our rules, without which we'd have no interest in remaining in this game. We have established these rules in such a way that our higher selves – which I will talk about a little later – cannot directly interfere with our lives, even if they witness us lose our loved ones and our riches, or see the destruction of what has been built – the demise of everything so precious to a modern human being.

If you begin to feel something like indignation because of what you have just read, that is normal. And yet, give it a little more time, and the pieces of the puzzle will come together.

To help save our beautiful planet, now in critical condition, the Universe directs powerful flows of energy toward Earth. Humanity has a unique opportunity to make use of these universal forces. Seeing that opportunity, the souls of those who have "died" without reaching their goals may choose to be born again at this time, giving each of them a

chance to correct a past mistake and gain the experience they still need. In that sense, each departed soul may be given another chance.

As you might have already guessed, this chance is given to us right now, and we are unbelievably fortunate to live at this time. Missing it would be extremely unwise.

Let me tell you something remarkable. I won't remember anything of the above when I wake up in the morning. Nevertheless, through this book, my friends and I will tell you a few curious things about the reality called Life.

So... my name is Tony, and now I am in another reality, a space that looks very much like our clouds in a brightly lit sky. This is a realm of silence, peace, and tranquility. Every soul in this place experiences all-pervasive, unconditional love and understanding. However, this is not Paradise, as you might think. In fact, I am only a short distance away from Earth. From here, it looks gray and lifeless, just like the surface of the Moon or Mars looks to us. I see it that way because my condition and the distance separating me from our planet take me beyond the so-called hypnotic field – out of the range of the Moon's transmitters that provide the simulation we know as our earthly lives. Later I will return to this subject, but for the moment this is all that needs to be said on it. It's worth noting that you experience the same condition every night as well, and instantly forget everything as you wake up.

While my consciousness wanders in the realm of dreams, my soul continues its flight in the heavens. Perhaps your own soul is somewhere nearby. Ah, but no, right now, you are reading this book.

Here, in another reality, we are able to communicate with the souls of those we know and those we don't, as well as those we once knew or will meet in the future. Moreover, here we can meet even those souls who have left the body forever and returned to their celestial habitat. Here you feel like a completely different being. The fact is our souls help us gain maximum experience in our earthly incarnations. This is one of the reasons we can't recall what happened to our souls while we were asleep. Of course, from the commonplace standpoint, some events in our lives may seem complicated or even terrible. But let's not forget that, first, we attracted this experience ourselves in the first place, and secondly, would

you really enjoy watching a show where every move is known to everyone in advance? I wouldn't.

So let me invite you to a place that will shed some light on the secret of our spirituality – to an unknown, mysterious world.

In the midst of peace and tranquility, I begin to notice moving white silhouettes. They look like ghosts from a movie. To my soul, everything that happens here feels natural. And how else could it be? Here, I am home, among beings like myself. We are all wearing identical, impeccably white garments. Only the souls of the "deceased" differ slightly from those who still possess earthly bodies. The "deceased" lack the faint scarlet glow around the chest, roughly where the heart is located. This reality preserves some features of the body from the current incarnation, which makes it easier for us to understand what is happening. Here in the heavens, we share our impressions and pool our experiences so that, in the future, we can improve our earthly reality.

Three beings draw my attention. They stand close together, looking at one another and speaking in low voices. These are my friends and our main characters, so let us move closer. Two of the figures appear white; the third is Black. He has a kind face and caring eyes. His name is Jason, and I address him first.

"Jason, I still want to ask you once again – you aren't mad at me for what happened, are you?"

"Not at all, Tony, and you know it."

"I do, but I wanted to ask anyway."

I turn to the tall blond man at his left. "And you, Tom, are you going to make things right?"

"Ye-e-ah," says the man, sighing uneasily. "I don't think I'll be able to find my way in this incarnation. In any case, I'll do my best to try and gain at least part of the experience I'm supposed to gain. But even if it doesn't work out, it's no problem. I'll still have the opportunity to come into being on Earth once again. Although in my next incarnation, I'll likely have to experience poverty and

hardship. But then again, the more difficult life is, the more interesting it is to live."

"And you can be proud of yourself," says the man at my right. He has wavy hair and a naive expression on his face. "Tomorrow you will have an important day on Earth."

"That's right, Peter," I reply. "So, it seems."

"What are you dreaming about now?" Peter asks.

With a faint smile, I close my eyes, concentrate, and suddenly find myself in a large semi-dark metalworking shop. I am standing among tough-looking workers in dirty overalls. They are throwing huge pieces of metal stock over my head. I watch them with dread, all the time ducking and dodging. To add to my fears, one of the workers keeps shooting me dark looks, as if hinting sooner or later he will hit me with a heavy piece of metal. Nearby, railcars rumble past at high speed, nearly tipping over. In my dream, I am truly scared now. I open my eyes and answer Peter with a smile. "Just some stupid stuff, never mind."

Tom and Jason step aside; a beautiful young woman with a delightful smile comes up to us. She has a delicate face, and a barely noticeable mole on her right cheek makes her even more attractive. Her name is Cindy.

"Well?" she asks me. "Are you ready for tomorrow?"

"Sure, looking forward to discovering new things."

"You have learned a great deal, and tomorrow you will get the key to this knowledge," she says, smiling and already moving away from our company. "Remember, on Earth you are my soulmate."

For a while, I watch her go, and then turn to my friends, "Alright guys, it's time for me to wake up. But first, I want to take another look into my dream."

I close my eyes again and instantly find myself in the same factory shop. One of the workers, moving quickly, is pushing an iron rail cart loaded with scrap metal straight toward me. I rush away to escape, but it is difficult to run – it feels like I am walking knee-deep in sticky molasses. I turn around to see how far I have gotten from the man who is chasing me. To my horror, I see him right next to me. I freeze in fear. With a thunderous rattle, the cart starts to tip over, and wrenches, chains, bolts, and nuts come spilling down. I almost let out a helpless wail...

In the next instant, I woke in a cold sweat to the rumble of my prison-cell door opening. Yes, I was still in prison. By morning, my sentence would be over. The cell was about four yards long and three and a half wide. In the dim light, I could see two bunks along opposite walls. In the corner to the right of the door stood a toilet and a cracked washbasin. The walls were covered with peeling paint and pictures clipped from glossy magazines. A large stack of handwritten notebooks and papers lay at the head of my bunk.

The door opened, and my cellmate appeared in the doorway. He was a middle-aged man with somewhat dark skin and curly hair. I woke fully and sat up on my bunk. A frowning, stocky guard removed my cellmate's handcuffs and let him enter. Behind him, the heavy door rumbled shut and the lock clicked.

My cellmate's name was Ricky. He walked silently to his bunk and sat down. I noticed his eyes were very sad. For a while, he sat without a sound, staring at the floor. He didn't raise his head and didn't even seem to breathe. I looked at him from time to time, but seeing him retreating deep into himself, I made no attempt to start a conversation.

Finally, Ricky raised his head and broke the silence, smiling sadly, "What dreams did you see?"

"Nothing special," I replied without hesitation. "How was your meeting with your family?"

"Everything's fine," Ricky said. "My son is growing up, my wife is working, so, you know, everything is fine," he repeated in a sad voice.

"I have never seen you so sad."

"Well, I couldn't have come to see my wife and just sit there with a Buddha face all the time. She wouldn't understand me. But I do understand her very well. She will miss me."

Then Ricky stopped talking, and again we sat without a sound. Finally, he broke the silence.

"So you're going out tomorrow?" he asked and, as though accidentally, added, "What do you feel right now?"

I hesitated, choosing the right words. Then I leaned over a little and looked my cellmate right in the eye. "Ricky, if you want... remember, you said someday you'd tell the story about how you ended up in jail. You know, today is my last day here. Maybe, we won't have another chance." I

paused, realizing how my own words sounded and added, "At least in the near future."

"Maybe we won't," Ricky repeated. "Okay, for now we still have time, and I can tell you the story you're asking."

He stood up and walked slowly to the cell door.

That night, Ricky was the only one working at a small gas station, where they also baked and sold pizza. Now and then he looked at a handgun on the shelf under the cash register. After looking at it once again, he turned to see the clock. It was almost 9 p.m. Normally, at this time, few people stop by, and that night was no different.

Ricky's gas station was at the corner of 5th and one of those back streets that were never properly lit. This ill-fated intersection turned out to change his life completely, dividing it into a before and an after.

Because of the poor lighting, the black car parked on 5th, right in front of the gas station, was hard to see. Two people were sitting inside – a man and a woman – both looking at the gas station.

"Looks clear," said the girl in the passenger seat in a low voice, taking out a gun from the glove box.

The man in the driver's seat, heavily built, dark-skinned, took his eyes off Ricky and slowly turned his head in her direction. "You want to load that gun?"

"Nah," she replied, "he'll give it up anyway. I know him. And I don't really want to kill him either."

"Well then, go get'em."

She put on a mask specially bought for the occasion, threw the car door open, got out, closed the door, and took a quick step – and then slipped on the wet pavement. Falling down, she banged her knee hard against the curb – so hard the bone crunched, and sharp pain paralyzed her. For a few moments, she couldn't move. Then, she saw her friend at the wheel opening the car door for her. She struggled to her feet through the pain, and got back in the car. She threw the gun on the floor, nursing her bruised knee and repeating over and over that this was a bad omen and they shouldn't have come here. Then she turned to the driver and said quietly but aggressively, "Let's get out of here, now!"

Meanwhile, Ricky was counting the cash he had taken in during his shift, though money clearly was not the only thing on his mind. One moment he stared through the glass doors into the darkness; the next he glanced at the clock behind him, then at the gun on the shelf beneath the register. He turned once more to check the time. The glowing display read 11:55 p.m. Ricky peered into the darkness again, searching the poorly lit street for something suspicious.

But he couldn't find anything suspicious. He shook his head slightly, with a soft sigh, and a barely noticeable smile. Not this time, looks like. He took a pen and buried his mind in the register and the books.

About five minutes later, the bells above the door suddenly rang. Startled, Ricky nearly jumped and raised his head. His eyes opened wide with fear, and he drew back.

Someone wearing dark clothes was opening the door by pushing on it with their back. After a moment's confusion, Ricky recognized his wife, Norma. Holding their little son in her hands, she walked inside. Ricky, who was about to pick up the gun, abruptly pulled his hand away and wiped his sweaty palm against his shirt. A wide, happy smile appeared on his face. He came out from behind the counter, carefully took his son in his arms, and gently kissed his wife. Then, he started throwing the baby in the air and catching him – Ricky knew the boy loved it, and soon both parents were enjoying the sweet sound of the baby's delighted laughter. Finally, Ricky put his son on the floor, and he ran across the hall.

"Your son can't sleep," Norma said. "And I feel worried for some reason, too. So, we decided to pay you a visit and take you home. Just to make sure you didn't have a secret date or something," she added jokingly. "Seriously though," she continued, gathering her thoughts, "I've been feeling so heavy-hearted and can't say why."

At that moment, little Sam ran out from behind the counter with a gun in his hand. Ricky promptly grabbed the boy and took the gun away.

"Is this some kind of toy?" Norma asked, unable to hide her surprise and already realizing that it wasn't a toy at all.

"Not exactly," Ricky replied, stepping behind the cash register. He stopped, held up the gun by the barrel, and turned it handle-first towards

Norma. "See?" he said. "It's not loaded, it doesn't even have a magazine in." He put the gun back on the shelf.

"But why would you need it?" she asked, bewildered. "You've been saying yourself keeping firearms at our gas station is illegal."

Ricky leaned forward with both hands pressing against the table and looked up and away, wondering how to explain to his wife the presence of the gun. Then, gathering his thoughts, he looked at her and said, "Okay, see here... the other day I had a vision. And it warned me something might happen today. I suppose your feeling down had a reason, too. But luckily, looks like I was wrong, and nothing happened."

"What kind of vision was that?" Norma asked, her voice full of excitement and curiosity.

The bells above the door rang again, and Ricky shuddered once more.

The black car around the corner never left. The girl's knee still hurt like hell, but her partner, it seemed, did not pay any mind. He kept watching the gas station. After a while, the man moved his heavy look to the girl and blurted, "Can you go there?"

"Are you crazy?" she said, still writhing in pain.

"But we need money, remember?!"

"Can't do it today. Let's go back."

"No way," he said. "When the sun rises in the morning and the new day comes, I will be cussing myself for giving up tonight. I'd rather die tonight than end up broke tomorrow. So, if you don't go, I'll go myself. Dave leaves no business unfinished."

Grabbing her partner's hand and catching his eyes, she said loud and clear, "You are not doing it! You hear?!"

The office door opened, and Ricky's employee showed up on the doorstep – a rather short and skinny fellow with quick movements.

"Sorry, man," he blurted. "If you only knew what was happening on the road..."

"Don't worry about it, it's okay," Ricky interrupted, glad he didn't have to explain himself to Norma anymore.

"If it's alright with you, I'm going to take a quick bite and run along," the worker said quickly. He took a ready-made pizza lying on the counter, flicked the box open and saw the pizza wasn't cut. He put it on the table next to Norma and came up to the counter looking for something to cut it. On the wall by the counter, there was a magnetic board that held a knife. It was on the other side, and the counter was pretty high, so he had to jump a little in order to get it. After cutting the pizza and putting the knife on the table, he set to devouring slice after slice.

"Hey, be careful, don't choke," Ricky joked, placing a glass of soda in front of him. Then he walked to the register, opened it, and put the day's proceeds in a small brown sack his coworker brought. After that he marked something in the notebook. "Make a deposit tomorrow first thing, when the bank opens. This is very important. You got that?" He came to the worker.

"Don't worry, boss," the guy replied quickly.

Ricky handed him the sack. The worker put the unfinished pizza in another bag, took the sack, and put everything in his backpack.

"Alright, off I go," said the worker, putting the backpack on his shoulder.

Meanwhile, the black car was lurking in the dark like a foreboding. It emanated evil – the kind that often leads to human tragedy. Inside, matters were clearly coming to a head.

"Don't you get it? There are three of them inside, and a small kid," the girl continued with palpable anger.

"Tell me something I don't know!" said the man. "What else I know is what will happen if we don't get the money..." He cut himself short because he saw the station worker run out of the store and get into a car. The headlights came on, then the brake lights, and the car started moving. "See," the driver said. "Now there's just two of them."

"You idiot!" the girl howled. "He is there with his wife, and they are going to leave together."

"Shut up!" her partner barked. "You coming, or not?!"

"No!"

"Then I'm going on my own."

He pulled his gun out from under the seat. He took out the magazine to make sure it was fully loaded. Then, he put the magazine back in, took the gun's safety off, and racked the slide.

"Psycho!.." the girl said resignedly and took her head in her hands, realizing she wouldn't be able to stop him.

"Whatever," he replied more calmly. "But you do know if we don't get that damn money by tomorrow, we are going to regret it. We'll have to pay back what we owe. Besides, no one will give us a fix for free. Now, listen to me," he continued, "we drive up there, I get out of the car, you get behind the wheel and wait for me. Keep the engine running and the door open. The moment I jump back in the car, you floor it, and we get the hell out. And remember, this far out nothing is going to stop me." He finished and put a mask on.

Through the station's glass wall, Ricky watched his employee's car pull away. Then he saw a camper pull into the station - a red motor home. It was not new, but it seemed well cared for. An elderly man got out, walked to the pump, and began rummaging through his pockets, probably for a credit card. His companion remained in the front passenger seat, talking on her cell phone.

Another car whizzed in from the street at high speed, passed the old man, and came to a stop a few feet from the office, tires squealing. A tall, masked man got out and walked quickly toward the building. Ricky felt cold shivers run down his spine. He shook his head, hoping it was only a dream and now he would wake up. But it wasn't a dream. Suddenly, everything seemed to shift into slow motion. He saw a giant man approaching his door, pushing it open hard, and moving straight toward him. In his right hand, the unwelcome guest had a gun pointing at Ricky.

His eyes wide with fear, Ricky looked at Norma. She instantly grabbed the boy running beside her, with one hand by the shoulder and the other by the head, and held him tight. Her eyes, which reflected fear and hatred, were directed at the stranger.

"Get the money here, quick!" the man ordered, throwing a crumpled plastic bag at Ricky. The sensation of the bag brushing against his chest helped Ricky out of his daze. He even tried to grab the bag but failed, and it fell on the floor. Ricky looked at his wife again. She was standing there, still pressing her son against her. The baby, unaware of the danger, was

just standing still and hugging his mother with both hands. Instinctively, he felt what was happening in front of him was not a game at all.

Pale with fear, Ricky opened the register without thinking, pulled out a few small bills and put them on the counter with trembling hands. Now he saw only the huge barrel of the gun in front of him – everything else seemed to be shrouded with a veil of thick fog.

"That's all I have," he said nervously. The robber did not respond. A few seconds passed, which seemed to Ricky an eternity. Then, under the gunman's gaze, he blindly pulled his wallet out of his pants pocket and threw it on the counter next to the small bills. Almost instantly, Ricky reached in his pockets again, hoping to find more money there, but instead of money his hands grabbed some handwritten notes, a pen, paper clips...

"Take it all," he kept muttering. "Take it, just don't kill us."

Finally, in one hurried motion he took a watch off his left hand, and in the same instant it fell on the counter in front of the robber.

The gunman looked at the counter. The catch was rather meager, if not outright poor. Sneering, he turned to Ricky and ground through his teeth, "So you like money more than your own life? What about her life?" He pointed the gun at Norma. "Maybe this will help you find more?"

Now Ricky found himself in a completely different reality. He didn't see the huge gun barrel anymore, and the fog around him somehow dissipated. He didn't feel any fear for his life either – instead, he was overwhelmed with a boundless hatred toward the trespasser and the fear of losing his loved ones – his family, to which he devoted his entire self. Without Norma in it, Ricky saw his life as nothing but a meaningless void. He realized he would easily accept death if it served to protect his wife and son. The gunman took a couple steps towards his wife and child. He put a gun to Norma's head and silently looked at Ricky. The station manager knew that now he could lose the people he loved most, but he also knew he couldn't change anything.

"Listen," he pleaded, "I just gave the day's proceeds to someone. He left just before you came in!"

The light of day somehow dimmed in Ricky's eyes, and he felt his knees give way. There was a deafening buzz in his ears. Desperate, he clutched his head. His eyes fell on the unloaded gun under the cash register.

Without thinking, he grabbed the gun with his right hand and threw it at the gunman, screaming wildly. The robber, not expecting anything like that, instinctively raised his hand with a gun to protect his face. His groan made it clear that he was in pain. Then, he saw on the floor the object that was thrown at him. The realization enraged him. "You son of a bitch," he roared, pointing his weapon at the cheeky man, with a firm intention to shoot him dead.

Ricky froze, waiting for the shot. Strange as it may seem, he wasn't afraid. What mattered was that for this little while he managed to protect his family. He stared down the barrel, and his whole life flashed before his eyes like a kaleidoscope. Facing death, he was humbly ready to accept it.

Seconds seemed to stretch into eternity. Stupefied, Ricky waited for the bullet to fly out of the barrel. Finally, he noticed some movement. 'Well, this is it,' he thought. But instead of the muzzle flash, he saw the gun barrel lowering. For a while, Ricky followed the motion with his eyes, still not realizing what was going on and waiting for the shot. Another few seconds passed, and his consciousness started to clear. He forced himself to look up and saw, as if in a dream, the gunman leaning forward at an unnatural angle and beginning to fall. Ricky turned his eyes a little to the right and saw a knife stuck in the man's side. It was buried to the handle, and the handle was in the hand of his wife, who was still trying to drive the knife even deeper. It was the same knife his assistant left on the table after cutting the pizza.

Ricky still couldn't fully take in what was happening. Then, a deafening gunshot blast jolted him, instantly bringing him to his senses. As the robber fell to the floor, his gun went off. Finally having regained clarity, Ricky saw a motionless body lying face down, its legs slightly bent. A black plastic knife handle was sticking out from its left side. Ricky looked at his wife. She huddled in a corner, holding the boy tight. She looked squarely at him, and tears ran from her horrified eyes. She was shaking but uttered no sound.

Through the glass doors, Ricky saw the elderly man, apparently scared by the gunshot, hurry back to his camper. His companion anxiously urged him to walk faster. Then Ricky's attention was drawn by a masked woman who apparently got out of the same car as the robber. Instantly he realized the nightmare wasn't over.

But now, he had no fear. On the contrary, he felt a tide of unimaginable anger rising inside. His teeth clenched and his eyes squinted with malice. Swiftly, he raised the folding counter-top and rushed to the gun, still in the hands of the robber lying on the floor. The masked girl, armed, appeared in the doorway. The sight of her partner's lifeless body shocked her. With widened eyes, she looked at Ricky. He recognized the girl, but now she held a gun in her hand, and he had to protect his family. Of course, if he knew her gun wasn't loaded, perhaps things would have turned out differently. But as they say, there is no escaping fate.

Ricky saw the girl's eyes in the holes of the mask getting bloodshot from anger. He instantly pulled the gun from the motionless robber's hand. Catching his move, she quickly pushed the glass door with her shoulder and, limping, sprang outside. As soon as he got the gun, Ricky, obsessed with stopping the second unwanted guest, fired at her. The bullet shattered the glass door but missed the girl. Trying to shoot at the girl again, Ricky stepped forward but tripped on the lying body, accidentally pulling the trigger as he fell. The sound of the shot was deafening. Time slowed down again, and he watched the bullet fly out of the barrel. It missed the girl by far. It flew in the direction of the elderly couple's red camper, which was already leaving the gas station. "No!" Ricky shouted at the top of his lungs. But the bullet caught up with the camper and pierced its side near the gas tank. There was a thunderous blast, and the camper blew up in flames. At the same moment, the black car with the masked girl behind the wheel screamed into full speed and disappeared into the night.

The entire lot of the gas station was cordoned off by the police. Two fire engines were standing near the burned remains of the camper. The

firefighters were wrapping up the hoses and preparing to leave. Paramedics were carrying a stretcher with a burned body, covered with a sheet, and loading it into an ambulance. It was the second ambulance. The first one took away another burned body a few minutes ago.

Ricky and Norma stood by the cash register, holding one another. Ricky wrapped his left arm gently around his wife and held their sleeping son in his right. The boy breathed peacefully, his head resting on his father's shoulder. Norma cried quietly against Ricky's other shoulder. Ricky was lost in thought. His mind raced as he struggled to absorb what had happened to him and his family, and no matter how hard he tried to compose himself, his eyes filled with tears.

His thoughts were interrupted by a young, energetic police officer who entered the office.

"You'll have to come with us," he said quietly, adjusting his hat. It seemed to Ricky the officer was touched by the situation and felt uncomfortable bothering the already frightened family – but an order was an order.

Ricky looked at the officer and nodded in agreement. Kissing his wife and sleeping son, he carefully handed the boy to Norma. Then he looked her in the eye and answered the question he saw there: "Let's stay calm. Everything will be fine."

Norma looked out the window as the officer helped her husband get into the back seat of the police car. The car moved away, illuminating the streets with flashing red and blue lights.

When Ricky finished his story, I burst out, "But you were protecting your family! How was any of this your fault?!"

A strange smile appeared on my cellmate's face. He watched me closely, as if it depended on my reaction what turn our conversation would take next. He kept silent for a minute, then said calmly, "It was my fault that two innocent people died because of my negligence. Also, I had no right to keep a gun at the gas station."

"But it was just an accident, a coincidence!" I insisted.

"Do you still believe in coincidences?"

"I think there's something you're not telling me. Did you know that girl? Why did you have a gun and why wasn't it loaded?"

After a minute of silence, as if having made a decision, Ricky said, "At one of my spiritual practices, a few days before what happened, I had a vision."

I kept looking at the person who was talking to me and tried to comprehend what I was hearing. While Ricky was telling his story, he was turning into a nervous man behind the counter, into a vindictive shooter, into a loving father. When he finished, he once again became a strong and composed spiritual mentor.

"At that moment I saw a girl who wanted to rob me, but what was odd, for some reason, she had a toy gun in her hands. The wall clock behind her showed the date and time. The vision was very clear. And amazingly, I knew this girl. She was my neighbor's daughter. The next day, I went to see that neighbor and asked her about her daughter. Looking regretful, she said they had a fight, and after that, her daughter hadn't been home for over a month. And when she heard about my visions and fears, she pointed out her daughter respected me more than her own father, and I was the last person she would hurt."

Ricky paused briefly and then said something that seemed to me even stranger, "Looks like you are supposed to realize a lot more."

I wanted to ask him what he meant, but Ricky raised his hand and stopped me, "As far as I understand, you still don't see any connection between what happened to each of us and the fact that we ended up in the same cell?"

The new light in which I now saw my cellmate was difficult to understand. I mumbled, "Maybe some things start to clear up. But in general, you're right, I don't see any connection."

"Okay, now you tell me your story. How did you get here?"

"But I've told you many times what happened to me."

"Please, do it for the last time," Ricky asked with a barely noticeable smile.

That day, years ago, my friends and I went on a picnic in the woods. The company wasn't that big. Peter and I came by car, and some other

guys rode bikes. When we got to the spot, we parked and made preparations. Peter and I were pitching a tent, others were taking food and beer out of the trunk. Everyone found something useful to do. Soon we settled around a tablecloth laid out on the grass. The spirits were high, and everyone tried to outdo the other guy telling some funny story, of course, not forgetting to sip the beer. Almost every story ended with a burst of laughter. 'We are having so much fun, I hope it doesn't bite us in the butt,' a wary thought suddenly crossed my mind.

The stack of empty beer bottles was growing fast. Although we were planning to spend just one night here, we had enough supplies for a few days. After another joke, the guys laughed again. You couldn't even tell anymore whether the joke was indeed so hilarious, or they were already drunk enough not to care. I laughed, too, and fell over on my back, holding on to my stomach with one hand while trying to hold the bottle upright with the other. Despite my best efforts, I spilled much of the bottle of beer. Peter, who was sitting next to me, laughing just as hysterically, snatched the bottle out of my hand and started pouring the contents over the groin area of my pants. The company burst into laughter again. When I finally felt something was wrong and got up to my feet, there was already a large wet spot on my pants, right between my legs. Everyone except Peter, who prudently ran a few yards away, was rolling on the ground laughing.

I wanted to catch up with my assailant and get even, but at that moment my attention was distracted by a revving engine. Turning around, I saw one of my friends, Tom, start his bike. Peter, seeing I was going to chase him, quickly ran towards the revving bike and hopped on behind Tom. Then, raising his hand and turning around, he shouted, "Now, Mr. Wet Pants, catch up with us if you can!"

With both arms, he held tightly to Tom, who twisted the throttle to the end and let the bike bolt forward with a roar. I ran up to another bike parked nearby, hopped on, and immediately started the engine. Shifting the gear, I felt someone jump on the back seat.

"And now, let's go," I heard Jason's mischievous voice, "let's catch these bastards and rip'em apart."

I turned the throttle sharply and released the clutch. The race in a small forest glade began. Two bikes were racing through rough terrain,

dipping in small pits and bouncing on bumps. The rest of our friends, holding their breath, watched this accidentally started, mad, drunken race. Squeezing every drop of speed from my motorcycle, I began to catch up with my assailant. Tom's bike was a little to my left, a couple of yards ahead. Seeing I was closing in on him, Tom cut me off by turning his wheel to the right. To keep my balance, I needed to turn right as well. We dashed along a downward path. Now, Tom and Peter were to our left, still on the glade and five yards higher than our path. I needed to rev up. Driving over another bump, I suddenly noticed a large fallen tree in front of me, blocking the road. I pressed the brakes as hard as I could, but it was too late. Jason, seeing the collision was imminent, clutched at me reflexively, tucking his head behind my shoulder.

Tom already thought himself the winner, reflected in his happy face and the triumphant smile. He turned his face to us and saw the big log that blocked our way. Not realizing the danger, Tom looked at us again. Jason and I had already struck the log, and now Jason was still clinging to me as hard as before, only there was no bike under us.

This made Tom even merrier. He couldn't stop laughing and took his eyes off us to look forward. Then he finally realized our predicament, turned around again, and saw Jason and I tumbling chaotically down the path, and the bike about to overtake and crush us. Tom pressed the brakes with his hands and feet at the same time, and his bike stopped almost instantly. He threw it on the ground and rushed to us. Peter followed, his face frozen in anxiety.

When Tom and Peter ran up to us, I was writhing in pain, making weak attempts to get up. The mangled motorcycle was nearby. Jason lay with his eyes open, not moving. Now and then he would close his eyes for a while, but never tried to get up. I finally managed to stand and, limped over to Jason.

"Are you all right?" I asked, leaning over him.

Jason weakly shook his head and quietly said, "I'm not sure. I feel my whole body sort of weak."

The three of us picked him up and quickly put him on his feet. Jason stood uncertainly and even smiled a little. This reassured me, and I said, keeping my eyes on Jason, "Well, didn't you scare me, man!" And repeated more cheerfully, "didn't you scare me!"

And I gave Jason a friendly slap on the shoulder. He still had that uncertain smile on his face when he suddenly swayed and fell to the ground, hitting his temple against a small rock. Horrified, I rushed up to him. But now, Jason didn't move at all, his head hung helplessly, and his eyes lost the spark of life. Still holding him, I realized he was beyond help. I turned my face up, shouting, "No-o-o!"

Everything that transpired afterward was like a dream. Now, my life was divided in two parts, before and after. All I remembered during this time were short fragments, including the trial, where, like a thunder from a clear sky, the judge's hammer struck and the jury's verdict sounded: GUILTY.

I finished my story and raised my head. Ricky was sitting across the cell, staring at me.

"I know it hurts to think about it, and I promise not to ask about it again," he said.

"You said nothing happens by accident. Do you see any connection between what happened to us and the fact you and I are here together?" I asked.

"Yes," Ricky replied. "There is a connection. What's more, whatever happened before was bringing about this exact outcome. But the answer to the question why you and I ended up in the same place at the same time will be yours to find. Let's say this is your homework. And I'll give you a little hint. That night at the gas station, I was supposed to die. Let's just say it didn't have to be at the gas station and not necessarily that day, but my time to leave my Earthly shell had already come. And then it happened the plans of your spiritual guide turned out to be a little different... besides, they didn't contradict the plans of my higher self. That's why we have what we have now, that is, being here in prison," said Ricky, smiling mysteriously.

"But I don't have a spiritual guide," I mumbled uncertainly. "Besides, all this sounds like ultimately I am the reason you ended up here."

"Not at all. What I'm saying is, you are the reason for me living longer. But let's leave this aside, or else we'll get lost in ifs and buts. Your mother has something to tell you about it. It's a heavy load on her mind. I'll tell you

this; not every woman is able to survive what she did. And now you must hear something very important from me. This requires your attention and full trust."

I started talking, "You know that I don't doubt you..."

Ricky interrupted me, "Take off your shirt." The request was pretty odd. Nevertheless, remembering the previous conversation, I took my shirt off without asking any questions.

"Now," Ricky continued, "tear it so we can make ropes. You won't need this shirt anymore."

This request was even stranger. Is he planning an escape? I wondered. But I wasted no time: I made a hole in the shirt with a pencil and began tearing it.

Ricky took a small piece of paper and wrote something on it. He folded it several times, went to the left corner of the cell, got down on all fours, and slipped the note into a barely visible crack between the walls. Then he ran his finger along the wall to make sure the note was hidden.

"What is that? Who is it for, and why?" I asked, surprised.

"I have already told you that for ordinary people like us, life is sometimes unpredictable. However, everything that happens is mathematically accurate," Ricky replied.

"Well, you lost me there – what's it all about?"

"You see," Ricky said with a smile as he approached the stacks of his written notes, "it's none of your business yet. When the time comes, you'll find out. Now give me the strips of cloth."

I just realized what the ropes were for. Ricky wanted to tie his manuscripts into a bundle. I handed him a few strips of fabric that Ricky immediately began to tie together to make a longer rope. Then, he carefully tied the manuscripts. I watched him for a while and got back to tearing up my shirt; there wasn't enough rope yet. It looked like Ricky was in a hurry, although I couldn't fathom the reason.

"Yes," Ricky said, as though having read my mind, "we need to hurry, or else everything you've learned from me here will remain a theory that you won't understand."

Intrigued by what would happen next, I hurried to help him. Soon, we finished the task and ended up with four bound stacks of handwritten papers.

"Now it's all yours," Ricky said, sitting down on his bunk.

"What? How's that? You've spent years writing these!" I said, astonished.

"Yes, but you'll need them more. Besides, they're no use for me anymore."

"I don't like the way you say it. You mean we won't see each other again?"

"We will," Ricky said with a smile, "rest assured. But it's going to happen somewhere else. And the way it will happen will be a little different

– in a different format, so to speak. But believe me, this is not what matters right now. So, let's not waste any more time. Please go sit on your bunk."

I sat down without saying a word. Ricky picked up what he always kept at the head of his bunk – a blank sheet of paper, a pencil, and a small slat he used as a clipboard – and handed it all over to me. "Write down how you'd want to see yourself after you leave here."

"I don't get it – what do you mean exactly?"

"For example, would you like to become a big official in the government, or a rich businessman? Make a lot of money, own a luxury car and a yacht?"

"Well, who doesn't want that?!"

"Okay, so write down where and how you see yourself."

I had no idea why Ricky needed me to do this, but I accepted his writing kit nevertheless. I focused on the task, biting the tip of the pencil, and eventually started writing. This must have something to do with what Ricky was saying earlier, I hypothesized. I wrote that I would like to become a big politician or businessman, make a lot of money, have my own yacht and a nice house on the seaside. "Well, I think that's enough." I smiled at Ricky and handed him what I had written.

He quickly ran his eyes through the text and nodded, "Alright, not bad."

He took the blanket off his bunk, put it right on the floor in the middle of the cell, and sat down at one side with his legs crossed. Then he gestured to me to sit down from the opposite side so we faced each other. I got up and walked to the middle of the room, noticing a strange sensation; my entire body was quivering. When I stepped on the blanket, the quivering increased, and in a few seconds, I felt warmth surrounding my body. At the moment when I started leaning over to sit down, I could barely feel my weight. Finally, I sat down and looked at Ricky. He reached out to me, with his right hand raised up and his left hand lowered. I reached out to him, too. Our hands touched, and Ricky squeezed my hands in his own.

We sat there for a while, looking each other right in the eye in silence. Soon, I felt my body beginning to sway evenly, although I wasn't actually moving. Ricky's head began to lean forward slowly. Immediately, I felt my head leaning, too, and strangely enough, I still felt as if I was sitting

straight, since I kept looking in front of me and saw the space above Ricky's head. I looked around, noticing something had changed, but so far I couldn't tell what exactly. "My goodness," I thought, "I must be dreaming." But immediately I saw it didn't look like a dream. Everything was real. I saw my cell where I had been serving time for years, my bunk, my personal belongings.

And before I could think of anything else, I swung gently and slowly began to rise. From there, I looked down. Ricky was still sitting there with his head down, and in front of him was no one but me, still sitting there. My heart was pounding. I had no idea what was going on. Continuing to rise up slowly, I tried to get back to my body, but failed. Then I noticed a very thin, glowing, pulsating thread. It was quite bright and connected me to the body sitting on the floor. Soon I began to realize the body didn't bother me much. I looked at the door of the cell and soon hovered above it. Then I moved smoothly through the wall and ended up in the prison corridor.

I saw wardens strolling to and fro and looking into prisoners' cells from time to time. I saw many threads going up as well. Then it dawned on me they probably connected souls to their bodies, and since it was nighttime, many were asleep, and their souls were rising upwards. "But where do they all go?" I wondered, continuing my climb. As I moved higher, the objects below became duller and less recognizable.

I had already reached the ceiling of the four-story building and began to pass through it without feeling any resistance. From this height I could see the whole prison. Suddenly, a translucent soul caught my attention. It was no different from the others, except it lacked the same luminous thread I, and many others, had. It seemed the creature looked at me very closely while flying by. Then I realized that this soul had left its earthly body forever.

Continuing my flight upwards, I noticed I could only see clearly the roof of the building, while the prison yard and, in fact, the entire Earth had already turned into a gray mass, not unlike the surface of any desolate planet. When I looked up again, the sky began to lighten. Islands of bright white clouds became visible. I felt utter serenity. The power and love of the Universe seemed so close that I was overwhelmed with an unprecedented

feeling of joy and happiness. I was drawn higher and higher, sensing whatever was drawing me getting ever stronger. It felt as if I was returning home, to the place where I had always been and from where I had come to Earth only for a short time. Incomprehensible joy began to fill me, along with the awareness I was coming to my real home, where I was expected and welcome. Now that I left my physical shell and saw the gray planet below, I began to realize my whole physical life was just a fleeting vision.

I tilted my head back and smiled blissfully, full of boundless happiness. The sky was getting brighter and brighter, and when it seemed I was about to reach my destination, an unknown force started to slow down the flight, although I didn't want that. Not knowing what was going on, but wishing to continue my journey in the heavens, I wanted to keep on flying. But something went wrong. Suddenly a breeze came that made me swing a little. Looking down, I realized it was the thin bright thread that kept me from rising still higher. Focusing, I reached upward. I felt absolutely no need to go back to Earth. But the unknown power pulled me back.

I looked into the sky again and saw the bright white clouds gradually getting shrouded with the darkness of the night sky. Something inside me was eager to go up, while another part of me knew exactly that I had to get back into my physical body. I surrendered to the pull and flew down quickly and smoothly. Soon, I began to make out the gray and lifeless surface below the roofs of the prison buildings. Then I saw the buildings themselves, and finally, the entire area began to take on a familiar look, as if an invisible painter drew it on the gray canvas.

Coming back, I passed through the roof again without any resistance, noticing on my way thin threads of light pointing upward as before, connecting souls to their bodies. Then I moved through the wall of my cell. Once inside, first I saw Ricky, and then myself – that is, my body, which was still sitting still and holding onto my cellmate's hand. I still had a strong desire to go back to the sky and didn't really feel like coming back into my Earthly body.

I woke up when I felt Ricky letting go of my hands. I opened my eyes, having no inkling about what had happened, barely realizing I had just come back to my body from another reality. I brought my hands closer to my eyes and began examining them, not entirely able to accept the fact that they were my hands.

Ricky watched me silently for a while, then, bearing in mind there wasn't much time, asked, "Do you still want to become a big businessman or politician?"

"Why?" I asked back in a quiet and peaceful voice, still looking at my hands.

"Well, that's what you wanted, just recently," Ricky said.

"Why?" I asked quietly, looking at Ricky.

Ricky raised his notebook so that the front cover was facing me and made a seemingly absurd request. He asked me to put my finger through it. Without thinking, I slowly raised my hand and poked my finger at the notebook. It might have looked astonishing, but my finger passed through the paper sheets without any resistance. Still in semi-trance, I held my finger gently to my face and started inspecting it. Without turning away, Ricky picked up a piece of paper from the floor and gave it to me.

"Read it," he said, "these are your desires. You wrote them down just a few minutes ago."

I calmly took the paper and started reading. After reading it several times, I began to feel the state of tranquility leaving me. Finally, I lowered the paper and started shaking my head, hard, just like a dog that just gotten out of the water. Then, crumpling the note, I looked at Ricky and asked curtly, "What was that? Where was I?"

Now it was totally clear. I wrote the note, but the one who had just read it, were two completely different people.

"You'll have time to think about it," Ricky said quietly.

For a while I kept sitting still, unable to grasp what had happened to me. I was both the same, and completely different. What I wrote a few minutes ago no longer sounded like something my current mindset could relate to. I didn't want to be either a politician or a businessman; I had absolutely zero desire to have more money. All these things suddenly became irrelevant. I knew I still had to be in this body for some time. Another part of me didn't want to agree with that, because the place I had just visited was filled with happiness and peace, harmony and joy. And the feeling that place was my true home, where everyone would be happy to see me back, only added to my inner conflict.

"Ricky, please tell me, what happened to me? And why did I come back?"

"The place you visited is where you came from into this world," my friend explained. "But first you need to understand why you were allowed to make a visit like that. Then again, as you might have guessed, I don't know everything. But since you've been sent back, you must be here. I suppose you have to continue on your way, but from this point on the path you walk will be much wider, unlike the paths of many other people living on Earth. You must understand, the wider the road, the more opportunities it offers, and the more opportunities, the higher the responsibility. This is the eternal law of the Universe, and it is a just law, in contrast to the laws of people, which often work to serve the interests of a few, or to be bent to serve them."

"But why do I need all this?"

"You'll be answering that question on your own, and soon enough," Ricky said. "Besides, you need to get some sleep. And remember, everything you have learned here, and your recent journey, will give you the mind power to help your intentions come true. But there is one caveat. If you lose your way, this power will destroy your life."

"My life?"

"That's right. To put it another way, the life of someone who calls himself Tony will be destroyed. I know you have many questions but wait a little. If things go wrong, you'll meet an old man or some other person... At least that's how I see him – an old gray Native American. So, listen to what he says."

"Okay. But how will I know it's him?"

"You'll know, don't worry. By the way, Tony, you speak and otherwise communicate with the Moon, right? Where did you get this talent?"

"From my mother. She is very respectful of the Moon and addresses her as Mother Moon. So, when I see the Moon, I say hello as well, show my respect, and sometimes share my impressions."

"And? Does the Moon talk to you, too?"

"Maybe it's just my wishful thinking, but I feel something akin to regard for me. Sometimes I feel my body filled with warmth and love. Although I can't explain it, the fact remains I feel good about communicating with the Moon. Since I ended up here, I've learned to communicate with the Moon through the walls without even seeing it."

"Well, you're lucky to have such a mother. I think you'll find out more when you meet her. But don't put off meeting her once you get out. Like I said before, she has something to tell you."

"Tell me what? About the Moon?" I asked enthusiastically. "Maybe you could tell me more right now? I mean, it would be an understatement if I said I could die of curiosity."

"Well, yes, I could tell you more, but chances are, at the moment, you're not going to get it anyway."

"Still, can you just tell me – pretty please!"

"Well, okay, just imagine I'm telling you a sci-fi theory. It'll be easier for you that way."

"Alright."

"Speaking of the Moon, first of all, it is one of the most important elements that helps maintain life on Earth. The Moon acts as a powerful relay station, re-transmitting our entire reality – much like a movie projector casting an image onto a screen. Only in this case the screen, as you may have guessed, is our planet."

"You mean, the whole diversity of life on Earth exists only thanks to the Moon?" I asked.

"No. The entire Universe works to create our reality. I'd even put it this way. The main purpose of the Universe is to create and sustain the conditions for life on our planet. Only the Universe doesn't work directly with the Earth – it works through the Moon. The Moon processes the endless flow of information transmitted by the entire Universe. We perceive the result of this entire system through our senses and experience it as our lives. Most people experience that result as the only reality there is."

"I agree, and I am one such person."

"Well, don't feel bad," Ricky said, smiling. "You're not alone. The truth is, what we are experiencing now is not the only reality on Earth. The Moon broadcasts a whole group of sub-realities onto our planet..." Ricky paused, choosing the right word, and then continued, "Yes, I think 'sub-reality' is the most appropriate term."

"I wonder what it looks like."

"For example, instead of our prison, in another sub-reality there could be an ocean on this spot, or a park, or whatever. In this reality, we are tightly sealed within a body with five built-in receivers, and they give us a hopelessly limited range of perception. This is done to make things more interesting – to add intrigue, mystery, and emotion. And what do you make of it?"

"What about other sub-realities – are things different there?" I asked, overwhelmed.

"Everywhere it's different, but this is not what should concern you most for now. While you're here in this body, don't let your mind get bogged down in thinking about visitors from so-called superior realities or other divine entities and whatnot. There is not much use in these concepts, but they do lead you astray from your own true path. What you need is to be present within yourself, know yourself, and change yourself."

"Can you at least tell me where the aliens come from?" I wasn't letting go easily.

Ricky smiled – the question had little to do with the subject – but he decided to answer anyway.

"You see, the Earth, being an amusement park of sorts for human beings, is a very complex system. To function, it extends beyond our dimension. As for the flying saucers and humanoids, we created them ourselves in order to support the attraction called Life on Earth. I hope you understand that by "we," I mean our higher selves. And, even if some aliens existed, why would they need to contact humans in one of the myriad sub-realities? Besides, the conscious span of a human life - from diapers in infancy to diapers in old age - lasts only a few decades on average. Whereas, say, they can live millions of years, measured as time flows in our so-called dimension."

"Millions of years?" I cried out.

"Well, I actually took pity on your brain and didn't tell you these creatures can live forever. Look, I know how you must feel about this conversation and me speaking mostly in riddles. But right now you are only at the beginning of your path, and life itself will soon answer your questions – that way the answers you're looking for will be more useful to you, and you won't forget them."

After hearing that, I didn't dare to ask more on the subject. But this time, Ricky, as though having felt my unspoken question, continued. "The thing is, you have already returned to your fully programmed state of existence on Earth. And the real world you just visited has already faded from your waking consciousness. Now, you have no choice but to start thinking again with your protein brain, which is capable of forming its thoughts based only on information received through senses built from the same biological material. Now tell me, Tony, why would we need such advanced extraterrestrial beings? If they are more naive than we are, then we will take advantage of them and seize their planetary resources for ourselves. Then we will play the generous conqueror and grant them reservations on their own planet. And if they turn out to be stronger than we are, we will surrender and then turn on one another for a pat on the head and a shiny medal. Isn't that a bit too primitive? Why would highly intellectual beings from another planet need us and our way of thinking? Okay, it could be they're going through the same stage of development and had a mindset similar to ours. But then it wouldn't make much difference; the authorities of the two civilizations would join forces and devise new ways to exploit their own people, who would remain none the wiser. Now tell me, how could that be useful for the Universe?" He made a short pause and continued, "I deviated from the subject so you could see that waiting for extraterrestrial beings makes no sense. Going back to the specifics; we are in an illusory world. Even more specifically, we are hypnotized, and the source of our hypnotic state is the Moon."

"Wow, this really is hard to believe. So, is that why the Moon always faces us with only one side?"

"Very perceptive, Tony," Ricky said with a trace of irony. Then he smiled. "The Moon can't do it any other way."

"Doesn't that mean that if the Moon stops broadcasting, I'll just disappear? Is that how it works? You know, it's getting kind of creepy." Ricky's theory really captured my attention.

"I asked you to pretend this is just a sci-fi theory, at least for now. And now, let's go to sleep. Although it wouldn't hurt to add a few more words, since I started talking about it. No power can make you disappear. But if something happens to the Moon, as you

say, it will just make the shroud fall off our so-called reality. And, as you are beginning to see, it's only an illusion. Here's an interesting fact: hypnotists hack this reality all the time, although not for long."

"What do you mean, they hack reality?"

"For example, a hypnotist can give you a bitter onion and program you to feel that it is a sweet pear, and you will be happy to eat that pear. But pretty soon the hypnotic spell will wear off, and you will come back to the original hypnotic state induced by the Moon, which I was talking about earlier. So, you'll see the onion as the onion again. You know what I find amusing? Even hypnotists can't explain exactly what happens to a person in a hypnotic state."

"Wait, now I have even more questions." But when I caught Ricky's expression, I knew it wasn't a good time. "Okay, maybe you're right about sleeping." I went to my bunk, realizing that I wouldn't be able to take in everything I had been through today all at once.

Ricky picked up the blanket we had been sitting on and headed toward his bunk as well. "There isn't much time left to sleep," he said. "They'll wake us up soon."

Peter's house was full of excitement. His wife, Lucy, was baking an apple pie, and Peter himself was frantically searching for his car keys. A man of about sixty sat on the couch, calmly watching the commotion. He was Tony's father. He tried to hide his emotions, and it looked as though he was succeeding. Today, his son was getting out of prison.

"Lucy!" Peter shouted, "have you seen the stupid car keys? I can't find them."

"Look in the pants you were wearing yesterday."

"I've already looked through all my pants, they're not there."

"Then, maybe you left them in the car."

Peter rushed outside and ran to the car parked by the house. He opened the door, searched inside, then headed back to the house. When he walked in, Lucy saw he had the keys in his hands. Peter turned to Tony's father and asked, "Mr. Snyder, are you sure you don't want to come with me?"

BORN WITH THE RIGHT TO HAPPINESS

"I am," he replied. "You go on, and I'll wait here."

Peter ran out of the house, got into the car, and left.