

**DO NOTHING**



# DO NOTHING

*The Alchemy of Presence*

Tai Phan



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*For those who sit with the silence  
and discover it was never empty.*

## Foreword

This is a story about a boy and his father and a dark room.

It is also a story about silence, and what happens when you stop running from it. About the things that rise up when you sit still long enough. About the strange, difficult, beautiful discovery that sometimes the most powerful thing you can do is nothing at all.

Nika is not a saint or a prodigy. He is a teenager with a phone and a short attention span and a head full of noise. His father is not a guru. He is a man who learned stillness the hard way — through loss, through fear, through the kind of desperation that leaves you with nothing except what was already there.

This book does not have all the answers. Neither do they. But they sit together, and they try, and sometimes that is enough.

If you are looking for a manual, this is not it. If you are looking for a quiet place to sit for a while — you are welcome here.

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## The Spark of Curiosity

Nika sat on the rooftop with his legs dangling over the edge, watching the city flatten itself into evening. The apartment building across the street turned its windows orange, then blue. Somewhere below, a motorbike coughed and went quiet.

Leo had left an hour ago. They'd passed his phone back and forth playing a game Nika couldn't remember the name of now. It had been fun. He was fairly sure it had been fun.

But something else had started — a feeling like the space between his ribs had grown. Not pain. Just emptiness. The kind that comes when you've been moving all day and suddenly stop.

He sat with it for a while. The sky turned the color of a bruise. He went inside.

Down the hall. Past the kitchen where his mother was chopping something that smelled like ginger and oil. Past his own door with the poster peeling at one corner.

His father's study light was off. The door was open.

Nika stopped.

His father sat on the floor, cross-legged, in the dark. No lamp. No book. No phone. Just sitting there — hands on his knees, back straight, eyes closed. Like a piece of furniture that had always been there.

The street noise filtered in through the window. Motorbikes. Someone calling a name. But inside the room, the silence was different. Thicker. Like it had weight.

Nika watched for what felt like a long time. His father didn't move. Didn't shift or scratch or sigh. His chest rose and fell so slowly it was hard to tell he was breathing at all.

"What are you doing?" Nika finally asked. His voice came out louder than he'd meant.

His father opened one eye. The corner of his mouth turned up.

"Playing a game," he said.

Then he closed the eye again. And the room was still.

## The Invitation

By morning, Nika had almost forgotten about it. Almost. He was eating cereal, scrolling his phone with one hand, when his father sat down across from him with a cup of tea and that look. The one that meant he was about to say something Nika couldn't pretend he hadn't heard.

"You want to know about the game," his father said.

"Not really," Nika lied.

His father smiled. He reached for the glass of water on the table and set it between them. Then he took a bottle of ink from his shirt pocket — the kind he used for calligraphy — and held it over the glass.

"Watch," he said.

A single drop fell. Black against clear water.

Nika watched it bloom. The ink didn't dissolve immediately — it hung there, suspended, a dark cloud with edges that curled and feathered like smoke underwater. Tendrils reached outward, spiraling, turning the water gray at the edges while the center stayed dense and dark.

He didn't know why, but he couldn't look away.

"I didn't do anything to it," his father said. "No stirring. No force. The drop fell, and I watched."

The ink kept spreading. Slower now. Filling the water the way a rumor fills a room — gradually, until you can't remember when it started.

"That's the game?" Nika asked. "Sitting in the dark watching ink?"

His father laughed. Not his teaching laugh. His real one — short, surprised, like he'd been caught off guard.

"No. The game is what happens inside you when everything gets quiet. The ink is just to show you what it looks like from the outside."

Nika looked at the glass. The water was pale gray now. Uniform. The ink was everywhere and nowhere.

"It doesn't disappear," his father said. "It becomes part of the water. Your thoughts are like that too. Your fears. Your noise. When you stop stirring them, they don't vanish — they settle. They become part of you instead of running you."

Nika didn't understand. Not really. But the ink was still moving at the edges, barely, and he didn't want to look away.

"Can I try?" he asked.

His father slid the ink bottle across the table. "Tonight," he said. "If you want to play the game, come to my room when it's dark."

Nika nodded. He picked up his phone again. But for the rest of the day, he kept thinking about the ink — the way it had moved without being told to. The way it had found its own way through the water. Patient. Unhurried. As if it had nowhere else to be.

## The Dark Room

**T**he room was smaller than he expected. Just a corner of his father's study, cleared of books, with a single cushion on the floor and a lamp in the corner turned so low it barely made a difference.

"Sit," his father said.

Nika sat. Cross-legged, the way he'd seen his father do it. The cushion was firm. The floor was cold through his socks.

His father sat across from him and dimmed the lamp further. The room went dark — not completely, but enough that the walls disappeared. Enough that there was nothing to look at.

"Close your eyes," his father said. "Feel your breathing. That's all. Just feel it come in and go out."

Nika closed his eyes. The darkness behind his lids was different from the darkness of the room. It was closer. More personal.

He breathed in. The air was cool in his nostrils, warmer in his chest. He breathed out.

For about thirty seconds, it was fine. Even pleasant. A softness in his body he hadn't noticed before, like muscles he didn't know were clenched had started to let go.

Then the cold came.

Not in the room — in his body. A patch of coolness on the right side of his back, spreading inward. It wasn't painful. It was just wrong. Like something had changed without permission.

He tried to breathe through it. The cold spread.

And then the voice started.

It wasn't a real voice. More like a thought that had put on a costume. It sounded like him but meaner. Sharper.

"This is stupid," it said. "You look stupid sitting here. Go back to your room. Go play something. This isn't for you."

Nika squeezed his eyes tighter. "Go away," he thought.

The voice got louder. "You're wasting your time. Your father is weird. This whole thing is weird. You don't belong here."

Nika's jaw clenched. His hands balled into fists on his knees. He fought the voice the way you'd fight a wave — throwing himself against it, pushing back, trying to shove it down into silence.

It didn't work. The harder he pushed, the louder it got. The cold spread through his back, into his ribs. His heart was hammering. He opened his mouth to say he wanted to stop—

And then a hand. Warm, solid, resting on his shoulder.

His father didn't say anything. He just kept his hand there. The weight of it — steady, unmoving — was like an anchor dropped into rough water.

Nika's breath shuddered. His eyes burned behind his closed lids. Something in his chest cracked, not painfully, but the way ice cracks in spring — a release.

He cried. Not much. Not dramatically. Just a few tears that slid down his cheeks and dried in the dark. The voice went quiet. The cold faded. Not because he'd beaten them, but because something else had arrived — something larger and warmer that didn't need to fight.

They sat like that for a while. His father's hand on his shoulder. The dark pressing close but no longer unfriendly.

When the lamp came back on, Nika blinked against the light. His father's face was calm. Not triumphant. Not pitying. Just there.

"How was it?" his father asked.

Nika wiped his face with his sleeve. "Terrible," he said. Then: "Can we do it again tomorrow?"

His father smiled. "Yes," he said. "We can do it again tomorrow."



## The Players Within

**M**orning. Kitchen table. The glass of ink-water from yesterday was still there, completely gray now.

"What was the scariest part?" his father asked over breakfast.

Nika chewed his toast slowly. "The voice," he said. "It told me I wasn't good enough for this. That I should quit."

"Whose voice was it?"

Nika frowned. "Mine. But not mine. Like a version of me that hates everything."

His father poured more tea. "You've got a lot of those," he said. "We all do. Think of them as players. Like characters in a game. Each one wants something — your attention, mostly. Some of them want to protect you. Some just want to keep things the way they've always been."

"So what do I do with them?"

"Nothing."

Nika stared. "Nothing?"

"Watch them. That's it. Don't play their game. Don't argue with them. Don't try to make them leave. Just — watch. The way you watched the ink."

"The ink dissolved on its own."

"Yes," his father said. "It did."

Nika looked at the gray water. The ink hadn't fought. It hadn't tried to stay concentrated. It had just done what ink does when you stop forcing it into a shape.

"The players don't go away," his father added. "They just lose their grip when you stop feeding them." He tapped the glass. "Like this. The ink is still here. It just doesn't run the show anymore."

Nika thought about the voice in the dark room. How loud it had been. How small it had become after his father's hand landed on his shoulder.

He hadn't fought it. He'd cried, and it stopped.

"So crying was the right thing?" he asked.

"There's no right thing," his father said. "You just stopped fighting. That's when everything shifted."

Nika picked up his toast. He didn't fully get it yet. But something about the gray water — the way it was calm and clear despite having ink in every molecule — stayed with him all day.

## Ink and Water

**A**fter school, Nika went to the kitchen and got a clean glass. He filled it from the tap, watched the water settle, then uncapped the ink.

He held the bottle over the glass for a long moment. Then he let a drop fall.

It was different this time. He wasn't watching it to learn something. He was watching it the way you watch rain — not for a reason, just because it was happening.

The ink bloomed. Dark center, feathered edges. It twisted slowly in the water, pulled by currents too small to see. He could have sworn it had a kind of intention — not intelligence, but direction. As if the ink knew where it was going, even though it had no brain and no plan.

He sat with the glass for twenty minutes. The water darkened. The ink lost its edges.

Somewhere between minute ten and minute fifteen, a thought arrived: the ink doesn't disappear. It becomes part of the water. And the water doesn't reject it. It just makes room.

He thought of the dark room. Of the cold patch on his back. Of the voice that had told him to leave.

What if the voice wasn't an intruder? What if it was already part of him — ink in water — and the problem wasn't the voice itself, but his need for the water to stay clear?

He stared at the glass. The water was gray now, soft and even. Not dirty. Just changed.

He left the glass on the counter. His mother moved it later, thinking he'd forgotten it. He didn't correct her.

## The Hand That Chooses

**H**e got into a fight at school. Not a real fight — more of a sharp exchange that left him shaking.

A kid named Bao had said something about Nika's bag. Something dumb, forgettable. The kind of thing that happens twenty times a day and means nothing. But Nika had fired back — quick, cutting, the words leaving his mouth before he'd even registered the thought.

Bao's face went red. The hallway went quiet. A teacher appeared. It was over in thirty seconds, but Nika carried it home like a stone in his pocket.

"What happened?" his father asked.

Nika told him. Left nothing out.

"He said something. I reacted. I didn't even think about it."

His father nodded. He didn't look disappointed. He looked interested.

"That's the word," he said. "'Reacted.' Not 'chose.' Not 'decided.' You reacted. The voice spoke, and your body obeyed."

"So what was I supposed to do? Just take it?"

"You had a choice," his father said. "Not between fighting or taking it. Between reacting and seeing."

"What does that mean?"

"Reacting is automatic. It happens before you know it's happening. Seeing is the space between the trigger and your response. It's a gap — tiny, sometimes only a heartbeat long — where you get to decide."

"I didn't feel any gap."

"You will," his father said. "The more you sit in the dark room, the wider that gap gets. It doesn't mean you never respond. It means you choose how."

Nika sat with that. The hand that chooses. Not the mouth that fires. Not the gut that clenches. The hand — steady, deliberate — that picks up the pen or sets it down.

That night, he sat in the dark room for fifteen minutes. Nothing happened. The voice didn't come. The cold didn't come.

He just sat there, breathing, thinking about Bao's face. Thinking about the gap he hadn't found.

It was the most boring fifteen minutes of his life. He didn't quit.

## Facing the Monsters

**T**he second real session in the dark room was different. He was ready this time, or thought he was. He sat down, crossed his legs, closed his eyes. The darkness arrived like an old acquaintance.

The cold came — same spot, right side of the back. He noticed it the way you notice a car pulling up outside. Acknowledged. Noted. He kept breathing.

Then the voice.

Not whispering this time. Loud. Clear. As if it had been rehearsing.

"You're weak. You know that? Sitting in the dark like a scared kid. Everyone else is living. You're hiding."

Nika's jaw tightened. His hands started to clench. He caught himself. Opened his fingers. Breathed.

The voice tried again: "You think this makes you special? This is nothing. You are nothing."

And something shifted. Not in the room. In Nika. Instead of pushing back, instead of arguing, he did what his father had said. He watched.

Not the words — the feeling underneath them. A tightness in his chest. A heat behind his eyes. A trembling in his stomach that felt older than the voice itself, like something that had been living in him for years.

He watched the way he'd watched the ink. Without trying to change it. Without trying to understand it.

The voice kept talking, but it was losing confidence. Like a performer sensing the audience isn't buying it. The words came slower. The pauses grew longer.

"You don't even — you can't — why won't you—"

And then it stopped.

Not dramatically. Not with a final shout or a whimper. It just ran out of things to say, the way a fire runs out of wood.

Nika sat in the silence that followed. His body was warm. The cold on his back was gone. Not chased away — just gone, the way clouds move on when the wind changes.

When the lamp came on, his father was watching him.

"The monster came," Nika said.

"And?"

"I didn't feed it."

His father nodded. That was all. Just a nod. But in it, Nika felt something he couldn't name — a recognition, the way one musician nods to another after a song played right.

## The Path to Understanding

**H**e walked to school differently the next morning. He couldn't explain what had changed. His bag was the same weight. The route was the same route. But his feet seemed to find the ground more squarely, as if the pavement had opinions about being walked on and he was finally listening.

He noticed things. The way sunlight hit the tops of the buildings but left the sidewalk in shadow. The weight of his backpack pressing on one shoulder more than the other. The smell of pho from a cart he passed every day but had never actually looked at.

He wasn't enlightened. He was just paying attention. It felt like putting on glasses he didn't know he needed.

In third period, a kid tripped in the hallway. His books went everywhere. The hallway laughed — that quick, reflexive laughter that comes before anyone decides whether something is actually funny.

Nika didn't laugh. He wasn't being noble. He just saw the kid's face before the laughter registered. The flash of embarrassment. The way his eyes went to the floor.

Nika picked up a book and handed it back. The kid took it without looking up. Said "thanks" to the floor.

It wasn't a moment. It wasn't a lesson. It was just a thing that happened on a Tuesday, and Nika noticed it, and that was enough.

## The Bench

Nika found Leo at their usual bench, hunched over his phone, thumbs moving in furious rhythm. The screen flashed. A tiny explosion. Leo pumped his fist.

"New high score," Leo said without looking up. "Three hundred and twelve."

Nika sat beside him. He watched the screen — the spinning colors, the dopamine bursts, the way Leo's jaw tightened with each near-miss. He recognized it. He'd been there.

"Do you ever wonder what happens when you put the phone down?" Nika asked.

Leo glanced up. "Yeah. I get bored." He grinned. "That's why I don't put it down."

Nika laughed. But the question stayed with him — not for Leo, but for himself.

That night, he tried. He sat on his bedroom floor, legs crossed, eyes closed. Just breathing. Do nothing, his father had said. Simple.

It lasted eleven seconds.

His phone buzzed on the nightstand. His leg itched. He thought about tomorrow's math test. He thought about what Leo had said — three hundred and twelve — and wondered if he could beat it. He opened his eyes.

"This is stupid," he muttered.

He sat again. Closed his eyes again. The itch returned. The math test returned. But this time, he noticed something: the thoughts didn't stop, but they also didn't stay. They moved through him, water through a net. Not because he mastered anything. But because he stopped trying to catch them.

Fourteen seconds that time. Then twenty. Then he lost count.

When he opened his eyes, the room looked the same. But something had shifted — as though the walls had taken half a step back, and the ceiling had lifted a little higher.

He didn't tell Leo. Not yet. Some things needed roots before they could stand in the wind.

## The Lamp of Awareness

**T**hat evening, his father was in the living room with the lamp on low. Not meditating — just sitting. Nika sat across from him.

"Can I ask you something?"

"You just did."

"Funny. The lamp thing — in the dark room — is my awareness supposed to be like a flashlight? Pointing at stuff?"

His father tilted his head. "More like a candle. A flashlight goes where you aim it. A candle just glows. It lights everything in reach without choosing."

"So I shouldn't focus?"

"Focus is fine. But there's something underneath focus. A wider kind of seeing. You don't aim it — you just let it be on."

Nika thought about that. "Like peripheral vision?"

"Like that. But for everything. Your thoughts, your feelings, the sounds in the room, the weight of your body on the cushion — all of it, at once, without grabbing any of it."

"That sounds impossible."

"Try it at dinner."

He did. He sat at the table and instead of thinking about the food or scrolling his phone or replaying something from school, he just — noticed. Everything at once. The clink of his mother's chopsticks. The taste of fish sauce, sharp and salty. His own impatience to finish and go to his room. The tired lines around his mother's eyes that he usually didn't see.

It lasted maybe forty seconds before his mind grabbed onto something — a text he needed to answer — and the candle became a flashlight again.

He told his father afterward.

"Forty seconds," his father said. "That's good."

"It felt heavy," Nika said. "Seeing everything at once. Like it shows you things you'd rather not look at."

His father nodded slowly. "That's why most people prefer the flashlight," he said. "You get to choose what you see. The candle doesn't give you that option."

## The Monster Too

**H**e had a bad day. The kind where small things pile up until you're carrying a weight you can't name. A low grade on a test he'd studied for. Leo canceling plans. His phone dying at lunch.

None of it mattered, and all of it mattered.

He came home and went straight to the dark room. Not because he wanted to practice. Because he didn't know where else to go.

He sat. Closed his eyes. Waited.

The monster came fast tonight. Not the voice from before — something heavier, denser. A feeling in his chest like a fist made of lead. Not telling him anything. Just sitting there. Pressing.

He watched it. Like his father taught him. Let it be there without feeding it.

It didn't dissolve.

He waited. Five minutes. Ten. Fifteen. The fist stayed. Heavy, dull, unmoved.

He sat with it for twenty minutes. It didn't change.

When he opened his eyes, his father was in the doorway.

"It didn't go away," Nika said. His voice was flat.

"No."

"Then what's the point? I did everything right. I watched it. I didn't fight it. And it just — sat there."

His father leaned against the doorframe. "Some things don't dissolve in one sitting," he said. "Some things need more time than you want to give them."

"So I just keep sitting with it? Forever?"

"Not forever. Just tonight. And then tomorrow, if it's still there." He paused. "The point isn't that the monster leaves, Nika. The point is that you stayed."

Nika stared at the floor. The answer annoyed him. He wanted the clean version — the one where you sit still and everything melts away and you feel peace.

But the fist was still in his chest. And his father was still in the doorway. And neither of them had left.

"Same time tomorrow?" his father asked.

Nika nodded. "Same time tomorrow."

## The Power of Questions

**T**hey walked through the neighborhood on Saturday morning. His father liked walking without a destination. Nika was still getting used to it.

"Let me ask you something," his father said. "Which is more powerful — an answer or a question?"

"An answer. Obviously."

"Why?"

"Because it solves the problem. The question is just the problem."

His father stepped around a puddle. "An answer closes a door, Nika. It says 'this is how it is, done, move on.' A question opens one. It says 'what if? What else? What's behind this?'"

Nika kicked a pebble along the sidewalk. "So answers are bad?"

"No. Answers are useful. But people get addicted to them. They want everything solved, labeled, filed away. And when you live like that, you stop looking. You stop being curious."

They turned the corner. A dog barked at them from behind a gate, then lost interest.

"Let me show you," his father said. "Who are you, Nika?"

"I'm Nika. Your son. A student at—"

"Yes, but who are you?"

"I just told you."

"Those are labels. Son. Student. Nika. Those are things other people call you. Who are you when nobody's watching? When there's no name, no role, no mirror?"

Nika opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again.

Nothing came out.

His father smiled. "That silence," he said. "Right there. After you ran out of answers and before you tried to fill the gap — that silence is closer to the truth than any label you'll ever wear."

They walked on. Nika didn't say anything for two blocks. Not because he was upset. Because the silence had weight to it now, and he didn't want to put it down.

## The Knife and the River

**T**here are two ways of knowing something," his father said one evening. They were on the porch. The sky was going dark blue at the edges.

"The first way is the knife. You cut things apart to see how they work. You analyze. You measure. You separate the flower into petals and stems and pollen and say 'now I understand the flower.' Schools love this. Tests love this."

"And the second way?"

"The river. You don't cut anything apart. You step in and let it carry you. You understand by being inside it. Not by taking it apart, but by moving with it."

Nika thought about it. "Can't you do both?"

"You can. Most people only use the knife, though. They dissect their life into pieces and wonder why it feels lifeless."

"What does the river know that the knife doesn't?"

His father looked at him. A flash of something in his eyes — surprise, or pride, or both.

"How the pieces fit together," he said. "The knife gives you parts. The river gives you the whole."

Nika thought about the dark room. When the voice had come, he hadn't analyzed it. He hadn't asked what it meant or where it came from. He'd just been there with it. In the river.

"Is the dark room the river?" he asked.

"The dark room is where you practice stepping in," his father said. "Life is the river."

The last light left the sky. A streetlamp buzzed on.

"Most of what I've been teaching you," his father added quietly, "can't be understood with the knife. You have to feel your way through it, even when it doesn't make sense. The understanding comes later — not from your head, but from somewhere lower. Somewhere older."

Nika nodded. He didn't fully understand that, either. But he was learning to be okay with that.

## The Flower of Understanding

**I**t happened on a Thursday, without warning. Nika was sitting in the dark room. Eleven minutes in — he'd started timing himself. The voice had come and gone quickly, like a guest who checks the door and sees no one's home.

And then, for maybe ten seconds, everything stopped.

Not the world. The world was still there — the distant hum of the fridge, the neighbor's TV through the wall. But inside him, the machine that never stopped running — the planner, the judge, the worrier, the voice — went quiet.

Not asleep. Not suppressed. Just. absent.

Like walking into a room where a fan has been running for years and someone finally turns it off. You didn't know how loud it was until it stopped.

Ten seconds. Maybe less.

Then it came back. The thoughts, the noise, the planning. Like someone flipped the switch on again.

He opened his eyes. His father was sitting across from him, still as stone.

"Dad. I think something just — stopped."

"What stopped?"

"Everything. The noise. The voices. The planning. Just for a second. It all went quiet."

His father didn't make a big deal of it. Didn't clap or smile widely or explain what had happened.

"That's good," he said. "It'll happen again."

The simplicity of the response annoyed Nika for about three seconds. Then he realized: that was the lesson. The quiet wasn't a trophy. It wasn't an achievement to dissect and celebrate. It was a door that had opened and would open again, and the best thing to do was not stand there describing the door.

## The Seed of Not-Knowing

**T**he most important thing I can teach you," his father said the next day, "is how to not know."

"That's not teaching. That's the opposite of teaching."

"Exactly."

Nika rolled his eyes. His father saw it and laughed.

"Listen," his father said. "When you think you understand something, you stop looking at it. You file it away. 'Got it. Done. Next.' And the thing — whatever it was — becomes a dead specimen pinned to a board."

"So I should never understand anything?"

"No. Understanding is fine. But hold it loosely. Keep the door open. Because the moment you think you've figured something out completely, you've stopped learning it."

Nika thought about the ten seconds of silence from the day before. He'd spent all morning trying to understand what happened. Taking it apart. Using the knife.

"Like yesterday," he said slowly. "I had that moment of quiet. And then I spent the whole day trying to figure out what it was. And now it feels — smaller. Like I killed it by looking at it too hard."

His father nodded. "The beginner's cup has room. The expert's cup is full. You can't pour anything new into a full cup."

"Did you just quote something?"

"Probably. The point is: every real step you've taken — sitting with the voice, watching the ink, finding the silence — happened because you didn't know what you were doing. You were open. Uncertain. That's not weakness, Nika. That's the door everything walks through."

Nika leaned back. "So the goal is to stay stupid forever?"

"The goal is to stay curious," his father said. "They look similar from the outside."

## The Garden of Nothingness

What's in this room?" his father asked.

They were in the study. Evening light. The lamp was off this time, but the window was open, letting in enough glow to see.

Nika looked around. "Chair. Desk. Lamp. Books. Cushion. You."

"What makes the room useful?"

"The stuff in it."

"No." His father pointed at the space between the chair and the desk. The gap between the books on the shelf. The open floor where the cushion sat. "That does. The emptiness. Without it, you couldn't put anything anywhere. The room is useful because of what's not in it."

Nika frowned. "That's a weird way to think about a room."

"Think about a cup. What makes it useful?"

"The emptiness inside it."

"Think about the dark room. What makes it powerful?"

Nika sat with that one. The dark room was powerful precisely because there was nothing in it. No light, no sound, no distraction. Just space. Space for everything he carried to rise up and be seen.

"The nothingness," he said.

"Right. Emptiness isn't the absence of things. It's the space that makes things possible. Your mind works the same way — the silence between your thoughts is where awareness lives. The pause between your breaths is where presence lives."

He tapped his chest. "People are afraid of emptiness. They fill every second with noise, every room with furniture, every silence with words. Because emptiness feels like nothing. And nothing feels like death."

"But it's not," Nika said. It wasn't a question.

"It's the opposite," his father said. "It's the only place that's truly full."

Nika looked at the space between the desk and the chair. It held nothing. It held everything possible.

## Tea Time

**H**is father made tea. Not a ceremony. Just tea. Kettle on the stove, leaves in the pot, water poured.

They sat at the kitchen table. His father talked about work — a problem with a supplier, a meeting that went long. Normal stuff. The kind of thing Nika usually half-listened to while checking his phone.

He didn't reach for his phone this time. Not because he was being disciplined. He just didn't think about it.

He noticed the steam curling off his cup. The way his father's hands wrapped around his mug — large hands, calloused at the fingertips, ink stained at the edge of one thumb.

"This is practice too, isn't it," Nika said. Not quite a question.

His father looked up. "What do you mean?"

"Just — sitting here. Drinking tea. Talking about nothing. It's the same thing as the dark room, just with the lights on."

His father took a sip. Set the cup down. A small smile crossed his face — not the teaching smile. The real one.

"Now you're getting it," he said.

They finished their tea. His mother came in and asked about dinner. The conversation moved on. But something about those ten minutes at the table — the quiet ordinariness of them — felt more like the dark room than the dark room did.

No silence. No emptiness. No monster. Just tea, and his father's voice, and the steam disappearing into air.

## The Nature of Concepts

**I**s everything you've been teaching me just concepts?" Nika asked one afternoon. They were walking again. His father's favorite mode of philosophy was apparently pedestrian.

"Yes. All of it. The ink, the lamp, the candle, the players, the monsters — they're maps. Not the territory."

"What's the territory?"

"What you feel when you sit in the dark. What happened those ten seconds when everything stopped. What you saw in Bao's face when you were about to fight him." His father stepped around a crack in the sidewalk. "Those are real. The rest is just me pointing."

"So when do I stop needing the maps?"

"When you can walk without looking at them."

"How will I know?"

"You won't think about it. You'll just walk."

Nika turned that over. He thought about how, the first few times he played a new game, he'd check the tutorial constantly. Then less. Then never. At some point, the knowledge moved from his head into his hands, and the tutorial became unnecessary.

"It's like muscle memory," he said.

"Yes. Right now, the stillness is something you do. Someday it'll just be something you are."

They walked in silence for a while. Not the loaded kind. Just the kind where two people are comfortable enough to not fill every second with sound.

"But the finger pointing at the moon is still useful," Nika said.

"Very useful," his father agreed. "Just don't stare at the finger."

## The Dream

**H**e had a dream. Not the kind you forget before breakfast — the kind that stays, like a stain on the inside of your eyelids.

He was in a dark space. Not the dark room. Something larger. No walls, no floor — just space, stretching in every direction, warm and close like the inside of a lung.

Things moved at the edges. Not threatening. Just — present. Shapes without names, shifting, circling, brushing against the borders of his awareness. A golden creature with too many wings. A silver weight that pulsed like a heartbeat. Something green and spiraling that felt like laughter.

He didn't freeze. He didn't run. He followed their rhythm — not with his body, but with his attention. Wherever they moved, he moved with them. Not chasing. Just keeping time.

It felt like the dark room, except the dark room had never been this alive. This was the dark room if the dark room had a pulse.

He woke up at 4 a.m. Lay in bed with his heart beating fast and a strange sweetness in his mouth, like he'd been eating something he couldn't name.

At breakfast, he told his father.

His father listened the way he always listened — still, attentive, giving the words room to land.

"Don't dissect it," he said when Nika finished. "The unconscious speaks in images, not arguments. If you take it apart, you'll lose the thing that matters."

"What matters?"

"How it felt."

Nika sat with that. The dream didn't explain itself. He let it be — like the ink in water, like the voice in the dark. Something that had arrived and would find its own place if he didn't interfere.

He carried it with him for the rest of the week. Not thinking about it, exactly. Just feeling it there, underneath everything else, like a low note humming through a song.

## The Game Begins

**H**e decided to sit alone. No father. No guide. No hand on his shoulder to anchor him if things went sideways.

He went to the dark room after dinner, set a timer on his phone for thirty minutes, placed the phone face-down on the floor, and sat.

The first ten minutes were restless. His right knee itched. His back ached. He could hear his mother washing dishes, and each clink of ceramic pulled him out of whatever he was settling into. He thought about a video Leo had sent him. He thought about lunch. He thought about whether he was meditating correctly, which he was pretty sure meant he wasn't.

The next ten minutes were quieter. The voice arrived — familiar now, almost expected — and tried its usual routine. "This is boring. You're bad at this. You could be doing literally anything else."

He let it talk. It was like listening to someone tell a joke you'd already heard. The words landed and slid off. The voice got frustrated, tried harder, repeated itself. Then gave up, the way it always did when it realized no one was arguing back.

The last ten minutes were different.

Not peaceful, exactly. More like — textured. The silence had layers to it. Some of them were warm. Some were cold. Some were just empty. He floated between them without choosing, the way you float in shallow water when you stop swimming.

His body settled into something deeper than comfort. Not good, not bad. Just there.

The timer went off. The sound startled him, which surprised him — he'd been sure he was counting every second. But somehow thirty minutes had folded into what felt like ten.

He opened his eyes. The room was the same. He was the same. But something between him and the room had shifted, like a pane of glass removed from a window.

He'd played the game. By himself. For real.

## Surrender

Not every session went well. He sat down on a Wednesday night and couldn't find stillness anywhere. Every position hurt. His mind raced — homework, a text he'd left on read, something embarrassing he'd said two years ago that his brain had decided to replay in full resolution.

He fought it for fifteen minutes. Tried breathing techniques. Tried watching the thoughts. Tried pretending he was calm. None of it worked. The harder he tried to do nothin, the further away it got. Like chasing a cat.

At minute sixteen, he gave up.

Not gave up on the dark room. Gave up on making it work. He just sat there — uncomfortable, distracted, thinking about everything, meditating about nothing. A boy in a dark room failing at silence.

And then, somewhere around minute twenty, something shifted. Not a breakthrough. Not a flash of light. Just a quiet softening, the way a clenched hand relaxes when you fall asleep. He wasn't peaceful. He was just tired of fighting.

He remembered a story his father had told him about Max, the dog from when he was seven. How Max had run into the woods, and

Nika had chased him for an hour — calling, crying, running until his legs gave out. And when he'd finally stopped, sat down on a log, given up completely — Max had trotted back on his own. Tongue out. Tail wagging. As if the whole chase had been unnecessary.

The stillness came back the same way — not because Nika found it, but because he stopped looking.

He sat with it. Not holding it. Not celebrating it. Just sitting.

When the timer went off, he had one thought:

*Surrender wasn't giving up. It was the door. And you couldn't push it open. You had to stop pushing.*

## The Inner Rhythm

**T**he next time he sat, something new happened. He noticed his body.

Not the aches and itches — those were old news. This was different. A tingling along his forearms, barely there, like static. A pulse in his belly, slow and steady, separate from his heartbeat. A warmth spreading from the center of his chest outward.

He'd never felt these things before. Or, more likely, they'd always been there and he'd never been quiet enough to notice.

"Your body has always been doing this," his father said when Nika described it. "Pumping, buzzing, adjusting, healing. Twenty-four hours a day. You just never listened."

"It felt — alive. Like, more alive than usual."

"That's because you weren't thinking. When you're thinking, you're in your head. When you stop thinking, you drop into the body. And the body is happening right now, always. It doesn't live in the past or the future. It's the most present thing you've got."

Nika thought about video games. How the screen was always there, but you only noticed the frame rate when it stuttered. His body was like that — always running, invisible until he paid attention.

"There was a pulse," he said. "Between my eyebrows. Like a drum only I could hear."

"That one's interesting," his father said. "Don't chase it. Don't make it mean anything. Just notice it when it comes."

"What is it?"

His father shrugged. "I don't know. Nobody does, really. People have a hundred names for it. What matters is that you felt it."

Nika didn't push. He was learning that some answers ruin the question.

## The Oil Lamp

**I**t came to him during a session — not as a thought, but as an image. An oil lamp, burning. The flame steady and small. And then the oil running out, and the flame going with it. No struggle. No protest. Just a slow dimming, and then dark.

He opened his eyes and told his father.

"Where did that come from?" his father asked.

"I don't know. It just — appeared. I wasn't thinking about lamps or oil. It showed up like a picture someone slid under a door."

His father leaned back. Something shifted in his face — not surprise exactly, but a kind of recognition. "That's what happens when the mind gets quiet enough. You don't think your way to answers. They rise. Like water from a well you didn't know you were sitting on."

"So the oil lamp — what does it mean?"

"What do you think?"

Nika closed his eyes again, the image still vivid. "The flame needs fuel. When the fuel runs out, the flame dies. No fight. Just — physics."

"And?"

"Thoughts are like that. Feelings. The voice in the dark room. They all need fuel. And the fuel is my attention. The more I pay attention to them — argue with them, chase them, fight them — the more fuel I give them. The more they burn."

"And when you don't?"

"They go out. Not because I killed them. Because I stopped feeding them."

His father was quiet for a moment. "You didn't learn that from me," he said.

"I know."

"That's the library."

"What library?"

"Yours. Inside you. Your mind is like a noisy room — televisions blaring, people arguing, phones ringing. But underneath all of it, there's a quiet floor with books everywhere. Real books. The kind written by your own experience, your own life. When the noise stops, you can hear them."

"The oil lamp was one of those books?"

"A page. Maybe a sentence. But yes."

Nika looked at his hands. They were resting on his knees, palms up, relaxed. He hadn't placed them that way on purpose.

"Is there more?" he asked. "In the library?"

"More than you'll read in a lifetime," his father said. "But it doesn't matter how much is there. What matters is this: you found it without looking. That's how it works. Not by searching. By getting quiet enough that the answers come find you."

Nika thought about the oil lamp for the rest of the week. He didn't dissect it. He didn't explain it to Leo. He just held it the way you hold a warm cup — gently, close to the chest — and let it do whatever it was doing.

## The Schoolyard

**T**he test came on a Tuesday.

Nika was walking home from school when Minh and two of his friends blocked the path by the bike racks. Minh was a year older, a head taller, and carried his anger like a backpack he never set down.

"Hey, ghost boy," Minh said. "Still sitting in the dark with your daddy?"

The words landed. Nika felt the heat rise through his chest, quick and sharp. His fists tightened. The old reflex — fight back, push back, say something cutting — surged through him like water hitting a dam.

He thought of the quiet room. Of the voice in the dark. Of the cold that had crept through his body, and what had happened when he stopped fighting it.

He did nothing.

Not frozen. Not afraid. Just. present. He looked at Minh. Really looked. Past the sneer, past the posture, past the performance. He saw a boy whose jaw was clenched so tight the muscles in his neck stood out. A boy whose eyes kept darting to his friends, checking, making sure they were still watching.

Minh needed an audience. He was performing.

"Well?" Minh stepped closer. "You deaf?"

Nika took a breath. Slow. Full.

"I hear you," he said. His voice surprised him — it was calm. Not brave-calm, like in a movie. Just. even. Like water that had found its level.

Something shifted in Minh's face. The sneer flickered. Just for a moment — like a candle in a cross-draft. He hadn't expected that. He'd expected fear, or anger, or tears. The script had broken.

"Whatever," Minh muttered. He shoved past Nika's shoulder — hard enough to sting, soft enough to pretend it was nothing — and walked away, his friends trailing like shadows.

Nika stood still. His shoulder throbbed. His heart was beating fast — faster than he wanted to admit. He hadn't been fearless. He'd been terrified. But he'd stayed.

Not perfectly. Not gracefully. But he'd stayed.

He walked home slowly, turning it over in his mind. The voice in his head — the old one, the one that sounded like doubt wearing armor — said: "You just stood there. You didn't do anything. That's weakness."

He let the voice speak. He didn't argue with it. He didn't agree with it. He just let it finish.

Then it was quiet again.

And in the quiet, something else spoke — softer, deeper, wordless. Something that felt like the warmth after a long night of cold.

It said: That was the hardest thing you've ever done. And you did it.

He smiled. Small. Private. His.

## The Mountain

**H**e told his father about Minh. They were at the kitchen table. His father listened without interrupting, his hands wrapped around a mug that had gone cold.

"What did you do?" his father asked when Nika finished.

"Nothing."

"And?"

"He left. He didn't know what to do when I didn't react. It broke his script."

His father nodded slowly. "How did it feel?"

"Terrifying. My heart was going so fast afterward I thought I might throw up." Nika paused. "But I stayed. I didn't run. I didn't fight. I just — looked at him."

"What did you see?"

"A kid who needed someone to be scared of him. He kept looking at his friends, checking if they were watching. He wasn't angry. He was performing."

His father set the mug down. "That's seeing, Nika. That's the gap. The space between the trigger and the response."

"I thought I'd feel stronger. But mostly I just felt shaky."

"Strength isn't a feeling. It's a choice you already made." He paused. "The dark room isn't always a room. Sometimes it's a schoolyard. Sometimes it's a hallway. Sometimes it's a conversation you didn't want to have. The game is the same everywhere."

"Doing nothing."

"Doing nothing. But doing it awake."

They sat with that for a while. Nika's mother came in and poured herself water and left without asking what they were talking about. She had learned, over the past weeks, that the kitchen table was sometimes a classroom.

"But Dad — what if someone actually hurts me? Not just words. What if doing nothing isn't enough?"

"Doing nothing doesn't mean being a doormat," his father said. "It means responding from clarity, not from fear. Sometimes the right response is walking away. Sometimes it's standing your ground. Sometimes it's saying no. But whatever you do — let it come from the quiet place, not from the panic."

Nika nodded. He thought about the gap. The space between the trigger and the response. It was wider now than it had been a month ago. Maybe that was all progress really was — a wider gap.

## The Dance of Life

**L**et me ask you something," his father said. They were in the study. Nika was on the floor. His father was in the chair with a book he hadn't opened. "When you play a game — who's playing?"

"Me. Obviously."

"Are you sure?"

"My hands are on the controller. My brain is making decisions. Who else would it be?"

His father leaned forward. "The game is also playing you. It's pulling your emotions, shaping your reactions, deciding what you see and when. The music gets tense — your heartbeat speeds up. A surprise attack — your hands clench. You think you're in charge, but you're dancing with something that's leading just as much as you are."

Nika opened his mouth to argue, then stopped. He thought about it. The panic when a boss fight went wrong. The rush when he pulled off a combo he'd practiced for hours. The frustration when the game punished a mistake he didn't think was fair.

None of those feelings were his idea. The game had created the conditions for them.

"So I'm not the player," Nika said slowly. "I'm — part of the game?"

"You're both. The game shapes the player and the player shapes the game. You can't separate them. It's a dance — not a domination."

"Like the ink and the water."

His father pointed at him. "Yes. Exactly like that. The ink changes the water. But the water also changes the ink. Neither one wins. They become something new together."

Nika stared at the ceiling. "Is that what life is? A game that plays you while you play it?"

"That's one way to say it."

"That's kind of scary."

"It's also kind of freeing. If you're not the only one in control, then you don't have to have all the answers. You just have to keep playing — honestly, attentively — and let the game show you what comes next."

Nika thought about the dark room. About the voice that always came. He'd spent weeks thinking he was the one doing the work. But maybe the dark room had been working on him too. Shaping him. Meeting him halfway.

The player and the played. Neither one alone.

## Impermanence

**H**is favorite game server shut down on a Sunday. He found out from a notification. The developers posted a message — something about costs and sustainability and gratitude — and then the world he'd spent two years building in just. stopped existing. The characters, the levels, the achievements. Gone. As if they'd never been.

He sat on his bed and stared at the wall. It wasn't grief exactly. More like vertigo. Something he'd assumed would always be there had dissolved overnight. The floor had moved.

He told his father at dinner.

"Everything ends, Nika."

"I know that. But I didn't think about it ending. It was just — there. Every day."

"Most things feel that way. Right up until they don't."

They ate in silence for a while. Then his father set his chopsticks down.

"You built your identity around that game, a little," he said. It wasn't a question. "Your rank. Your guild. Your name in that world. A version of you lived there."

Nika nodded. The tightness in his chest confirmed it.

"And now that world is gone. So what happens to that version of you?"

"I don't know. He feels. homeless."

His father didn't rush to comfort him. He let the discomfort sit between them on the table, next to the rice and the fish sauce.

"This is what impermanence feels like," his father said. "Not as a concept. Right here. In the ache you're feeling right now."

"It sucks."

"Yes. It does."

"So what do I do?"

"Feel it. Don't run from it and don't wallow in it. Just let it move through you."

Nika pushed the rice around his plate. "If I'm not my thoughts, and I'm not my feelings, and I'm not my games — who am I?"

His father looked at him. Not with an answer. With something more honest than an answer.

"You're asking the right question," he said.

That night, Nika sat in the dark room. Not to meditate. Not to practice anything. Just because the dark felt more honest than the light.

He thought about the game world. All those hours. All that building. Dissolved, like ink in water.

He didn't cry. He didn't feel peace. He just sat there, being a person who had lost something, and let the dark hold what he couldn't.

## The Compass Within

**H**ow do I know if I'm making the right choice?" Nika asked. They were on the porch again. Stars out. Jasmine on the air.

"The right choice makes your heart quiet," his father said. "Not excited. Quiet."

"What's the difference?"

"Excitement is loud. It comes from wanting. From the part of you that chases. Quiet is different. It's the feeling of something settling into place. Like a key turning in a lock."

"What about wrong choices?"

"There are no wrong choices. Only choices. Each one shows you something. Some of them show you what you don't want. That's still useful."

"People always say 'follow your heart,'" Nika said. "Like it's easy. Like the heart just speaks up and says 'go left.'"

"It does speak. But not in words. It speaks in the body. A tightness here, a warmth there. You've felt it — in the dark room, when you

stopped fighting and something softened. That softening is the heart saying yes."

"And when it tightens?"

"That's the heart saying wait. Or not this. Or not yet."

Nika thought about the argument with Bao. His heart had been pounding, his chest tight, his hands clenched. Every signal in his body had been screaming. He'd just been too busy reacting to listen.

"So the body knows before the mind does," he said.

"Almost always. The mind is fast, but the body is honest."

They sat with the stars for a while. Somewhere down the street, a door closed. A dog barked once, then stopped.

"Every choice is practice," his father said. "You won't always get it right. But if you keep listening — really listening — you get better at hearing what's already there."

Nika looked at his hands. He'd been clenching them without realizing it. He opened them. Rested them on his knees.

The quiet in his chest said: this. Right here. This is fine.

## The House of Nothingness

**W**hat if I stopped identifying with anything?" Nika asked one evening.

He didn't know where the question came from. It arrived like the oil lamp had — fully formed, without invitation.

His father looked up from his book. "Say more."

"Like — I identify with my name. My school. My games. My grades. Even the dark room practice. All of it is me, right? But you keep saying those are just labels. So what if I dropped them all? What would be left?"

"Nothing."

"That's terrifying."

"Is it?" His father set the book down. "You've already been there, Nika. The dark room. When the voice faded. When the silence came. What was left?"

Nika thought back to it. The last ten minutes. The texture of the quiet. "Peace," he said. "Just — space."

"That's the house of nothingness. No voice can follow you there. No fear. No identity. Because there's nothing to grab onto."

"But I can't live there. I have school. I have—"

"You don't live there. You visit. And when you visit often enough, you start carrying a piece of it with you. Into school. Into arguments. Into the things that used to knock you off balance."

Nika thought about Minh in the schoolyard. Standing there while the words landed. That calm — it hadn't come from somewhere. It had come from nowhere. From the empty space he'd practiced sitting in.

"The house of nothingness," he said, testing the words. "It sounds like the worst real estate listing ever."

His father laughed. A real laugh. "No windows. No doors. No heating. Price: everything you think you are."

"But the location is great."

"The location," his father said, "is the only one that matters."

## Comfort and Courage

**D**oes this mean I should always stay comfortable?" Nika asked. "Because the dark room is comfortable now. It used to be terrifying, but now it's — easy. And people keep saying you have to leave your comfort zone to grow."

"What do you think a comfort zone is?" his father asked.

"The place where things are easy. Familiar. Safe."

"And what's wrong with that?"

"I don't know. Nothing? But people act like it's a prison."

His father scratched his jaw. "For some people, comfort becomes a cage. They stay there so long they forget there's anything outside it. The comfort isn't the problem — the staying is. The refusal to move when life is calling you somewhere new."

"But the dark room calls me somewhere new every time I sit in it."

"Then it's not a comfort zone. It's a launching pad."

Nika chewed on that. "So the real question isn't whether I'm comfortable. It's whether I'm still growing."

"Close. The real question is: are you awake? You can grow in comfort. You can stagnate in challenge. It depends on whether you're paying attention."

"What about fear? People say you should do things that scare you."

"Sometimes fear means stop. Sometimes it means go. The body knows the difference, even when the mind doesn't. If the fear comes with a tightening, a closing — that's protection. If it comes with a trembling, an aliveness — that's invitation."

Nika thought about the first night in the dark room. The fear had been both — a closing and an opening. A door that looked like a wall.

"Life will push you out of your comfort zone whether you want it to or not," his father said. "The question isn't if you'll be moved. It's how you'll meet the moving. Stiff as a board, or loose as water."

"I think I'd rather be water."

"Then keep sitting," his father said. "The dark room teaches you how to be liquid. How to hold your shape without being rigid. How to flow around the rocks instead of breaking against them."

Nika nodded. He thought about the gap again — the space between trigger and response. It was wider now. And in that wider gap, there was room for choice. Room for water to find its path.

## The Garden of Eve

**T**hey stepped outside. Spring had arrived in full — the cherry tree in the garden was heavy with blossoms, and the koi pond caught light like scattered glass.

Nika's eyes moved differently now. Not scanning, not searching — just receiving. The pink drift of petals falling. The way the water held the sky. Things he'd seen a thousand times, but never like this.

He didn't feel transformed. He felt tuned. Like a radio that had been between stations and had landed, finally, on a clear signal.

His father carried a small bag. From it he drew a tea set — not ornate, but careful. An iron kettle, a ceramic bowl, a bamboo whisk, two cups the color of moonlight.

"Are we doing a ceremony?" Nika asked.

"We're drinking tea."

"Outside? With the fancy cups?"

"They're not fancy. They're just clean." His father set the cloth down beneath the cherry tree. Arranged the pieces. Slow, deliberate

motions — the kind you make when you're not performing but you also aren't rushing.

"What makes this different from kitchen tea?" Nika asked.

"Nothing. Except that we're paying attention."

"So that's all a ceremony is? Paying attention?"

"That's all anything is, when you do it right. Brushing your teeth. Walking to school. Eating rice. It's all ceremony if you show up for it. And it's all sleepwalking if you don't."

Nika sat down on the cloth. The ground was cool beneath him. A petal landed on his knee. He watched it there — pink and curling at the edges, already beginning its slow return to the soil.

"I think I understand," he said. "A ceremony isn't about what you do. It's about how present you are while you're doing it."

"Yes." His father filled the kettle. "And the more present you are, the more you taste. Not just the tea. Everything."

The water heated slowly. The garden held its breath.

## Preparation and Surrender

**H**is father moved through the preparation the way water moves through rock — finding the path without forcing it. Every gesture was precise but unhurried. Placing the kettle. Measuring the matcha. Warming the bowl with a splash of hot water, then emptying it with a turn of the wrist.

Nika watched. He'd expected instructions. Instead, he got a demonstration of something that didn't need explaining.

His father's hands were steady. The movements were small. No flourish, no performance. Just a man making tea beneath a tree, with the kind of attention that made each step feel like the only thing happening in the world.

"It was beautiful to watch," Nika said when his father set the whisk down.

"It wasn't me."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean — I wasn't thinking about my hands. I wasn't planning the next step. I was just doing it. The tea made itself. I stayed out of the way."

Nika frowned. "That doesn't make sense. Your hands were moving. You were doing things."

"My hands were moving. But the part of me that usually runs things — the planner, the controller — was quiet. The preparation happened the way your breathing happens when you're asleep. Naturally. Without interference."

"That's surrender," Nika said. Not a question.

"Yes. Not surrender to God or the universe or some big idea. Surrender to the activity. Letting the thing do itself through you."

A petal fell into the empty bowl. His father left it there for a moment, then lifted it out with the tip of the whisk and set it on the cloth.

"That's what the dark room is training you for," he said. "Not to empty your mind forever. Just to get out of the way long enough for life to move through you without resistance."

"Is that what the game is?"

"The whole game," his father said. "Start to finish."

## Balance

**H**is father drew something in the dirt with a stick:  $1 + 1 = 2$ .  
"What do you see?"

Nika leaned forward. "Math?"

"Two separate things. And a meeting between them." He pointed to the plus sign. "That's the bridge. The willingness to meet."

"And the two?"

"Something new. Neither one alone could make it."

His father poured the hot water into the bowl. Steam rose. The matcha powder, dry and vivid green, sat waiting.

"Hot water. Cold powder. Masculine meets feminine. Force meets stillness. And in the meeting—" He handed the whisk to Nika.

Nika took it. He held it over the bowl, unsure. Then he began to whisk — awkward at first, too fast, the bristles clanging against the ceramic.

"Slower," his father said.

Nika slowed. Found a rhythm. The powder dissolved into the water, the green deepening, foam rising in small bubbles on the surface.

He stopped thinking about doing it right. And for a moment, the whisking just happened — the way walking happens when you're not paying attention to your feet.

"There," his father said.

Nika looked at the bowl. A smooth, bright green, capped with a fine layer of foam. Not perfect. But alive.

He lifted it to his lips. The taste hit him — bitter and soft at the same time. Earth and sweetness. Weight and lightness.

"That's balance," his father said. "Not standing still. Not being perfect. Just being present for the meeting."

They shared the tea. Bitter and warm and exactly enough.

Nika put the bowl down and looked at the equation in the dirt.  $1 + 1 = 2$ . Two things becoming something neither could be alone. He thought about the dark room — his stillness meeting the silence. His breath meeting the dark. His attention meeting the voice, and the voice dissolving.

Every meeting changed something. Every meeting was a small ceremony.

The garden was quiet. The tea was gone. The equation stayed in the dirt.

## The Symphony of Meetings

**T**hey sat without speaking. The tea was finished but its warmth remained — in the belly, in the air between them, in the quiet that held the garden together.

Nika noticed things. The tea had met the cup. His tongue had met the taste. The breeze met his skin. The sunlight met the koi pond and broke into moving pieces of gold.

Everything was meeting everything else. Constantly. Silently. Without announcement.

He watched a cherry blossom detach from a branch. It spun lazily — not falling, exactly. Drifting. It landed on the surface of the pond, and the water held it there, and the reflection of the sky framed it, and a koi passed underneath it like a thought passing beneath a calm mind.

He didn't say anything. His father didn't say anything.

The world performed its ceremony, and they sat in the middle of it, and that was enough.

## Opening the Heart

**W**eeks passed. Then months.

The quiet room waited, patient as stone, and Nika returned to it — not every day, but often enough. Some mornings he sat for twenty minutes before the restlessness won. Some evenings, time dissolved, and his father had to touch his shoulder to call him back.

He didn't become perfect. He forgot. He reacted. He chased old habits and caught nothing. He argued with his mother about screen time. He lost his temper with Leo over something so small he couldn't remember it an hour later. He sat with the shame of that, too.

But something had shifted in the soil of him, the way a season turns — not in a single day, but in a thousand small surrenders. He noticed things he hadn't before: the way his breath changed when he was about to lie. The way his chest tightened when he scrolled too long. The way his father's eyes softened when he thought no one was watching.

He was not the boy who had climbed to the rooftop and wondered about games. He was not yet the man he would become. He was the space between them — the pause, the breath, the turning.

Spring came again. The cherry blossoms opened.

And his father said, "Shall we sit together one more time?"

The question landed in the space between them— like a petal drifting down in the hush of morning. It carried both wonder and weight, like something ancient seeking light again.

His father turned to him, a smile blooming slowly across his face. "Why do you ask, Nika?" His eyes— clear, deep, wide as sky— held no pressure, only invitation.

"I was thinking about yesterday," Nika said, choosing his words carefully, like planting seeds in fresh soil. "When we spoke of monsters. Of fear. And how love. transforms it. How love can soften shadows, heal what was hurt, light the way forward." "Ah," his father nodded, a quiet knowing in his gaze. "Then let's speak of love— but not with words. Let's approach it differently. Let the heart lead." Nika leaned in. "What way is that, Dad?"

"The truth is," his father said, his voice low and steady, "love cannot be told. Only felt. It's a language made of pauses and pulses, the hush between breaths, the heat of light on your skin. No one can show it to you— not unless your own heart is open to feel." Nika's voice softened. "Then. show me how to open my heart. How to listen with it." His father placed a hand over his chest, then drew it back— a gesture both blessing and reminder.

"Close your eyes," he said. "Let the outer world fade. The noise, the wants, the habits of mind." Nika obeyed. The garden dimmed behind his lids. There was only breath now. And stillness.

"Now listen, Nika," his father said. "Not with your ears. With the whole of you. With the quiet space inside where the river flows and nothing needs to be said." Nika listened. To something deeper than sound. And slowly— he began to feel.

## The Tree's Being

**T**hey were under the cherry tree again. Spring had come back, or a new spring had arrived — Nika couldn't tell the difference anymore. The blossoms were thick, the scent heavy.

His father said, "Close your eyes. Feel the tree behind you."

Nika leaned back. The bark pressed against his spine — rough, warm from the sun on one side, cool in the shade. Solid in a way that his body rarely felt. Like the tree had been leaning against this exact piece of sky for fifty years and wasn't planning to stop.

He breathed. Slow, deep breaths that synced with something — he didn't know what. Maybe the breeze. Maybe the sap. Maybe his own pulse, finally matching the tempo of something older and stiller.

The boundary between his back and the bark softened. Not in a mystical way — in the way that happens when you sit very still in nature for a long time and forget where your skin ends and the air begins. The tree's stillness bled into him. Or his stillness bled into the tree. The direction didn't matter.

He could feel the trunk. Not the outside of it — the inside. Or he imagined he could. A slow movement, rising. Like water being drawn

upward through a straw that had no hurry. Like breathing, if breathing took a century.

He wasn't thinking. He was just — part of it. The way a branch is part of a tree without trying to be.

Time did something strange. He didn't know if five minutes had passed or an hour. The sun moved, or he imagined it did.

He opened his eyes. The garden was sharper. The colors weren't different — they were deeper. Like someone had cleaned a window he didn't know was dirty.

"I think I felt the tree," he said.

His father sat beside him, eyes still closed. A petal rested on his shoulder.

"Or maybe it felt you," his father said.

## The Rising Tide

**T**he sessions were different now. When he sat, really sat — not fighting it, not performing — something moved in his body. Not muscles. Something underneath. A warmth that started low, at the base of his spine, and wanted to rise.

It wasn't comfortable. Not painful either. More like pressure — the feeling of something building, looking for a way through.

He told his father.

"Don't guide it," his father said. "Don't push it. Just notice it, the way you'd notice a river from a bridge."

So he sat with it. The warmth built slowly. It pooled at the base of his spine like water behind a dam. He breathed. The warmth pressed upward.

There was a place in his chest where it stuck. A tightness. A gate that didn't want to open. The warmth pushed against it, gently at first, then with more force.

His heart beat faster. His jaw clenched. He wanted to stop — to open his eyes, turn on the light, check his phone. The pressure was too intimate. Too close to something he didn't have a name for.

He breathed. Stayed.

And then the gate gave way. Not with a crash — with a sigh. Like a knot that had been tied for years simply deciding it was done.

The warmth moved through his chest. His heart hammered once, hard, then settled into something deeper. A rhythm he hadn't felt before — or had always felt but never listened to.

He exhaled long and slow, and the trembling in his body gradually stilled.

When he opened his eyes, the room was the same. He was the same. But something between the two had shifted — a current that hadn't been there before, running from the base of his spine to the crown of his head, faint but steady.

"Something moved," he told his father. "I don't know what."

"You don't need to know," his father said. "You just need to let it."

## The Light Within

**T**he deepest session happened without warning. He'd sat down expecting nothing — tired from school, head full of noise. The first few minutes were pure struggle. Then the struggle dissolved, the way it always did when he stopped fighting it. The noise receded. The dark arrived.

And then — patterns.

Behind his closed eyes, shapes appeared. Not imagined — more like discovered. Geometric, shifting, alive. Triangles within triangles within triangles, each one a tiny mirror reflecting light that had no source.

He didn't chase them. He'd learned not to chase. He just watched, the way he'd watched the ink, the way he'd watched the flame — with curiosity and no agenda.

The shapes moved. Rotated. Pulsed with soft color — green and gold, like sunlight through spring leaves. They formed structures he'd never seen and somehow recognized, the way you recognize a face in a dream.

A question surfaced from somewhere deeper than thought: where does the light come from?

He looked. The mirrors reflected light, but there was no source. No lamp, no sun. Just reflection after reflection, going down forever. Like two mirrors facing each other.

He searched for the origin. Found nothing. Searched again. Nothing.

And then, on the third search, something shifted. The searching itself became the answer. There was no external source. The light was the looking. The awareness itself was the thing illuminating the mirrors.

He sat with that for a long time. The patterns faded. The dark returned. His body hummed.

When he opened his eyes, the room was suffused with a strange clarity. The wood grain on the floor, the dust in the lamplight, the texture of his own hands — all of it sharper, more present, as if a filter had been removed.

"Colors are brighter," he said to his father.

"They always were," his father said.

## The Garden Returns

**H**e sat in the garden after and couldn't stop looking at things. The grass was not just green — it was a hundred greens, each blade catching light differently. The koi in the pond moved with a purpose he'd never noticed, their bodies turning as if conducting a slow, private orchestra.

He wanted to understand it. He reached for the knife — analysis, labels, explanations. And the moment he reached, the vividness dimmed. Like grabbing a butterfly and finding only powder on your fingers.

He let go. Released the need to name what he was seeing. And it came back — the brightness, the detail, the aliveness of everything around him.

"The more I try to understand, the less I see," he said.

His father was trimming a branch nearby. "That's because understanding is the mind's job. And seeing is the heart's. They don't always work at the same time."

Nika sat with the garden. Not meditating. Not practicing. Just being a person sitting in a garden, looking at things that had always been there.

The cherry blossoms drifted. The koi circled. A bird landed on the edge of the pond, drank, and left.

He didn't understand any of it. He saw all of it. And for the first time, that felt like enough.

## Dancing with the Rhythm

**H**e watched a cherry blossom. Not thinking about it. Not analyzing it. Just watching — the way the petals moved in the breeze, the rhythm of their opening and closing, the slow dance of something that didn't know it was dancing.

His breathing changed. Not on purpose. It synced with the blossom's rhythm, the way you sync your steps with someone walking beside you. Inhale as the petals opened. Exhale as they drifted.

He felt a thread form between them — not visible, not mystical, just a felt connection. The kind that happens when you pay attention to something long enough that the boundary between watcher and watched starts to thin.

The blossom seemed to respond. Its movements slowed, matched his breathing, or his breathing matched its movements — he couldn't tell which, and it didn't matter. They were in rhythm. Two things moving together.

He thought: this is what attention really is. Not a beam you point at things. A bridge. A current that flows both ways.

He'd felt this before — with Leo, in the moments of easy silence under the oak tree. With his father, in the dark room, when the hand landed on his shoulder. With the tree against his back.

Attention is connection. Presence is meeting.

He sat with the blossom until the wind changed and the rhythm broke. He didn't try to get it back. He just smiled — quiet, private — and let the next moment arrive.

## Discovering Love

**T**wilight. The sky was turning amber at the edges. Nika opened his eyes. He didn't know how long he'd been sitting.

"How does that feel?" his father asked.

"Like I wasn't here. But also like I was more here than I've ever been."

"And the flower?"

"There was no flower. Just — pulse. Warmth. No me and it. Just the rhythm. A current running through everything."

His father was quiet. Then, gently: "That's love, Nika."

The word surprised him. It sounded too small for what he'd felt, and too big at the same time.

"I thought love was — between people. Like the love you have for me."

"That's one form. The first form. The one you learn at home." His father shifted to face him. "But love isn't limited to people. Love is

what happens when attention becomes so complete that the line between you and what you're watching disappears."

Nika thought about that.

"So when I sat with Leo and didn't say anything — just stayed, just listened — that was love?"

"Yes."

"And when I watched the ink dissolve and couldn't look away?"

"A beginning."

"And the tree? And the blossom?"

"All of it. Different doors. Same room."

Nika looked at the sky. Stars were appearing — faint, tentative, as if asking permission.

"Can I lose it?" he asked. "The feeling?"

"If you grab it. Love doesn't survive a closed fist." His father's voice was careful. "The moment you chase it, it becomes craving. The moment you cling to it, it becomes possession. And then it's not love anymore — it's just need with a better name."

"So what do I do?"

"What you always do. Nothing. Let it come. Let it go. Trust that the current doesn't stop flowing just because you stop watching it."

Nika sat with that. The stars brightened. The garden dimmed. Somewhere in his chest, a warmth that didn't need words or explanations hummed quietly, steady as breath.

"I think I'll call it love," he said.

"Call it whatever you want," his father said. "Just don't try to put it in a jar."

## The Petal

They sat beneath the cherry tree, the last light pooling around them. The blossoms were past their peak now — more petals on the ground than on the branches. Nika noticed his father looking at the bare limbs, a quietness in his face that was different from peace.

"Dad?"

"Hmm?"

"Have you always known how to do this? The game. The stillness. All of it."

His father didn't answer right away. He picked up a fallen petal and turned it between his fingers. When he spoke, his voice was different. Not steady. Not the calm river Nika had come to know. Something rougher. Something closer to the surface.

"No," he said. "I haven't."

The word hung between them, simple and enormous, like a stone placed on an altar.

"When your mother was sick," his father continued, his eyes still on the petal, "before you were old enough to remember — I sat in that quiet room every night. Not in peace. In terror." He paused. "I did everything I taught you not to do. I fought the silence. I argued with the darkness. I bargained with God, with the universe, with anything that would listen."

Nika said nothing. He had never heard his father speak like this. The man who always seemed to stand in the center of a still pond was showing him the storm that had once raged there.

"I begged for answers," his father said. "I demanded them. I squeezed the pen so hard the ink ran black through every corner of my mind." He smiled, but it was thin. "And nothing changed. She was still sick. I was still terrified. The darkness didn't care about my meditation practice."

A bird landed on a branch above them. Its weight sent two petals drifting down.

"What changed?" Nika asked.

His father was quiet for a long time. The kind of long time that has weather in it.

"One night," he said, "I stopped. Not because I found peace. Because I ran out of fight. I just. had nothing left." He looked at Nika then, and his eyes were wet. Not crying. Just honest.

"And in that nothing," he said, "the nothing I teach you about — it found me. I didn't find it. I didn't earn it. I didn't deserve it. It just. came. The way dawn comes. Not because you asked for it. Because the night was over."

Nika felt a pressure behind his eyes. Not sadness exactly. Something larger. The feeling of seeing his father not as a teacher, but as a man. A man who had been broken, and who had built the quiet room not as a temple, but as a lifeboat.

"So everything you taught me," Nika said carefully, "you learned because you had to."

His father nodded. "Not because I was wise. Because I was desperate." He set the petal down. "Wisdom, Nika, is just desperation that aged well."

Nika laughed. It came out of him before he could catch it — sudden, bright, real. And his father laughed too. Not the gentle,

knowing laugh Nika was used to. A real laugh. The kind that doesn't care how it sounds.

When it faded, the garden was quieter than ever. And warmer.

"Thank you," Nika said.

His father put a hand on Nika's knee. "Thank you for asking," he said. "I should have told you sooner."

A breeze moved through the cherry tree. The branches swayed. And for the first time, Nika saw his father not as the tree, but as one of the petals — still falling, still turning, still lit by the last of the light.

## Love and the Monster

They sat for a while after that. The bare branches of the cherry tree traced dark lines against the fading sky. Nika could still feel his father's confession in the air between them — raw, unfinished, real.

"So when you told me to love the monster," Nika said slowly, "you were talking about yourself too."

His father didn't flinch. "Yes."

"Loving your own fear. Your own desperation. The voice that told you you couldn't handle it."

"The same voice that comes for you in the dark room. It came for me first. It came for me for years."

Nika pulled at a blade of grass. "And doing nothing — the whole game — that's how you love it? By not fighting?"

"By letting it be what it is. The cold. The voice. The fear. Not running. Not wrestling. Just — staying. The same way you stayed when Minh stood in front of you. The same way you stayed when the monster didn't dissolve."

Nika remembered that night — the fist of lead in his chest that wouldn't go away. He'd thought it was a failure. Now it looked different.

"Love isn't always warm and fuzzy," he said. Not a question.

"No. Sometimes love is staying when everything in you wants to run. Sometimes love is sitting with something ugly and not looking away."

A breeze moved through the bare branches. Two more petals fell — the last ones, hanging on all this time.

"Is that what you did with Mom?" Nika asked. "When she was sick? You stayed?"

"I stayed. Badly. Desperately. With no grace and no wisdom. But I stayed." He paused. "And eventually, the staying itself became the practice. Not some elevated spiritual thing. Just a man in a room, terrified, choosing not to leave."

Nika nodded. He didn't need to say anything else. The pieces had fallen into place — not like a puzzle solved, but like a river finding the sea. Of course. The whole time, from the first drop of ink to the dark room to the oil lamp to Minh to the tree to the blossom — it was all just variations on staying. On showing up. On being present for whatever arrives, even when it's the last thing you want.

The game of doing nothing was the game of love.

He hadn't expected it to be that simple. Or that hard.

## The Unfolding

**T**hey went inside when the dark came. His father heated soup. They sat at the table — the same table where the ink-water glass had sat weeks ago.

"You know everything you need to know," his father said, between spoonfuls.

"I don't feel like I know anything."

"That's how you know."

Nika almost laughed. "All roads lead to confusion with you."

"All roads lead to not-knowing. Confusion is just not-knowing with a bad attitude."

This time Nika did laugh. His father grinned — not the teacher grin, the real one.

They finished their soup. His mother came in, kissed the top of Nika's head, took the bowls. The ordinary machinery of a household, turning.

"The world is a book," his father said quietly, after she'd gone.  
"But you don't read it with your mind. You read it with your silence."

Nika nodded. Not because he understood. Because he was willing to keep finding out. And somewhere in the space between knowing and not-knowing, between the dark room and the kitchen table, between his father's steady voice and the silence underneath it — that willingness felt like the truest thing he had.

## Under the Oak

**D**ays passed — then weeks. And the lessons gathered in the hush of the quiet room, under the cherry blossoms' gaze, took root deep within Nika.

The seeds his father had sown — watered by experience, warmed by the light of love — had blossomed into a garden of insight, its fragrance a quiet blend of joy and knowing. He carried those teachings like a flame within, a soft, steady glow guiding him through the shifting tides of life.

One afternoon, Nika sat with his friend Leo beneath the old oak tree. Its branches reached into the sky. A breeze moved through the leaves, playing with the light on the grass.

"Leo," Nika said at last. "Do you remember when you asked me about my favorite game?"

Leo chuckled. "Yeah. You said everything felt like a game. I thought you were losing it."

"I was," Nika said. "But now I think the greatest game is the one we play inside ourselves. The game of finding out who we really are."

Leo set his phone down. That was something.

"That sounds like something your dad would say," Leo said. Not unkindly, but not convinced either. "No offense, Nika, but. sitting in the dark doing nothing? That's not a game. That's just. sitting in the dark."

Nika expected this. He'd rehearsed answers in his mind — metaphors about rivers, about lamps, about ink in water. But sitting here, under the oak where they'd built forts and told lies and watched the sky turn, none of those words felt right.

"You're probably right," Nika said.

Leo blinked. "Wait, what?"

"It sounds weird. I know it does. I can't explain it in a way that makes sense." Nika pulled at a blade of grass, twisting it between his fingers. "All I can tell you is that when I sit still — really still — something happens. The noise inside me gets quiet. And underneath the noise, there's this. I don't know. A feeling. Like everything is already okay."

Leo was quiet. Which was unusual.

"I'm not saying you need to try it," Nika added. "I'm just saying it changed something for me."

Leo picked up his phone. Put it down again. Picked at the bark of the tree.

"My parents are getting divorced," Leo said. The words came out flat. Like he'd been carrying them in a sealed box and had just now pried the lid.

Nika looked at him. Really looked. The way his father had looked at him in the dark room — not with answers, but with presence.

"That sucks, Leo," he said.

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah."

They sat with it. The wind moved through the leaves. The silence between them wasn't uncomfortable. It was just silence. The kind that holds things too heavy for words.

"Who are you, Leo?" Nika asked finally. Not as a lesson. Not as a teaching. Just because it was the truest question he knew. "Beyond your name. Beyond what people say about you. Who are you?"

Leo stared at him for a long moment. Then he looked up at the oak branches.

"I don't know," he said. His voice was different now. Quieter. Real.

"That's the right answer," Nika said.

Leo almost smiled. "How can not knowing be the right answer?"

"Because it means you're willing to look."

The sun dipped behind the hills. Gold and indigo spread across the sky. Two boys sat under an old tree — one who had walked through the dark, and one who was just beginning to feel it coming. Both of them looking up, both of them not knowing, both of them exactly where they needed to be.

## The Door

**T**he sun had set. The sky held its last breath of violet, then let go of the light.

Nika rose from the bench. Leo stayed, still looking up at the branches, still sitting with his question. Nika didn't rush him. Some seeds take time.

He walked home slowly. Each step pressed into the earth, gentle and deliberate. The air smelled of cut grass and jasmine — the same scent that had greeted him on the rooftop, months ago, when all of this began with a question he didn't know how to ask.

His father's study light was on. Through the window, Nika could see him writing — the same posture, the same quiet concentration, the same pen that had once been a fountain of ink in a glass of water. He thought of everything that had happened since that evening. The dark room. The fear. The tree that was his father's leg. The ink, spiraling through clear water. The voice that whispered in the silence. The tea ceremony — how the bitterness of matcha had taught him more about balance than any lesson. The cherry blossom that danced to his rhythm. His father's tears beneath the bare branches.

And Minh. Standing in the schoolyard, waiting for a reaction that never came.

And Leo. Sitting under the oak tree, holding a question he didn't know he needed.

All of it — every chapter, every silence, every moment of doing nothing — had led him here. To this walk. To this breath. To the knowledge that he was not finished, and never would be, and that this was not a failure but a gift.

He reached the front door. Paused.

Somewhere behind him, the garden was still. The koi pond reflected stars. The cherry tree stood bare and patient, waiting for another spring.

He placed his hand on the door. Cool metal. Solid. Real.

He didn't open it. Not yet. He stood there, one hand on the door, the other resting at his side, and let the evening settle around him. He breathed in. He breathed out.

And in the space between those breaths — vast, quiet, luminous — he heard it. Not a voice. Not a thought. Something older. Something that had been waiting for him all along, the way silence waits beneath every sound.

It didn't say anything.

It didn't need to.

He opened the door. He went inside. The light was warm.

*If this book brought you a quiet moment in the noise of life, I would be grateful if you considered leaving an honest review on Amazon.*

*Even a few simple words can help another reader find it at the right moment.*

*Thank you for reading with an open heart.*

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*This book began as a conversation between a father and his son.*

*It was written not to teach, but to remember — to trace the shape of something that can only be felt.*

*The lessons here are not instructions. They are invitations: to sit with what is, to trust the silence, and to discover what remains when everything else falls away.*

*Nothing in these pages needs to be believed. Only experienced.*

To experience “do nothing”, please feel free to visit :

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## **About the Author**

Tai Phan is a writer, technologist, and seeker of stillness.

His first book, *The Flying Lake*, is a fable about a lake  
that learns to see itself by becoming a bird.

*Do Nothing* continues the journey — through the eyes of a boy  
named Nika, who discovers that the most powerful thing  
he can do is nothing at all.

He lives and writes in the quiet spaces between noise.

[www.ayahealer.com](http://www.ayahealer.com)

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