





The Beatitudes

*(a flash series based on
Matthews 5:3-12)*

Zary Fekete



Poor In Spirit

Zary Fekete

The greenroom was quiet with a faint scent of old velvet and furniture polish in the air. Elias straightened his tie and saw he had buttoned his shirt wrong for the first time.

There was a knock at the door and then it opened, “Three minutes, sir.”

He nodded.

The piano was out there on the stage before the darkening, expectant hall. He had been here before. Once dreamed of it. Now it was the latest date on his schedule... a theatre with patrons and an instrument he had mastered like a bicycle.

Elias balled his fists and loosened them. His fingers felt fine. He played a few arpeggios and scales in the air and heard the phantom sounds in the silence. He was ready.

But...

He leaned on the makeup table then breathed a long sigh. In the mirror he glimpsed again the recent sag of his shoulders. He winced up at the

sharp fluorescent bulb. Its glare made the man before him impossible to ignore.

He dropped into the chair. He felt it again... the hollow space in his chest. An emptiness waiting... not for approval or applause but for something softer. Real.

What's wrong? He waited and then answered himself, *It's not the music.*

Then the thought came, It's how you've been playing it.

Another knock and a voice calling his name. He stood and crossed to the door.

A moment later he stood in the darkness of the wings. The stage was glowing in golden light. The piano in the center...a shiny thing as familiar as his own body.

Elias stepped toward it. The audience whispered admiration. Someone coughed.

Remote control took over as he bowed and sat. Hands lifted. He inhaled. Fingers were poised above the keys.

And then... for once... he did not play. At least not yet.

After a pause he looked out into the faceless many. They all waited and the moment stretched into the uncomfortable.

Elias leaned forward, the microphone catching the small clearing of his throat. His voice, when it came, was steady, but low.

"Ladies and gentlemen... I owe you something different tonight."



Those Who Mourn

Zary Fekete

The sign at the entrance said THANK YOU FOR YOUR PATRONAGE printed with black marker. Leonard unlocked the door. No point in changing routines yet... still his place for at least one more day.

A scent in the air was of flour and yeast. The bakery's counter and display were spotless with empty shelves behind the glass, waiting for whatever the new owner would sell. The steel cash register was on the floor by the utility closet with the power cord wrapped around it like a comforting arm.

Leonard closed the door behind him and the welcome bell jingled in the stillness. He slowly walked through the room, adjusting chairs, flicking flecks of dust from table tops. He grabbed the broom and turned to look at the old store. *Not bad for forty-two years*, he thought. He smiled as he caught himself... *And that's just my tenure... never mind Dad and Grandpa before me.*

He passed his hand over the wooden counter, worn smooth by years of neighbors sitting side by side. Thousands of hellos and goodbyes. It

felt like just another day even though it was the last one. The morning light slanting through the window slowly crept across the floor.

Leonard glanced up and saw someone outside, a woman reached out to try opening the locked door. She had a grocery bag in her other hand. He stepped to the entry and opened the door. “Sorry,” he said. “We’re closed.”

She nodded. “I know.” He waited, eyebrows raised. She tapped the grocery bag. “Muffins. Thought you might not be baking today.”

Leonard scratched his head. He had expected to spend the day alone, no gifts or flowers...definitely not store-bought pastries from a patron he hardly knew. But some habits die hard. He gestured her in and stepped back. She put the bag down on the counter and then grabbed a second broom without waiting to ask.

Side by side, they swept the floor. Nothing grand. No music in the air. Just faint shuffles of feet and bristles against floor boards. Finally, Leonard glanced around. The old bakery was spotless and ready for its new role.

The woman reached into the bag and pulled out a muffin, flicking out a napkin with it, and placing it down before Leonard. She gave his shoulder a squeeze. “Thank you,” she said and then left, with the bell jingling behind her.

Leonard stared at the muffin awhile. The light brightened around him and he realized the day might not just be about an ending. It might be about a door that’s been cracked open. He broke the muffin in half and ate it slowly as though it was the last good thing in the world.



No Music

Allison Whittenberg

I met him one night, a Thursday. the air was thick with secrets. the music, loud.
he smiled, the type of smile so forward so familiar.

I dance closer to him thinking: shake me.
He grabbed my upper arms and my body echoed: kiss me.
and silently I dared him: make me give in.

It wasn't love, it was something else. I wanted to be alive and the
warmth of his breath on my neck made the world shrink.

He didn't ask, like thread slipping from a spool innocence wrapped
unraveled along with a New Freedom and then a hailstorm of what-ifs
swirled.

As days passed through nod to ache, words from a pamphlet came to
me: reputation, pregnancy, AIDS.

These words clung and strangled. months passed and I wondered if
I'd ever get back the version of myself that once existed.

I never saw him again. So was it worth it? The answer came some-
times as a whisper, sometimes as a scream. the answer morphs as morphs
and changes.

It was never a demand, never anything either. if only it could be like
the movies with the music and sweeping cameras. instead it was street
lights as I walked home yellow and blue



The Meek

Zary Fekete

The old house looked hunched, like it was leaning into the wind. A half-broken porch ran around the outside. In the back a chimney lurched awkwardly toward the sky. Chipped, white paint flaked off here and there.

Lena was in the rear of the bidding crowd, clutching a card with her number. She was the first to arrive and had slowly made her way through the gently tilted rooms. She stood before an upstairs window and traced her finger along the sagging windowsill.

The place didn't add up to much, certainly not what most buyers were looking for. But Lena wanted it.

The auctioneer gestured and his voice rose and fell. Lena was surprised at the speed of the bidding. Hands flew up and down. Men nodded yes or no. Lena bid twice with her heart trembling in her chest.

But she was no match against the man on the side. He had arrived last and stood out from the rest with his expensive suit and casual sunglasses.

He didn't look at the auctioneer, but rifled through the bids with the practiced air of a professional... like he was ordering coffee.

In the end the auctioneer's gavel came down with a hollow thump. Sold. The man chuckled and shook someone's hand while he spoke to someone else on his cell phone. A photographer stepped forward and took his picture.

Lena folded her card and stuck it into her purse. She was about to leave and, in fact, felt a stab of anger motivating her footsteps toward the door. But she stopped instead and approached the man through the thinning crowd. He glanced up at her. She held out her hand.

"Congratulations," she said. "She's a winner."

He looked puzzled and shook her hand lightly. Then his phone rang again, and he turned away. Lema smiled... a small but real smile... and walked away, out into the late winter sunshine.

It was late spring when the call came. She didn't recognize the number and almost didn't answer.

"Miss Carter?" said the voice.

"Yes."

"You probably don't remember me. We met at the auction a few months back."

She remembered. He cleared his throat.

"I... well, it turns out... I had a change of plans."

A year later Lena sat on the crooked porch in her rocking chair. A steaming cup of tea balanced on her knee. Not much had changed. The chimney in the back was still canted at an odd angle. Upstairs the windowsills were still worn. She considered fixing things, but, in the end, decided she liked it the way it was. The house was a bit like her... stubborn, worn by weather, but still standing.

She looked across the unruly lawn and slowly closed her eyes. The memory came back to her of the man on the phone. She remembered his voice and the words he hadn't quite said.

No papers. No fuss. The deed given as a gift.

Lena opened her eyes and slowly sipped from the mug. Somewhere in the house a clock ticked onward steadily. And her world continued forward... imperfect but hers.





Hungry and Thirsty

Zary Fekete

The classroom window was warped and wouldn't close all the way. When it was windy it shuddered and the room grew drafty. Ms. Hanley stuck a wedge of folded cardboard against the frame. She had done this for the past four winters.

She turned and looked at the room.

Twenty-six desks.

Fifteen textbooks.

Twelve chairs with a wobble if a student leaned too far back.

She jotted the items down on a list she had been keeping. She thought someone might ask someday, but no one ever had.

That night was the annual school board meeting. She smoothed her hair and adjusted her skirt. She stood in front of the empty room and practiced the speech, her notes in her right hand. She wasn't asking for much. She needed a few simple supplies, one working computer, and a

few new copies of *To Kill a Mockingbird* where the covers weren't tattered or missing.

When the time came, she crossed a few hallways and entered the auditorium. It was half full and most of the people already looked tired.

When her name was called, she stood up and walked to the microphone. She thanked the school for the chance to share. She mentioned the desks, the drafty window, the cracked linoleum floor. She singled out each student by name, mentioning how they stayed late to clean the chalkboard and sweep the floor since the janitor couldn't be spared on certain days.

Then she sat down and waited. The principal thanked her for her "passion". Then the proceedings moved on to the gymnasium floor that needed replacing and the plans for the prom budget.

It was late by the time she got home that night.

Ms. Hanley woke the next morning and drove to school. She unlocked the classroom and switched on the lights. They blinked on one by one.

She noticed immediately. Something was different. She stepped toward her desk slowly.

An old shoebox sat in the center, wrapped in used construction paper. A piece of masking tape was stuck to the top with the words: "For the New Books."

She opened it. Inside were a few crumbled bills, a pile of sticky pennies, and a few folded notes. Ms. Hanley blinked hard and sat down in her chair. Her wheel squeaked when she did.

She opened one of the notes. It said in halting script, "Mom said I could use my allowance."

Another said, "Thanks for all the fun reading times."

The students slowly trickled in and took their seats, the chairs creaking as they sat. Everyone pretended not to notice Ms. Hanley's eyes. She looked up and smiled at them. Then she stood and did the roll call.

Outside the cold wind rattled the window, but she didn't hear it this time.



They Will Be Shown Mercy

Zary Fekete

The dented, grey car was sprawled, half on the curb and half across the driveway.

Eli jammed the brake down hard, the back of his car fishtailing wildly. When he was stopped, he pushed his hair back from his face and breathed heavily, feeling the heat rise in his temples.

He glanced at his watch. *Already twenty minutes late.* The exam was starting any minute. No re-takes. No grace. No excuses.

He crunched the car's gear into park and angrily pushed open his door. He got out and slammed it so loudly a few sparrows took off from a nearby tree, tweeting madly at him.

The guilty car was small with some rust spiderwebbing up the sides of the doors. A few overdue parking tickets dangled from until one of the wipers. Eli pulled an old receipt from his pocket and scratched out an angry note.

“Thanks for costing me my final grade!”

He leaned forward to stuff the receipt until the other wiper when he noticed something. He looked through the windshield. There was a paper with a child's crayon drawing. The picture was of a heart with flowers surrounding it. In the corner was a yellow sun, too big for the page.

Below the picture was printed in careful, unsteady lettering: "*Good luck today, Daddy!*"

Eli froze.

The rain that had been falling all morning suddenly softened and he felt mist on his cheeks. Around him the street sounds dimmed, like the world was holding its breath.

He looked down at the crumpled note in his hand and slowly shoved it back into his jacket pocket.

The rain softened into mist. The street around him seemed to muffle itself, like a held breath.

He stood there, the ruined note hanging limp in his hand.

The anger drained, slow and sour, leaving something hollow in its place.

He crumpled the paper into his jacket pocket.

Stepped back.

Took a breath that hurt a little at the edges.

There was still no way he would make it on time.

But there were worse things than being late.



blackratsnake

airport

Green Trees loom as wall, it's always green, it's always alive, alive and shifting, i see a snake i hear a bird i don't see the snake i don't hear the bird, the Green Wall, verdant, will it rain today? It's always green always green, the skink catches a centipede I thank it, the frog croaks, i see a snake the frog stops croaking, i can't see the snake, it is night, it hasn't quite rained, the wall is unsatisfied, it wanted rain but it did not rain, the branches sway discontentedly in the wind, do they want me to enter? do they want me to stay out? what is the wall for? did my will construct it or did nature construct it or did we all work together to put up a Green Wall that is verdant and displeased? the rain hasn't made up its mind, neither have I, I see the snake, I hear my breathing, I do not see the snake



Pure in Heart

Zary Fekete

Micah was advancing the film with his thumb when the camera shutter jammed halfway through the second roll. He frowned and gently thumped it with his fingers. He shook it softly like you shake a stubborn drawer. No movement. It was dead.

He signed and eased himself down onto the curb. Around him the city noises continued... buses sighed at stoplights, pigeons cooed while searching for crumbs, a dog barked across the park.

The camera wasn't his. He borrowed it from the school lab, promising the caretaker he would bring it back in one piece. He needed it today. The contest deadline was tonight.

He rubbed his thumb against his fingers, feeling the oil from the lens he had adjusted too many times. He felt his damp shirt clinging to his sweaty back.

Nothing to be done. He pulled a cheap disposable camera from his bag. He looked down at it and chuckled. It was a joke. He bought it as a backup at the convenience store for three dollars.

But... still. The sun was just setting. Magic hour light poured between the buildings in bright shafts of gold.

Micah stood and started to walk.

He pressed the flimsy, plastic shutter and snapped a shot of a boy chasing bubbles across a playground. He caught an angle on an old woman scattering crumbs before a crowd of happy birds at her feet. He took a pic of a father leaning down to tie his child's shoe.

The disposable camera made brittle little clicks each time. He had no idea if any of the shots would be good. No second chances.

He finally reached the end of the roll and realized his fingers were numb and his sandals were dusty from sidewalk grit. He slowly walked back to his dorm, dropping the camera into the overnight processing bin and paying the charge with a few coins from his pocket.

Then he went home. The next day he mailed the photos in to the contest. And promptly forgot about it.

Three weeks passed, and the letter arrived.

The envelope was typed. No return address... just the contest name in the upper left corner.

Cautiously, Micah sat down at his desk and opened it. Inside there was no prize. No invitation to any ceremony. Instead, there was a single sheet of folded paper. A short note printed in neat handwriting.

“Dear Micah,

Your photo of the father and the little girl stuck with me long after the judging was over. It wasn't the most polished entry. The shot wasn't even centered. But it was the only picture that really made me stop and look.

Thank you.”

No money. Nothing else.

But Micah held the letter in his hands a long time before he slowly folded it... smaller and smaller until he slipped it into his back pocket.

He glanced outside. The sun was setting again, bathing the campus mall with soft twilight.

He locked his dorm room and hurried to the convenience store. There was one disposable camera left.

He grinned and bought it. Outside he advanced the film carefully and slowly. Then he lifted it to his eye and waited.





Peacemakers

Zary Fekete

Everyone knew about the feud between Mrs. Connors and Mr. Reyes. But if anyone happened to be walking by just then, they would have seen the two neighbors staring down the alley between their houses.

The dog was nothing but ribs and matted fur.

“You see him?” Mrs. Connors said.

Mr. Reyes shielded his eyes against the setting sun. “Probably trouble.”

“Could be hurt,” she said.

Then the dog noticed them, and it turned, darting away up the alley. They both stood a second longer. Then, at almost the same time, they stepped off their porches and trotted after it.

The mutt was faster than it looked. It squirmed through broken fences and whipped past a rusted swing set. The two neighbors kept pace, however.

Mrs. Connors called softly, “Here, boy!” The dog ran harder. Mr. Reyes grunted under his breath about how some things didn’t want saving.

He kept after it as it ran past the corner grocery, through the library parking lot, and then into a vacant lot filled with dandelions.

Finally at the back fence, the dog stopped. It glanced back at them nervously before collapsing in the grass, its gaunt chest heaving.

The two neighbors approached it carefully. “Careful,” Mr. Reyes said, gently touching Mrs. Connors arm.

She crouched down first, holding out her hand, palm up. The dog whimpered, wary. Mr. Reyes reached into his back pocket and pulled out a hunk of jerky he had been snacking on. He broke off a piece and tossed it toward the thin creature.

The dog sniffed cautiously. Then limped forward and took the morsel, chewing loudly.

The three of them sat for awhile under the twilight sky. Slowly the dog’s breathing calmed. It rested its head on Mrs. Connor’s knee. Mr. Reyes ran his hand over its head, smoothing the dirty fur.

Neither of them spoke. The dog closed its eyes.

A bit later the first stars came out. Mr. Reyes stood and dusted off his jeans.

“I have an old leash in my garage,” he said quietly.

Mrs. Connor scratched the dog’s head and nodded. “I’ve got a spare bowl.”

She looked up and smiled. Mr. Reyes smiled back. The dog thumped his tail once against the dry grass.



Blessed Are the Persecuted

Zary Fekete

Sundown was when the curfew hit. Everybody knew the rules... they were posted in the main square, pasted on walls and telephone polls on thin paper that flapped in the wind. The rules were simple. No gathering or speeches. No public pronouncements or symbols.

And no candles.

Marcos pulled one of the papers off a nearby wall and read the words through once... then twice. He folded the paper and slid it into his jacket pocket. He looked at his watch and then up at the church tower clock.

At that moment the clock struck nine.

Marcos turned and walked out into the center of the square, past closed store fronts and below apartment windows that flickered with white and blue television light from within.

He carried a small candle, the kind you put on a birthday cake.

He cupped his hand around the feeble flame as a gust of wind pulled up around him, ruffling his hair. He walked onward toward the center fountain. No one stopped him.

He set the candle down on the rim of the dry stone of the fountain basin. The tiny flame flickered gently, but held. Marcos nodded, satisfied.

Then he stepped back and watched.

No one came the first night. The second night, two guards stood on one of the street corners. When Marcos walked to the center of the square with his candle, one of the guards spat onto the street loudly. The other muttered something into a walkie talkie.

Marcos placed the flickering candle on the fountain again. He walked away, leaving it burning in the dark.

The third night was cold. The candle went out twice as he walked toward the fountain. Still, he placed it on the stone rim and relit it again... it took two tries.

On the fourth night, the guards were waiting for him at the fountain with their hands on their belts. Their faces blank.

Right after he placed the candle one of them flicked it to the sidewalk and the other crushed it beneath a black boot.

Marcos said nothing. He gathered up the crushed pieces and walked away.

The fifth night he placed another candle. And on the sixth. And the seventh.

They came for him on the eighth night. He stepped out of his apartment, heading for the square, candle in hand, when they stopped him. His mother called to him when she realized the front door was still open. But he had already been hustled into a waiting black van.

The candle he had dropped was laying on the ground, broken in half, but still faintly burning.

On the ninth night, the square was empty. The fountain sat dark and cold beneath a hollow moon. All around the town slept.

The tenth night, just after nine, Marcos' mother entered the square wearing a grey coat. She held a package beneath her arm.

She reached the fountain and one by one, took out candles. She lit one. Then another. By the time the fifth one was lit, she was joined by a young couple who approached from the other side. They reached into the package, taking candles. Placing them. Lighting them.

In five minutes, the square was full of people and the fountain was ablaze in light.

No speeches.

No slogans.

Only light.



fairies

Svetlana Rosotva

Somewhere, two fairies lay,
Collecting dust like fireflies.
Looking out for the night sky
In their little golden jars,
They look like stars.
Or bottled
Little prophecies.

The Weight of Dreams and the Fire of Survival

Torsaa Emmanuel Oryiman

Why would life be so unfair to me? What have I done to deserve all this pain, abandonment, and hardship? Sometimes I sit alone, lost in the quiet hum of the night, questioning every breath I take, every step I make. I search my heart for answers that never come, and the silence feels heavier than words. How can someone bring a child into the world—two living parents, breathing, existing—yet still hand that child over to strangers, as if I were a burden too great to carry, a mistake to be corrected? Was I not enough? Did I cry too loud as a baby, or did I simply arrive at the wrong time, in the wrong place, to the wrong people?

What sin did I commit by being born?

Before I took my first breath, the world had already cast its shadow over my father's life. He didn't walk into hardship—he was born into it. A man burdened with more sorrow than joy, more weight than a soul should bear. He fought, not just for himself, but for everyone he loved. Each day for him was a battle—a battle against poverty, against expectations, against the injustice of a world that never gave him a

chance to rest. He was the third-born, not the eldest, yet it felt like all responsibility was poured into his lap.

His parents were humble farmers, their hands blistered and calloused from the fields, their backs bent not just from labour but from carrying the weight of hope. They prayed that their children would grow beyond the boundaries of soil and sweat, that education would be the key to freedom. They starved, they wept, they toiled endlessly just to send their children to school. But life is cruel in how it tests dreams.

As the children climbed the ladder of education, so did the costs. Every pencil, every book, every exam fee became a mountain too steep for their tiny farm to carry. The land, once a source of pride, became a silent witness to their suffering. My grandfather, once full of hope, now walked with hunched shoulders, not from age, but from the crushing weight of worry. Then came the day that would change everything. One heartbreaking afternoon, with eyes rimmed red and voice heavy with sorrow, he gathered his children beneath the mango tree where they had once played and shared laughter. But that day, there was no laughter—only silence, fear, and a storm of reality.

He told them the truth they had all sensed but dared not speak: they couldn't go on like this. The farm was drowning under the pressure. There simply wasn't enough to keep everyone in school. He asked for a volunteer—someone to put their dreams aside, to make the ultimate sacrifice so the others could have a shot at a better life. The silence that followed was more painful than any scream. No one moved. No one spoke. How could they? Each of them carried dreams too big for their small world—dreams of becoming doctors, teachers, maybe even someone important enough to change the family's story.

Days passed. The air in the house grew heavier with every passing moment. There were no meals shared around the fire; no evening stories told in soft candlelight. Just silence. Just tension. And then, the decision was made—not by choice, but by circumstance. My father, the third-born, was chosen to step down.

That moment did not just shatter his dream—it shattered his spirit. My father cried for days, his tears soaking into his thin mattress, his cries muffled by the pillow so others wouldn't hear the sound of a soul breaking. He stopped eating. He stopped smiling. The spark in his eyes—the light that only a dream can ignite—was gone. In the quietest of moments, when the moonlight bathed the house in silver, my grandfather would sit by his side and whisper, "I'm sorry, son," over and over again. But no apology could undo what had been done.

Eventually, my father rose—not because he healed, but because he had no choice. He accepted his fate with the dignity of a soldier sent to war. He went back to the farm, not out of passion, but out of duty to the family he loved more than himself. His hands, once soft and young, grew rough and calloused. His back bent under the weight of work far too heavy for one man to bear. He became the backbone of their survival, the silent engine that kept the family going. Even when darkness fell, and the fields emptied, he remained—his tears falling quietly with the evening dew, watering the very soil that had stolen his dreams.

The years rolled on, and slowly, his hard work bore fruit—literally. The fields began to yield more than enough. The farm that once mocked his sacrifice now seemed to reward his perseverance. But prosperity is never free. It draws attention, and not always the kind you hope for. The same villagers who once scoffed at his sacrifice, who turned their backs when he needed them most, now returned with outstretched hands and empty promises. They borrowed, and lied, and left him poorer with every transaction.

At first, he gave freely—because that's who he was. A man who knew pain too well to wish it on others. But over time, he began to notice a pattern. People weren't just borrowing; they were using him. Their kindness was a mask. Their gratitude, fleeting. So, with a heavy heart, he began to say no—not because he stopped caring, but because he finally started protecting what little he had left.

And that decision... that one act of self-preservation... marked the beginning of his torment.

The villagers turned on him like wolves. Rumours spread like wildfire—he was called selfish, greedy, arrogant. They dug into old family histories, resurrecting long-dead feuds. “He deserves this,” they whispered. “Let him suffer. Let him feel what his ancestors made us feel.” It didn't matter that he was a different man. It didn't matter that he had done nothing but give, give, and give. The world had already chosen its villain, and he wore the mask they handed him.

But what they didn't know was that behind that mask was a heart that still broke every day. A man who still mourned the education he never got. A man who prayed every night that his children would never have to make the sacrifices he did. A man who, despite it all, still believed in goodness.

The same villagers he had once helped—the ones he had fed in times of hunger, clothed in times of need, defended when no one else would

—now turned against him without mercy. They slandered him in the markets, mocked him in whispers that grew louder with each passing day, and painted him as heartless simply because he had chosen, for once, to guard his own heart. It wasn't greed that guided him—it was exhaustion. Years of giving, of bending, of breaking for others had left him hollow, and all he had asked for was space to heal. But the world doesn't like boundaries from those it has always taken from.

Hatred festered, not merely from jealousy, but from something older—something colder. Ancient grudges resurfaced like ghosts clawing out of unmarked graves. The people spoke in riddles, with eyes that refused to meet mine. When I confronted them, raw with confusion and rage, all I wanted were answers. *Why? Why such cruelty? Why now?* Their reasoning twisted like a vine choking a tree—*generational revenge*, they said. “Your father's blood is not clean,” one of them told me, his voice low and bitter. “What your people did to ours cannot be forgotten.” I stood there, shaking. My fists clenched. My voice cracked with disbelief as I cried, “Why must the innocent pay for sins they did not commit?” But they looked past me, as if I were already guilty by blood.

And then came the storm.

Not just a storm of weather, but of fate. The skies wept with us as if heaven itself was mourning. The crops failed. The once bountiful fields turned to dust and sorrow. My father—my hero—fell ill. It began with a fever, then a cough that refused to leave, and soon, it was as if the years of toil and heartbreak were demanding payment from his bones. Everything we had built, every sacrifice he had made, began to crumble before my eyes. Our home, once filled with the smell of roasted yams and laughter, became a place of medicine bottles and whispered prayers.

I was just a child, small and scared, unable to understand the storm tearing through my family, yet old enough to feel the coldness of fate tightening around us like a noose. I would lie awake at night, staring at the ceiling, listening to my father's laboured breaths, wondering why life had to be so cruel to someone so kind.

He became a shadow of the man I had known—thinner, quieter, but never bitter. Even when his legs could no longer carry him to the fields, even when his voice grew faint, he never let the fire in his spirit die. One evening, when the power had gone out and the candlelight danced across the hospital wall, I asked him the question that had been eating at me for years: “Papa, why does the suffering never end?” He looked

at me then—his eyes, though tired, still full of depth. And he whispered words that would etch themselves into my soul forever.

"Son," he said slowly, "the day you wake up without a struggle is the day you're in a coffin. Life, my son, is pain—but pain teaches us to live. It humbles us. It Molds us. You will know yourself in the way you bleed, and you will find strength in the tears you never thought you'd cry."

I didn't understand it fully then, but as I grew older, those words became my Armor. Pain became the echo of his wisdom, and even in loss, his voice guided me.

As if that wasn't enough, as if life hadn't already stripped us bare, my grandmother—the gentle matriarch who once carried me on her back and sang lullabies under moonlight—developed severe eye problems. Day by day, her world faded into shadows. She could no longer sew, could no longer walk around the compound without someone to guide her. Surgery was her only hope, the last chance to reclaim even a sliver of light—but how do you pay for surgery when you can barely afford to eat? The choice felt cruel: sight or survival? Bread or medicine?

We nearly gave up. There were days when the cupboard echoed with emptiness. We ate once a day, sometimes not at all. My mother would pretend she wasn't hungry just so I could eat. My father, already fighting his own battles with illness, would lie and say he had eaten in town, just to watch us finish the last crumbs without guilt. Hunger clawed at our stomachs, but what hurt more was the silence—the kind of silence that sits heavy in a house, thick with helplessness.

Illness, hunger, and isolation became our daily bread. People we once called family stopped visiting. Friends disappeared. The village that once cheered my father's harvest now whispered behind our backs. We were no longer the proud family with strong arms and a generous heart—we were the forgotten ones. But somehow, through it all, we survived. Not because life got easier, not because miracles rained from the sky, but because God carried us through the fire without letting us burn.

Today, we are still standing—not tall, not without scars—but standing nonetheless. Not because we are superheroes, not because we are immune to pain, but because we refused to stay down. My father may not have had a university degree to hang on the wall, but he taught me lessons that no classroom could ever hold. He taught me what it means to sacrifice everything for those you love. He showed me that faith

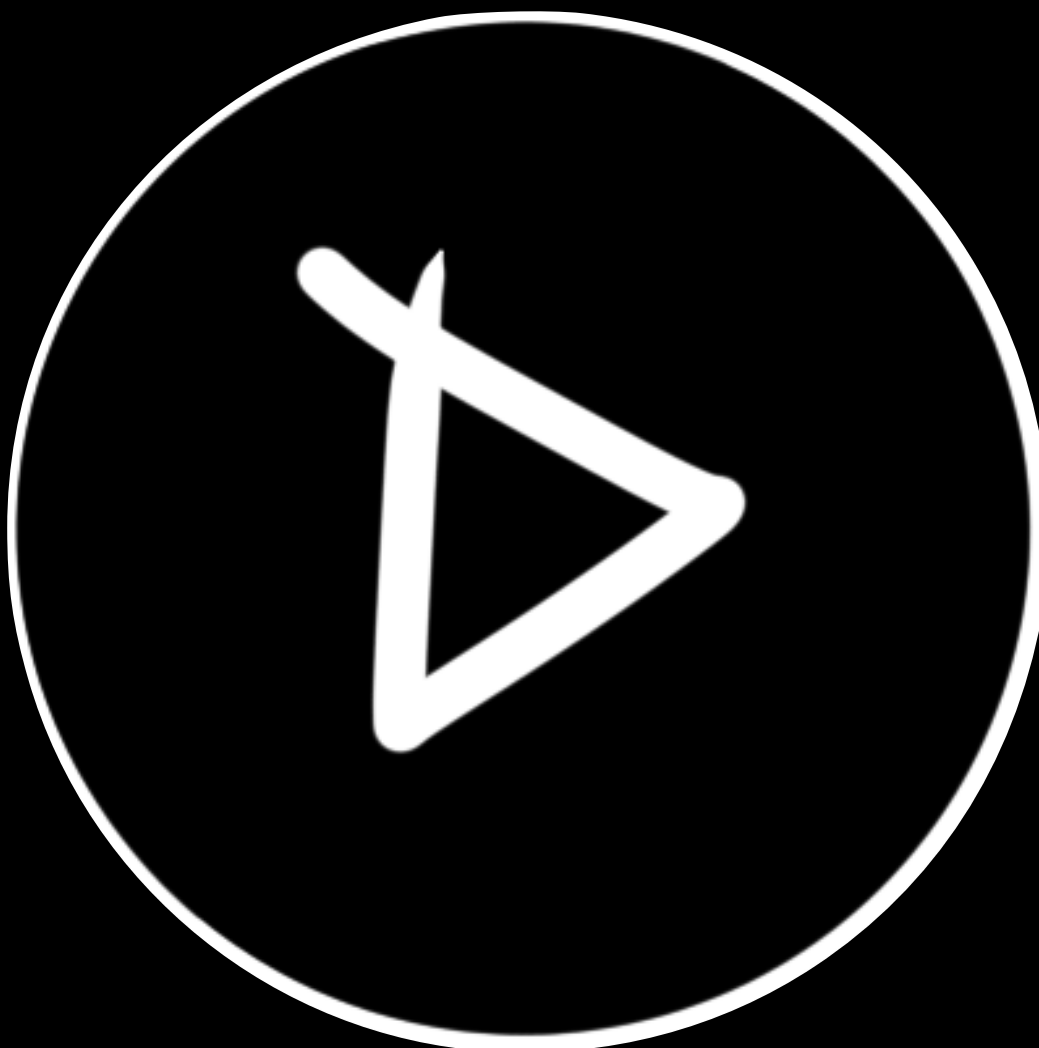
isn't found in easy days, but in the ones where everything falls apart and you choose to keep going anyway.

Our story is not just one of suffering—it is a story of fierce resilience. What the world meant to use against us only revealed how unbreakable we truly are. Pain didn't destroy us; it built us. Rejection didn't silence us; it refined our voice. The fire we walked through became the furnace that forged our strength.

So, to anyone who is hurting, anyone who is drowning in nights that feel endless—I see you. I feel your pain, and I promise you, it won't last forever. Please, hold on. Hold on when your hands shake. Hold on when your heart feels too heavy to carry. Life may bend you, but do not let it break you. The longest nights often birth the brightest dawns. The world may forget you, but your story matters. You matter.

Let your slogan be “never give up,” not just because it sounds good, but because it is the anthem of survivors. The ones who walk through the storm and emerge stronger, wetter, bruised—but still alive. Still breathing. And sometimes, surviving is the bravest thing of all. So take heart. The sky will clear. And when it does, you will look back—not with bitterness, but with pride—knowing you endured the impossible.





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