

What is this story about?

This story is about us. You and me and life and how we live it and how we ought to live it. And a caterpillar. Yes, also a caterpillar named Charlie. And his friends, because there is no such thing as a good story, if not with friends.

Dedication

To my mother, who taught me everything I know about love, compassion, goodness and greatness and whose memory will live on until I see her again, dancing in the presence of God.

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Charlie

Sectopolis is a bustling city filled with skyscrapers, lights, noise and activity. Just outside the main business centre, in a small flat overlooking a large park, lived a caterpillar named Charlie. It was Monday morning and Charlie, dressed in his Sunday best, was making his way to the office. Charlie was an operations manager at a prestigious leaf processing company. He was happy with his daily routine, crawling to work, making sure things ran smoothly and munching on the finest leaves during breaks – a perk of working at Applesoft.

Charlie's life had fallen into a predictable rhythm, with days blending into weeks that would blend into months. His social life, on many days, consisted of nothing more than discussions with colleagues over lunch.

One day, during lunch, the conversation turned to the topics of change and growth. Matthew, chief financial officer of Applesoft, quoted Buzzjamin Franklin, a famous honeybee, viewed by many as the father of industriousness, who said, "When you're finished changing, you're finished."

This made Charlie uneasy. He knew that Matthew had been speaking in the context of Applesoft, and how the company had to continue changing in a demanding and volatile market, but he couldn't shake the feeling that it also applied to him personally. He listened but did not comment or contribute to the rest of the discussion. The remainder of his day was spent in silent, restless discomfort. He had always liked his life as a caterpillar and saw no reason to change, or did he?

Still unable to shake the conversation, Charlie soon fell into a dark, brooding mood. He went through what he recognised as the first two stages of grief; denial and anger. Why was he grieving? Why was he angry? He was a happy, carefree, confident caterpillar. He had no reason to grieve, but now he felt himself wondering more and more about his comfortable existence. He remembered a quote by Albugt Einstein, a revered ant whose relentless attention to solving big problems had immortalised him.

Einstein had said that "Imagination is everything. It is the preview of life's coming attractions."

Charlie wondered if there was more to life than what he had imagined. Maybe, just maybe, he had to re-imagine the world and his role in it. Maybe he had been thinking too small, playing too small, dreaming too small, and living too small.

These peculiar thoughts continued to eat away at Charlie. He could see the quality of his work declining. He was withdrawing from conversations and struggling to sleep at night. What he needed was a voice other than the one in his head. Someone whom he could trust, and he knew just the man.

Charlie had met Samuel a couple of seasons ago. Samuel was a Praying Mantis, who had lived so long that his prayer-position was now his only position. His limbs could no longer move, not like when he was young and agile.

"But," Samuel would say, "if I was going to get stuck in one position, this is not a bad one."

Samuel was, as far as Charlie was concerned, a creature occupied with the more complex, even spiritual matters of life.

He didn't do small talk, and would always cut right to the chase.

"Slugger, it's good to see you. It's been too long. So tell me, quickly, have you?" he would ask, strangely leaving the sentence incomplete. This was almost his *idee fixe* as a conversation opener. Some creatures would dash off, intimidated or merely convinced that Samuel no longer had all his marbles, but those closest to him saw it for what it was. It was Samuel's way of really caring, not about things, but the creatures who he called friends.

"Have I what?" creatures would ask.

"Just 'have you'. You would know best what should follow. If I knew, I wouldn't be asking you, would I?" he often quipped.

This tended to steer those who stayed in a direction of meaningful discussion about their life and dreams and the things that held them back and how they could overcome them.

Charlie expected that his conversation with Samuel would follow suit, but when Charlie crawled through the door, Samuel just stood there for a moment, taking it in. Then he slowly remarked, "It's about time." And he turned around to get them some supple leaves to chew on while they spoke.

"Time?" enquired Charlie.

"Oh sure," said Samuel, "in fact, it's long overdue." He spoke in a calm manner that suggested Charlie knew exactly what he was referring to. Charlie didn't.

When Charlie just sat there, nibbling as caterpillars do, Samuel pushed forward.

"You're wondering whether there is more to your life," he said dryly.

"How did you know?" asked Charlie.

"There's a kind of expression someone carries on their face when they awaken to this question. Some never do. Some too late..." he let his words drift off for a moment, then stared blankly at Charlie.

There was no humour in his voice, nor was there judgement or pity. In a tone that merely resembled a 'matter of fact' Samuel said, "It was almost too late for you, but you still have time."

The two insects spoke and duelled and parried with thoughts and questions late into the night. Samuel was known for his collections of wisdom, often quoting creatures who had left an impression on his own life. "Now Ralph Wilglow Emerson was a unique firefly. His wisdom was, in a number of ways, a light to many a creature in the dark of night," Samuel remarked.

"He said 'The only person you are destined to become is the person you decide to be.'" Samuel paused, giving Charlie a moment to ponder on the statement.

So, Charlie, who do you want to be?" It was clear that Charlie would go home way past midnight, with many new questions. Questions he would need answers to.

"Here," said Samuel, handing Charlie a book.

"This may help." And with that, Charlie headed home.

After many sleepless nights, Charlie had arrived at only one hard truth.

He was in fact, not happy with his life.

He was grateful, for sure, but deep in the centre of his existence he knew incontestably that he was destined for more and once you know this, you can never be satisfied until you pursue that destiny, that future that you see for yourself.

And so, Charlie decided to embark on a journey of discovery, referencing Samuel's book often. He read and re-read many of the pages. The words were the same every time, but – and he could not quite explain this – the meaning seemed to change and evolve, as he himself, changed and evolved.

It was as if he and the words were in tandem, growing together, like dancers learning to move together. It was a curious book, an omnibus really of sixty-something shorter stories, all telling the tales of other adventurers. Their joys, failures, rebellion, repentance, love and death. Some of the stories made sense to Charlie, while others were so otherworldly that he almost laughed at the insanity of it all. Yet, he knew that at some point in his life, even those insanities may take up new meaning and make more sense.

There were many side notes written by Samuel himself. Charlie always read those with acute attention. Mostly because he trusted Samuel and he felt that they were more recent than

the original stories, and therefore presumed they would be more relevant than the strange worlds and creatures that the stories spoke of.

While he knew that life – even his life – was not all about him, he realised that he had a unique contribution to make, while he still had the time. He read the scribblings of Samuel about a creature called Richard who said, "If your dreams don't scare you, they are too small." He felt that now. He was scared. No, he was petrified, caught in web of near impossibility. He was afraid of changing, not knowing what to expect and he was afraid of staying the same. He knew that he was on the precipice of some big change and if he had to choose between the two fears, he would rather fear the unknown and pursue it than be caught in a perpetuality of a life not fully lived. And, while change itself seemed necessary and even exciting, it was still quite daunting. It meant leaving the comfort of who he had been for most of his life.

Somewhere among the pages, Samuel had noted a stranger's words. Darwindor apparently had this crazy notion that all creatures were once nothing other than soup. Yeah, strange guy, but at least this quote made a lot of sense to Charlie:

"It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent; it is the one most responsive to change."

A lot had been changing in Charlie's life. The changes had been subtle, perhaps invisible to others, but he could see and feel them. He was more resolute, having grown into and unto himself. It was difficult to articulate, but the more he embraced that his life was a journey and not an event, the more he became content with the uncertainty of tomorrow, knowing that he would lean in, and step up.

At work, one of Charlie's colleagues started noticing a change.

"Something's up with you," Paul had said, raising a suspicious eyebrow.

Charlie brushed it off, but in the back of his mind, he could hear the voice of a most peculiar and highly frowned upon lady bug. He wasn't sure if he remembered her name correctly, *Analady Nin*? he contemplated, *It doesn't matter*, he thought. What mattered more, was what she said.

"And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom."

In that moment, Charlie knew. His future was catching up to him, peering through a looking glass back into time, curious about the decisions and small habits that were now beginning to shape the caterpillar he would become.

More things started to change; as if change itself was a living catalyst for more change. Change had obtained a gravity of sorts, becoming stronger the closer he got, and Charlie...Charlie was in free fall.

Decisions

Just about every facet of Charlie's life was transforming, as if his life were a canvas that had only contained the outlines. Now was a season of colour, wild and wonderful colour painted in and over the lines.

He dressed differently, spoke differently and attracted different people. He started finding different things interesting to what he had before. He remembered – what now felt like a lifetime ago – sitting at lunch, talking about people and problems. Now, his thoughts were of solutions and ideas. He entrenched himself in the community, finding that the more he gave, the more he received.

This was initially a foreign concept to him, in spite of having read about this very thing in the side notes by Samuel. It was as if one first had to 'do' something before it could really be fully understood, as if merely reading about it could not break through the crust to reveal the inside, where the real value resided. It was like reading about a life versus living it. There were whole sections in Samuel's book which elaborated on this principle, which now started to make more sense to him.

Charity had always seemed like something done by large companies as a tax rebate or desperate people who needed companionship or camaraderie to fill their lives. Now, as he started changing in himself, his view of the world started changing as well and for the first time, he saw a charitable lifestyle as a necessity. He had always been kind and generous, but charity was new to him, it was more intentional. His new sense of 'intentional kindness' wasn't about filling a hole, but rather seeing the world through a different lens and learning that gratitude was not an inward emotion, but an outward action - a way of life. At first, giving seemed paradoxical surely, if you give, you have less, right? Not so. He found that for everything he gave - his time, money, expertise, and so forth – he received ten times the joy, meaning and purpose. He discovered that charity and grace, was in fact the commerce of trading tangibles for intangibles, finite things, for the infinite.

On some days living deliberately was difficult. After all, setting goals and making plans took effort. Executing those plans even more so.

Some days he would walk past his couch and almost audibly hear the invitation to fall back into a familiar rhythm of merely existing, lying down and imagining life, rather than living it fully.

It was certainly easier to do what most creatures did – living their lives through others or through TV screens. He saw it happen all around him, all the time, creatures seduced into giving up on dreams and slipping back into their old patterns because it was comfortable and easy. Some never explored their passions to begin with, with their wildest adventures being the stories played out in movies.

When he felt the pull back towards a more passive and opportunistic lifestyle, or when people called him crazy, he became angered and annoyed. It seemed like inertia and indifference yearned for companionship.

"If you can do better, then do better," he reprimanded himself.

A thought from Samuel's book popped into his mind.

Sometimes, the discomfort is not uncomfortable enough, he recalled. It was an extract from the adventures of a beetle named Tarun. At birth, Tarun had been abandoned in the street. A family of Mantis' discovered and raised Tarun as one

of their own, but over the years, it became guite evident that he was not. Tarun, a rare beetle of magnificent colour, was unable to move with the stealth and grace of his siblings. His natural defensive instincts were to make himself appear as large and formidable as possible, not camouflage with the surroundings. Nothing about his radiant colours was subtle, making him ever the outcast. Day after day, the pain of the truth grew inside him until one day, he couldn't live with it anymore. In spite of being deeply loved by his adoptive family, the pain of trying to be something he was not, was too much. He needed to assume his own identity. He wasn't a Mantis. He knew this and he would always fail at being what he wasn't. It had been years before he had mustered the courage to pursue his own life and his own dreams. That pivotal moment when he decided 'enough is enough', everything changed. He was no longer comfortable with the pain or the denial.

"Sometimes, the pain must first increase before we are prompted to change," the story had concluded.

In a short time, Charlie had become more disciplined about his 'intentional kindness'. In fact, he became more intentional in every part of his life.

Charlie looked at the large clock on the wall. He needed to hurry if he was going to be on time. Charlie had recently volunteered to help at a soup kitchen. He realised that not all creatures in the city had it as easy as he did. There were simply too many mouths to feed. He wondered at how he had lived his life without seeing the great need around him. Now that he was aware of it, it screamed at him, urging him to participate and contribute to those who were not as fortunate as he.

It was the third week in a row that Charlie volunteered at the kitchen. Creatures from all around the city queued for hours for the smallest helping of food.

"Good morning," he would greet each creature he served. Some greeted in return and feigned a smile. Others accepted the food in silence, but he made a point to try and make eye contact with everyone he served. That brief moment of connection seemed to have as big an impression as the food they served.

When the last person was served, the woman in charge turned to Charlie. She was a large lizard with bulging eyes. He had met her some weeks ago through a mutual friend.

"Charlie, if you're not busy tomorrow morning, we want to take some food and clothes to the neighbouring villages," enquired Lizzie.

"You mean, go beyond the wall?" asked Charlie, his eyebrows raising in surprise.

"Indeed," replied Lizzie, "and yes, there are risks, so no-one will hold it against you if you're not ready to take on that risk" she said.

Sectopolis was well protected against the elements and the creatures higher up in the food chain. Venturing beyond the wall meant facing unknown dangers and few ever dared to take the chance. The city itself was not free of peril, of course. Even within the walls there were factions and certain species that preyed upon others, but it was certainly safer than outside the walls.

Charlie thought about the book and the adventures of the creatures that have inspired his own change.

Fear and excitement welled up inside him.

"Yes," he replied, his voice spontaneously agreeing while his mind was still reeling with potential hypotheticals.

"Great!" replied Lizzy, "Let me introduce you to the team."

Lila was a ladybug, known for her ability to solve just about any problem presented to her. By all accounts, she was the first Ladybug ever to have solved a Rubix cube and she was, for a while, apprentice to a magician, until the magician disappeared mid-show and he hasn't been found since.

Sylvia was a crafty spider and a celebrated architect in Sectopolis. Her work was nothing short of captivating as she wove the imagined into being. Her webs were critical in keeping the crates on the wagon as they travelled the foreign territory.

Baxter was a bumblebee, a skilled navigator and communicator. His memory of routes and landmarks was legendary, and he served as a scout for all missions ensuring that the traveling troop steered free of unnecessary danger.

And then there was Jemma.

Jemma was a centipede. Something about Jemma resonated with Charlie. The way the sunlight danced across her body as she moved, showering her in an ethereal light. When their hands touched in greeting, Charlie felt a rush of blood through

his body. Their eyes met and Jemma looked at Charlie with blushing cheeks and glistening eyes.

"You're going to be trouble," she chuckled, leaving Charlie speechless as she turned around and strolled away.

Beyond the wall

When Charlie exited the Eastern gate of Sectopolis, he paused to take in the scenery. They had agreed to meet there at the break of dawn so that they would cover the first part of the journey while it was still cool. As at the start of every adventure, the world seemed to hold its breath in anticipation. The caravan already stood ready for their departure. At the helm were two magnificent rhinoceros beetles, their exoskeletons gleaming like polished armour under the soft morning light. Sylvia had used her webs to connect the carts to each other and to the torsos of the beetles, allowing them to pull the carts with ease.

Charlie stood beside the caravan, his gaze fixed on the path that lay beyond the wall. He was dressed for the journey, his usual office attire replaced by gear more suited for adventure. Next to him, Lizzie, with her caring and knowing eyes, surveyed the preparations, her experience as a leader evident in her calm demeanour and clear instructions.

When she was certain that all was in order, Lizzie's gaze shifted to Charlie. She eyed the peculiar grey backpack draped over his shoulders, an unusual sight for the caterpillar who favoured minimalism. With a quizzical tilt of her head, she gestured towards the backpack.

"Luck favours the prepared," he shrugged.

As Lizzy made her way to the front, Charlie continued studying the scene, trying to find his place amidst the bustling activity.

Jemma was pulling on ropes and crates, ensuring every item was secure. Lila seemed engaged in a final check of the caravan's structure, ensuring that everything was in perfect order. Sylvia was busy reinforcing the connections between the caravans and the beetles. Baxter flitted around the caravan, making use of his unique vantage point to confirm that all was in order.

Jemma waved at Charlie, moving towards him.

"What should I do?" asked Charlie, feeling out of place.

"Whatever it takes, of course," replied Jemma, smiling. It was clear that this was the best and only answer he was going to get, so he simply grasped his walking stick more firmly, and fell into tow.

There was a sense of urgency and apprehension in the air, which smelled of earth and dew. Charlie's mind raced ahead, the adventures from his book, spurring him onwards and cautioning him to run and hide. Most of the adventures he read, involved a sense of danger, even death. He glanced upwards and about the foreign territory, narrowing his eyes as if to seek out anything out of place. He tried to pierce the grasslands ahead, seeing the mountains in the distant horizon. He could hear the heavy breathing of the rhinoceros beetles, anxious to get underway as they stomped their feet. His companions were shouting confirmations or questions at each other, seeing to the final details.

"Check," shouted Baxter from up above. This seemed to be the final confirmation Lizzy was waiting for.

Lizzy let out a loud whistle and the rhinoceros beetles started their steady march. With a slight moan, the caravan jolted into motion. He glanced over his shoulder briefly, seeing – for the first time - Sectopolis from this side of the wall. It was breathtaking. Rising above the city walls, were towering structures made of natural and man-made artefacts. architected into impressive structures that housed thousands of bugs and creatures. Buildings were adorned with luminous patterns, reflecting the early morning light in a kaleidoscope of colour that shimmered against the rising sun. Inside the walls, the city would be a bustling hub, with creatures moving about their daily tasks as night gave way to day. From the lofty spires that served as lookout points for the city's guardians to the winding pathways that mimicked the veins of leaves, every element of the city was a testament to its inhabitants' ingenuity and cooperation. His thoughts shifted to the outer districts, closer to his home, where the colourful markets and vibrant gardens would come to life with creatures exercising, mothers pushing their offspring in strollers and musicians, busking for the odd dollar. For a moment, Charlie felt a pang of nostalgia, before turning his face to the path ahead. His heart and mind were racing with imaginary adventures and intrigue.

"So this is what it feels like," Charlie murmured, more to himself than anyone else, his voice barely above a whisper.

"To travel?" Jemma inquired, her voice laced with curiosity as she approach his side.

"To live," Charlie replied.

"How far are we going?" Charlie asked, as they started the journey.

"Oh, it depends, really," Jemma said thoughtfully, "sometimes, the rains flood the roads, then we have to take a different route which could take twice or even three times as long, but if we don't have any unexpected surprises, we should be back just before nightfall."

Charlie absentmindedly fumbled at the grey backpack.

"That's a lot of walking," remarked Charlie.

"Gives us time to learn more about each other," Jemma said, studying Charlie.

Charlie let out a light-hearted laugh, shaking his head slightly. "You certainly have an insatiable curiosity," he observed with a chuckle.

"That's a good thing, I hope," Jemma replied.

"Yes, definitely a good thing," Charlie affirmed, a playful yet sincere tone in his voice.

As the sun climbed higher, bathing the forest in warm light, the caravan came to a halt beneath the expansive branches of a giant oak tree. The carts were arranged into a protective half-circle, creating a makeshift campsite. The group settled down in a circle, appreciating the cool shade and a moment of respite.

"So far, so good," Lizzie observed with a nod of approval. Her eyes then turned to Charlie, sparked with curiosity. "Charlie, I've been wondering, what's in that mysterious backpack of vours?"

With a slight smile, Charlie carefully opened the backpack, revealing its contents. Inside were three makeshift bows, ingeniously crafted from repurposed paperclips, skilfully bent into the shape of a bow. "I'll need Sylvia's help for the strings," he said, passing the bows to her.

Sylvia, with her expert eye, examined the bows thoughtfully. Meanwhile, Charlie presented three quivers, each ingeniously made from matchboxes. They were designed not just to hold the matchstick arrows but also to ignite them with a strike on the side.

"You said, 'fortune favours the prepared'," Lizzie remarked with a raised eyebrow. "It seems you're prepared for war."

"I'd prefer not to be eaten," Charlie said, raising his eyebrows in emphasis.

Laughter rippled through the group, easing the tension of the journey. Sylvia then handed out the bows to Charlie, Jemma, and Lila, each testing the tension of the string. Charlie demonstrated how to use the matchstick arrows, explaining their design and purpose.

Lila studied the design. "Why didn't I think of this?" she commented absentmindedly.

"I can't take the credit, really, I read about it in a book," Charlie remarked in response to the curiosity from the group, "it seemed appropriate, considering the possible dangers of the road."

An hour later, the caravan rolled into the small town of Honeydew. It was nothing like Sectopolis. Here, the streets were unpaved, meandering dirt paths that wove through the town like the trails of foraging ants. The buildings, a far cry from the architectural marvels of Sectopolis, were crafted from what the earth and circumstance provided. They were humble abodes, each fashioned from discarded boxes or crates, resourcefully repurposed. These makeshift structures were then artfully cloaked with layers of broad leaves, a natural defence against the whims of weather. The homes were adorned with colourful stones and flowers, creating a bohemian atmosphere, which held a unique, rustic charm.

Charlie surveyed the surroundings. In this small community, life seemed to move at a more languid pace. The inhabitants of Honeydew, a colourful array of insects of various sizes, went about their daily routines with a sense of harmonious ease. There was a sense of communal togetherness, typically evident of a shared struggle.

A female figured approached them with a dignified air. Her wings, though faded with age, carried the soft, mesmerizing

patterns of countless moons and suns, a testament to the many seasons she had witnessed. Each step she took was measured and deliberate, aided by a slender cane that seemed as much a part of her as her delicate antennae.

Her eyes were deep and knowing, testimony to the wisdom that only comes with age.

"Welcome, Lizzy," she said in a song-like voice.

Lizzy embraced the old moth gently.

"I'm sorry we took so long," Lizzy said, "tough times all around."

"You're here. That's what matters," replied the old moth.

Lizzie waved Charlie over.

"Charlie, meet Marigold. Marigold, Charlie," Lizzie introduced the two.

"Charlie is the newest member of our merry band," Lizzy chuckled.

"Charlie?" Marigold asked thoughtfully.

Charlie wasn't sure if or how to respond, so he waited.

"Could it be 'the' Charlie, as in 'friend to Samuel'?" Marigold asked.

"Yes," Charlie said as his face lit up, "I do know Samuel. He's a good friend."

"Ah, that he is. He mentioned you might be coming this way," Marigold said.

"How do you know Samuel?" Charlie asked.

"He and I, we've lived a long time. Longer than most. At some point, your peer group becomes quite small. We met some years ago and we've remained close friends."

Lizzie interjected. "We still have a long day ahead. Shall we head over to the warehouse?" she asked.

"Yes, please, help is already waiting," Marigold replied, pointing to a large wooden crate not far from where they were standing.

Baxter urged the rhinoceros beetles forward. As they arrived at the warehouse, a battalion of ants swarmed through the large doors to help unload the crates.

In no time, half the crates were unpacked in the warehouse and the party bade the town of Honeydew farewell.

"Please send my warmest regards to Samuel," Marigold asked Charlie, as the caravan rolled out of town.

"I will," Charlie said, waving and smiling.

Under siege

As Baxter's urgent shout pierced the air, the group sprang into action. The two crows circled above, their shadows sprawling across the ground like dark, moving stains under the harsh sun. Each flap of their massive wings sent gusts of wind swirling down, ruffling the leaves and dust around the caravan.

Quickly, the novice archers readied their weapons, their hands shaking amidst the rising tension. The carts were hastily pulled into a defensive formation, forming a makeshift barricade. The air was thick with the sense of impending danger, and every eye was trained upwards, watching the crows' every move.

Without warning, the crows dove down, their sharp beaks and talons aimed at the group. Reacting instinctively, the archers launched their fiery arrows, streaks of light that cut through the air. The crows, surprised by the sudden retaliation, swerved in mid-air, narrowly avoiding the flaming projectiles.

Again the crows launched an attack and again the arrows rained down on them. The rhinoceros beetles stormed the crows when they were within reach, using their glistening horns and fortified bodies to good effect, but the crows were gigantic titans by comparison and even in their fury, the beetles did little damage.

The crows, persistent in their attack, managed to break open some of the crates, scattering their contents across the clearing. Some of the food meant for the next town was snatched away by the sharp talons of the crows, leaving a trail of destruction in their wake. Broken crates lay sprawled across the floor. Anger fuelled up in Jemma.

She shrieked at the top of her voice and took aim at the closest crow. Recognising the threat, the crow turned his attention towards Jemma with a menacing screech. In a flash, the crow lunged across the clearing, talons etched towards Jemma, who could only watch in dread. Her throat tightened and she could feel the dust burn her postrils. She tried and failed to move.

Charlie came dashing forward as fast as he could, seeing Jemma frozen in fear. He crashed hard against her, bashing her out of harm's way. A moment later, he felt a searing pain rip across his lower body. He crumpled to the ground with a pained groan, his face contorted in shock and agony. The crow towered over him, clasping him firmly under its talon. It shrieked in delight. Charlie recognised that death was imminent as the crow opened its beak to end his life. He could feel his heart race against the helpless fear of the moment.

Lila, witnessing Charlie's plight, took a calculated shot. Her flaming arrow soared through the air and struck the crow directly in its eye. The fiery impact sent the crow reeling back, its screech piercing the air.

Realizing the threat posed by the defenders, the crows decided to abandon their assault. With a final, resentful caw, they flapped their wings and ascended into the sky, disappearing from view.

With the immediate threat gone, Jemma and the rest of the group rushed to Charlie's side. His wound was severe, the blood seeping into the dirt beneath him. Jemma's eyes were wide with shock and concern as she knelt beside him, her hands trembling as she assessed the injury. Tears were running freely down her cheeks.

"Stay with us, Charlie," she whispered, her voice laced with urgency. Sylvia stepped closer, stitching the wound with practiced perfection while Jemma held Charlie's hand with a face drained of colour. Charlie managed a brief smile, before the light around him faded. As his mind drifted, he could hear his companions issue instructions and then, silence.

A tale of buttons

Jemma had not left Charlie's side during his recovery. He had been mostly bed-ridden, unable to move while his body healed. During this time, they had gotten to know each other intimately and he could feel a strong emotion stir inside him. The rest of the group had visited from time to time to make sure their friend was recovering, but in Jemma, Charlie found something else; a fellowship that made the ordeal not only bearable, but meaningful.

During this time, Jemma shared her story. Charlie didn't always know how to respond, but he was a passionate listener and it seemed to him that this was what she needed. She had been in an abusive relationship for years, too afraid to step out. "Sometimes," she commented, "we don't give ourselves enough credit, Charlie. I thought that my relationship was what I deserved, that I was not good enough to expect anything more."

It was only when things became a lot worse, that she mustered the courage to change her reality.

When she first told Charlie about that time in her life, she said that she had argued, "Better the devil you know, than the devil you don't." But she had been wrong. Our fears are often nothing more than flights of imagination, designed to protect us from the unknown, but with no evidence at all to substantiate the fear itself.

"It's unfortunate," Jemma added, "that only the brave ever realise this."

She had expected, in her uncertainty, to find more darkness when she stepped out of her own grey existence. The opposite had been true. She found colour and joy and a world that started making sense again, a life worth living; a life that had been yearning and waiting for her to step into the spotlight of her own adventure.

Like Samuel, Jemma offered a deep well of wisdom, with solid evidence to back it up.

"My change," she said to Charlie, "was not easy. It was abrupt, but not easy. I was down and out and had to start building

myself up from just about nothing. I wasn't always motivated. Sometimes, I just wanted to curl up and wait for the world to pass me by. I wanted to close my eyes and believe that if I could not see the world, then it could not see me."

Jemma was a centipede. By nature, they excelled at curling up. She quoted a beetle called Jim Roam: "Motivation is what gets you started. Habit is what keeps you going."

"Some days, Charlie, I forced myself to make my bed and that was enough. It was a start, at least - a start of many tiny habits that got me through those early days and that still keep me going. We all need habits. Good habits that become instincts through endurance." She squeezed his hand.

Charlie was grateful to have met Jemma. While life in general, was the journey to find one's way amidst an endless array of uncertainties, he had become absolutely certain of one more thing: he will suffer setbacks and he will have failures, but there is comfort in fellowship and having a shared vision.

He looked at Jemma and his heart missed a beat. It seems this chapter of his life was marked by many types of falling – falling into change and perhaps, if he dared, falling into love.

"To dare is to lose one's footing momentarily. Not to dare is to lose oneself." Charlie remembered reading this somewhere among the pages of Samuel's book. He recalled vaguely that it was written by an ex-pat insect called Søren-something. He wondered if Søren first lost himself before he dared to change.

It was the weekend and Charlie and Jemma had agreed to meet Samuel for dinner. It was high time that Charlie introduced them to each other, and he was now much better, able to move slowly, but without pain.

"Perhaps," he teased Jemma, "if you two start talking and debating the mysteries of life, I will finally have some quiet!"

They laughed. Before meeting Jemma, Charlie hadn't laughed for such a long time, not really anyway, not deeply. It wasn't that his joke was particularly funny, but it was the peace and honesty of the moment that bubbled to the surface. He would laugh at jokes as much as the next bug, but it felt like forever

since he just laughed with raw and simple joy. He felt that now, simply being in the moment with Jemma.

And then the strangest thing happened. There was a slight popping sound.

Charlie looked down. The button of his shirt hanging over his bellybutton had popped right off. He looked back up and met Jemma's gaze. For a moment, life seemed to have hit the pause button and then Jemma erupted with mirthful laughter as Charlie's face pulsated through different colours of red and purple from absolute shame.

"I don't know why that just happened," he protested, scurrying in vain to find the button and recover a semblance of dignity.

"Old age 'does' things to a man," Jemma uttered in between forced breaths and continued laughter. "I've heard that everything sags. The hair on your head grows less because it starts coming out of your ears and nose. Perhaps this is just those parts of you that are becoming more susceptible to gravity."

Jemma was enjoying this moment way too much, but Charlie had to admit that as embarrassing as it was, it did in fact

warrant her mockery and laughter. He glanced at his stomach where now, his belly button was clearly protruding through his shirt.

"That's just wrong!" he said, turning around to find a bigger shirt.

Bon appetite

"Did you ever find it?" Samuel asked Jemma.

"Some buttons don't want to be found," Jemma replied, sharing in the mirth.

Jemma had just completed recounting the unfortunate tale of Charlie's expanding waistline. Come to think of it, he was feeling even more bloated now and they had hardly started eating. He had recovered well from his injury, so he was confident this was unrelated. His friends had been weaving philosophy with mockery for going on thirty minutes now. He felt strangely absent-minded. Since 'the button episode' he felt as if change was now something that was happening 'to' him, and not 'by' him. Change, it seemed, had taken on a persona and he was now the object of its attention. He wasn't sure where this was going or whether he was even okay with the idea of not being in control, but then again, how could he control what he did not understand?

His thoughts returned from their meandering.

Samuel and Jemma had enjoyed their laugh and were now dishing up, with only isolated chuckles remaining from the imagery of the button popping.

"This is nice," said Samuel.

They ate in silence for a while, before Samuel turned to Jemma, with a serious expression.

"I was worried about him, you know," Samuel said.

Jemma waited for Samuel to continue.

"I've known Charlie for all of his life, I saw him grow up right in front of my eyes. I was there when he was born, you know. He was little more than a larva when I bounced him around on my knee. I knew his mother before I met this young chap."

Samuel stared into the distance, taking on a far-off expression as if reliving a lifetime in a thought. Thoughts can do that – pause time.

"Fact is, I've always known he was destined for greater things.

Took him long enough to figure it out for himself," he said and winked at Jemma.

"You do realise I'm sitting right here?" Charlie teased.

"You're just here for the food," mocked Samuel.

They all laughed.

"But seriously, the mistake many make, is to think they have more time. We don't. Have either of you ever watched a sunset over water?" Samuel asked.

They both shook their heads.

"It's a strange thing. The sun seems to drop slower as it nears the water, as if fire and water refuse to meet and then, suddenly, as if two lovers see each other across a room, time accelerates to make up the moments it had lost. One moment you have sunlight and then, in nothing more than a blink of the eye, it's dark all around. That's how it is with time. It creates the illusion that life waits for you and that there is always tomorrow, but that's what it is. An illusion, if not a desire of the heart. We want so much for it to be true that we have more time, that we convince ourselves that we do, until we don't."

"Well, that's heavy," said Charlie.

"Heavy and true, my friend. Heavy and true. I've watched you grow older and do many good things. Good things, when you could have been doing great things. I was worried that you'd

die one day, when the sun meets the water, having only ever been a good man."

Charlie didn't know what to say. Sometimes, or most of the time, saying nothing is the best response. This was such a moment.

After a moment, Charlie looked at Samuel and enquired, "So, Marigold?"

"Ah," shrugged Samuel, "she's a marvellous creature." His face took on a longing expression.

"Seems like there's a story there," probed Charlie.

"There is indeed, my friend, but it's a long story for another day," Samuel replied with a note of sadness.

"She sends her regards," interjected Jemma.

"Thank you. I believe you met her right before your encounter with the crows? Whatever happened there?" Samuel asked.

Jemma told the story of how they fought off the crows and how Charlie saved her life and had the scars to show for it. "I would not be here tonight, had it not been for our valiant friend," Jemma said jokingly, but her voice held a sincerity to it.

"I'm glad you're here," proclaimed Samuel warmly, smiling at Jemma and raising his glass in salute.

"Charlie, I've got to ask. Every creature I know, who has had a near-death experience, has described it as 'life-changing'. Is it the same for you?" enquired Samuel.

Charlie watched the wine in his glass as he swirled it gently in a circular moment.

"It's hard to describe, but yes, I'd say it's true. The moment that you realise how much you stand to lose and how fragile it all is, you gain a greater level of clarity. I suppose you could say that for the first time, you experience gratitude and love in its purest and most intense form."

He glanced at Jemma and noticed her warmth towards him. He reached out and took her hand in his.

"Here's to daring to live!" Samuel exclaimed, looking straight into Charlie's soul as he said it.

They raised their glasses.

"To friendship," Charlie shouted.

"To no more toasts!" Jemma laughed, raising her glass and joining the mirth.

The night dragged on, and the friends ate and drank and laughed and cried. They lived as life was intended to be lived. Fully. In the moment, as if there were no tomorrow.

The dream

As Charlie settled into his bed that evening, the events of the dinner still fresh in his mind, his thoughts danced between the lucid and the obscure, tugging at the edges of his consciousness. Whispers of voices both familiar and strange murmured around him, some speaking to him and others merely of him.

His mind drifted. He saw himself aboard a vessel, being carried further away from the sanctuary of the shoreline. A deep longing surged within him for the grounding embrace of terra firma. But then, a phrase from Samuel's tome echoed in the midst of his longing: "Ships were not built to remain tethered to the harbour."

The sails flapped in the winds of his imagination. He could feel the cold spray of the ocean on his face. The cool brought him brief comfort.

He saw himself as Samuel had described. The young larva, carefree and untainted, before the world got inside of him

through the bruises and cracks that come with time. He heard a familiar voice, but could not put a name to it.

"The world is a marvellous place full of wonderful and dangerous things. Imagine yourself floating in the ocean with water as far as you can see. Your survival hinges on the water staying on the outside. The real threat is if the water gets in. The same with the world. Certain things must stay on the outside. Don't let them in." It was sage advice that he hadn't taken.

He saw himself as a younger man, who did have dreams. Wild dreams of great things. However, the wrong words and the wrong opinions had clawed their way inside, and the fear and doubt that manifested was far greater than the wild dreams of a young man. Instead, Charlie had believed the lie that had made a home in his heart. "You are not enough," it told him.

Once they get inside you, the voices start to sound like your own and they become harder to ignore. Eventually Charlie had given up. He had been convinced that an ordinary life was what an ordinary man deserved. Seeing this now, it tore at him, the years he had lost to a lie.

A translucent figure then emerged. It was Søren.

"Why do you grieve?" he asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Charlie sneered, "look at what I lost! Imagine where I could have been had I not given the world a voice inside my heart!" Charlie was caught in a rage.

"Anger and regret are not your friends, Charlie, even though they promise comfort in their embrace. They are the desperate hands of the past trying to pull you back there, to hold you hostage in a place you've left behind. It was only a chapter, and now you get to write a new one."

"But it's hard, Søren. It's so much harder than it ought to be."

"Said whom?" replied Søren, "who said it was supposed to be easy? Only the fool or the drunkard believe a thing of any value to be easy."

The wind howled, a symphony of nature's fury as a tempest raged around the ship, rocking it violently to the rhythm of the storm. A chaotic canvas of angry greys and blacks with sporadic flashes of lightning illuminated the skies.

"Let it go," said Søren, "the past, the pain, the yearning for dry land, the promise of safety. Let it all go. It takes you nowhere."

Søren faded, as did the storm. Only the calm remained.

Death

The world awoke to silent reverence as a symphony of light cascaded from the rising sun. In the streets of Sectopolis, the nocturnal were handing over the proverbial flame to those who would embrace the day, but Charlie didn't move.

He felt the sensation drain from his body sometime during the night. It was a strange feeling that he couldn't quite articulate. He could feel that his body was there, but at the same time, he could not bring it to respond any more than a tree could bring its branches to dance. While he could just about feel the sunlight on his face, he felt disconnected from the world. Amidst a haze of confusion, there was only one thought that was clear to him.

"I am dying," he reflected.

The world around him, once so vibrant and tangible, grew dim, though not in a manner that spoke of finality, but of something else to come. He was surprised to find himself feeling excited

and not afraid. He had always feared death, yet now that it was here, his impression of it was beautiful and not frightful, hopeful and even comforting. It was as if the finality, in some way, accentuated the beauty of life and he felt elated and relieved to be welcomed into its embrace. He vaguely recalled his mother, wrapping him in a blanket, humming a lullaby and rocking him in her arms. It felt familiar, as if he were back in that moment, enclosed in a blanket with no concern over anything beyond the here and now.

His eyelids were heavy, like Samuel's words. The dark brought him comfort, like Jemma's smile.

In a strangely fitting exclamation, considering the vastness of the moment, Charlie's final thought as he met the inevitable end we all must face was a simple, "Come."

The world faded and then it was dark.

The dead do not talk

"Charlie! Charlie! Can you hear me?" Jemma shouted, as she beat him violently on his chest.

"Charlie, wake up!" Jemma was near if not past the point of absolute hysteria.

She wasn't ready to let him go, not now. Not after last night's dinner when she decided to welcome him into her heart. She loved him. She wanted to spend the rest of her days with him and she expected those days to be many.

Charlie didn't move.

"Charlie!" she screamed, her voice betraying her desperation and fear. Love is to be feared, for it is the most powerful force in all the world. One can survive without it quite comfortably, until it finds you, until you feel it's tender kiss on your lips, until you feel it stare and stir inside you. Then, you can never live without it. It consumes you and enslaves you and sets you free, all at once. At that moment, Charlie's death was Jemma's death, but she could feel herself dying, over and over, every time she imagined a future without him.

Jemma broke down in tears, crumbling to the floor. She collected herself into a thousand embraces, holding herself while the world rushed by.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, "I'm sorry. I should have told you. I should have..."

"He knew," Samuel asserted, who had just arrived through the doorway, still cast in his prayer-like position.

"He knew," Samuel repeated as Jemma leapt up from the floor and held him like he was the only thing alive.

They stood in silence, staring into nothing.

Time passed.

"Coffee?" Samuel said, as he handed the cup to Jemma. It wasn't so much a question as it was an instruction.

"Thank you," she replied.

On her lap, lay Samuel's book.

"He wouldn't put this thing down," she remarked, "said it helped him grow."

"It makes sense," Samuel responded, thinking about the man that Charlie had been.

"He felt he had a lot of time to make up for. Growth is something we must do ourselves, but it's easier if we have some support on the way when the going gets tough, and it does get tough sometimes. He was luckier than most for having you. I've seen many start their journey only to revert back for having no one to support them."

Taking in his words, Jemma then said, "I remember vaguely, a mole saying something like this once. I think her name was Shelen Keller. She said, 'Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.' It made even more sense considering moles were blind, so they needed the eyes of others to experience the world around them."

"It's true, to some degree I think," Samuel remarked, "sometimes I think we underestimate the good that we can do. I've seen a single act of kindness change the world, or a single kind word, end a war..." He let the sentence fade, staring at the shape of his friend on the bed, facing towards them, arms clutched together at his chest.

"In the end, he touched so many lives," he said, "his own story should also be recorded in that book. We can tell his story, 'Change is the law of life'. One of Sectopolis' mayors said that once."

Samuel sipped at his coffee. The sunrise had given way to a quiet rain. It was befitting that the heavens wept.

I'd rather have my story say, "Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything."

Samuel paused. He could have sworn that he just heard Charlie talk. He had been staring at the raindrops on the window, painting a story on the canvass that only he understood. A story of things coming together and scattering apart, only to come together again somewhere else.

He looked at the bed. Charlie hadn't moved. He looked at Jemma, whose face was frozen in something between fear and excitement.

"Yes," she said in response to the question Samuel didn't ask, "he did just speak. How is that even possible? Dead men don't talk."



Charlie blinked. He shouldn't be able to, he was sure of that, and yet there he was, blinking. Flashes of light overwhelmed him, forcing him to close his eyes again. The light was brighter than he remembered.

"Perhaps the afterlife has a sense of humour," he chuckled.

He felt the muscles of his face move. He shouldn't have a face, not according to what he knew of the afterlife. Maybe what they knew was all wrong. Maybe...he left the thought unfinished and instead tried to open his eyes again.

He could feel the muscles contract. It seemed like every time he reached out to a part of himself, that part gained a spark of life, a tether drawing him back from oblivion.

Start small, he thought. He listened. He could hear muted sounds around him. Voices in conversation, those of a man and a woman. Sometimes he could make out what they were

saying, other times it just became a blur of noise, converging with the ambient hum of a bustling city outside the window. He could sense he was in a room, on a bed. He could guess the size of the room through the shift in atmosphere. He could tell it was morning by the way the sun danced through the window, finding rest on his cheeks. He moved in and out of understanding. He heard statements that made momentary sense. He even attempted a response once, before falling back into the void.

Some parts of him were missing though, which was very concerning. And there were new parts, completely unfamiliar and strange to him. It was as if he had returned to the land of living by some divine decree, but only half himself and half something different. His shoulders felt tight, as if he was wrapped in a blanket that was too small. He seemed to have less hands and feet than before, but they were longer and more responsive.

Perhaps, he thought, this is what it feels like to be born again.

He thought about the madman, the luna moth that was always seen on the corner of the street, shouting things like "the end

is near," or "the only way to secure eternal life, is to be born again."

It had all seemed like the ramblings of an impassioned zealot, but who knows, maybe being born again was in fact the doorway to immortality.

Perhaps it was worth exploring, if he ever fully recovered from this state of limbo.

What does that even mean though, to be born again? He let the thought go. It was way too complex to contemplate now, given his current dilemma of missing parts and new limbs.

He returned his attention to the trial and error of his new existence. Something moved, hesitantly. He pushed again with his mind, focusing all his attention on the sensation that trickled down his spine.

Then, with a soft, rustling whisper, a magnificent expanse unfurled from behind him. The sensation was both ethereal and surreal, and as the grandeur of his wings expanded, casting shimmering hues, realization dawned.

Charlie had not only returned to life; he had transformed into something altogether different.

In a moment he was lucid, alive, filled entirely with the same impassioned thirst for life as the madman. It was as if for all his life he had been submerged under water and in this moment, he broke the surface to breathe for the very first time.

New beginnings

Charlie looked at Samuel and Jemma. Their faces were awestruck and to see them both utterly speechless at the same time, was a marvel to behold.

He smiled.

He knew the silence wouldn't last long, before the rhetorical questions would freely fall from their lips.

"But how?" one asked.

"Is this real?" the other enquired. For several moments, Samuel and Jemma danced this dance of questions without answers, until Charlie simply got up and embraced his two friends.

"I remember now," Charlie said.

"Before my mother passed, she said something like this might happen. I didn't understand it at the time of course. How could I?" The sunlight was shining through his wings, causing the most breathtaking display of colour and light on the floor every time he moved.

His mother had died too soon. She suffered from a disease that clutched its fingers around her, drawing her in. It had been a long and painful process and he remembered hating to see her suffer. She was a jewel of a mother and he had been blessed for it. In all the world, there was no better mother he could have wished for. Not a day of his life would go by without him remembering her fondly, immortalised as the personification of all that is beautiful and righteous and glorious.

"She told me not to be afraid and that the end of anything is only the beginning of something new."

"A chapter," Samuel said.

"Yes," Charlie replied, "a chapter."

Wiping tears from his face, Samuel remarked, "Well, my friend, if change is what you wanted, you certainly got a whole lot of it!"

They laughed and cried and laughed some more.

When the excitement settled, Charlie turned to Jemma.

"Did you mean it?" he asked.

She stared at him in silence for a long time before the corners of her mouth turned ever so slightly upwards.

"Of course I did," she replied.

"And does this change anything?" he gestured to his wings.

"It changes everything," she replied, "but not in a bad way."

They smiled.

"You know," Samuel said, "somewhere in that book you cherish so much, there's a story about a butterfly. Maya Angelwing. She once said, 'we delight in the beauty of the butterfly, but rarely admit the changes it has gone through to achieve that beauty.' For the first time, I now understand what she meant."

Life

As the days passed, the city was abuzz with whispers of the transformed Charlie. It seemed that life expectancy in Sectopolis was short and memories even shorter. The transformation from larva to butterfly had apparently not happened for a number of years, marking this as quite the momentous occasion and bringing what had faded into legend onto the lips of creatures, young and old.

The mayor, Ms. Penelope Wren, even approached Charlie with a proposal.

"Charlie, I'm sure it's obvious. The morale in the city has dwindled over the last couple of years. Crime is up, inflation is putting pressure on household income and for a million other reasons, people seem to have lost hope. You may not know this, but your transformation has caused quite an uproar and has given people something positive to talk about for a change. I would love to host a workshop where you can talk about this. Perhaps your story can help us save the soul of the city?"

Charlie considered this for a moment. He had seen the pointing fingers and heard the whispers as he walked to and from Applesoft, which was at the centre of town. He had flown there on one occasion, when the streets were particularly busy and he wanted to avoid the rush-hour congestion. This caused such an audible response from the creatures in the streets that he had since decided to avoid flying in public environments.

Now he was being asked to speak in front of the very same people.

"Can I get back to you on that?" Charlie asked.

"Of course, dear," Penelope replied.

Following his rebirth, Charlie had spent some time with the madman, who turned out to be far from it. He was merely high on life. Charlie was not really a fan of how Palora (he had discovered the madman's name) chose to communicate his message, but the message itself had still sparked interest. On an occasion, Charlie commented to Palora, "Listening to what you're saying about your God, perhaps it makes sense that you should always be telling the world about Him, but you should only sometimes do so using words. The rest of the time should be through your example."

Palora considered this and then replied, "The world is so loud Charlie. People only see what they want to see. The only way to be heard is to be louder than all the other noise."

While on the surface it made sense, Charlie wasn't sure it was true. *Silence can speak volumes*, he thought.

Charlie had sound boarded this off Samuel, curious about his opinion on the matter.

"He's right and he's wrong," Samuel stated. This answer did not surprise Charlie in the least. It was such a typical Samuel response, looking at something without bias and trying to understand it from every angle.

"The world *is* loud and people *do* want to see and hear only what is comfortable, and his message is *not* comfortable," he went on.

"I don't think shouting helps, though. It just adds to the noise. In fact, it becomes part of the noise and not separate from it, which is probably what he is hoping to achieve." Samuel contemplated this a while longer, while sipping at his coffee,

making a deliberate slurping sound, as if to say, "Don't interrupt me, I'm thinking."

"Rebirth – the way he talks about it – is quite radical," Samuel continued.

"More radical than dying as one thing, and coming back as another?" Charlie interrupted.

"Point taken," Samuel said.

"Nevertheless, not all of us have such stories to tell. To some, change is fearful and death is final. 'Fearful 'and 'final' are frightening thoughts. Not many would go there unless they have no other alternative."

"So people will choose the path of least resistance?" enquired Charlie.

"Almost every single time," Samuel said. Even though there was a sadness in this, he said it merely as a matter of fact.

"I have lived a long time, Charlie, longer than most. I have seen seasons come and go, cities rise and fall, but through my life, I have always seen the vast majority of people content to do what they've always done, never questioning or challenging the way things are."

Charlie's eyes narrowed as he tried to recollect a memory.

"In the book," he said, "there was a story of a creature by the name of Bernard Buzzshaw and I remember him saying that 'Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.' If everything stays the same, where do we find adventure or joy or purpose?" asked Charlie.

"Where indeed!" responded Samuel, "Perhaps this is part of your and my purpose; to help the creatures who merely trudge through life to realise there is so much more, if they have the courage to pursue it. Life and love? These things are to be pursued. They do not volunteer their beauty. They want to be sought."

"You're sounding a lot like Palora now," chuckled Charlie.

"Oh?" Samuel asked.

"Yes. One of his many messages are 'Seek and you will find."

"Perhaps I don't give him enough credit then," laughed Samuel.

"So you think I should agree to do the talk for Penelope?" enquired Charlie.

"I do," Samuel said.

"There was a creature I remember from my younger years. He was rash, always ready for a fight, but mostly because he was so passionate about everything he pursued. He once told me that 'Each of us should use whatever gift we have received to serve others' and you my friend, you've received a great gift. If we cannot inspire others to be great, then let's inspire them to be good, at least."

Jemma had joined the two friends while they were talking. She listened quietly until she had something meaningful to say.

"I agree," she said. "After all, you're the one who told me that, 'the only way to make sense out of change is to lean into it, move with it, and join the dance."

"I just quoted Alan Ohme. It's from his book," Charlie replied with a mocking accusation finger pointing at Samuel.

Samuel feigned a wounded heart.

"It's not my book, dear friend. It is the book of us all. It is the book of stories and of the lives we ought to live."

"Hear, hear!" Jemma said, raising a glass.

"To friendship!" Samuel exclaimed.

"To life!" Charlie replied.

The conversation diverged into other directions and more toasts were celebrated. The night would be old before the friends called it in. Life was to be lived, shared and loved and there is only the moment you are in.

The next morning, as Charlie finished his coffee, he picked up the phone.

"Penelope? I'll do it," he said.

From behind him, Jemma wrapped her arms around him.

"I'm so proud of you," she said.

"What if I don't have all the answers?" he asked, "I don't want to disappoint them, or you."

"Oh my dear Charlie. Disappointment is part of life, so it should never be a concern. Perfection is neither the point nor the destination. Don't you remember the story of Rainer Brigge? Let me remind you" she said, pulling him closer and then, in nothing more than a whisper, she said, "And the point is, to live *everything*. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer."

Charlie smiled.