

THE GOOD FIGHT

“What's the name of the short story contest you told me about?” asked the young man.

“It's called *The Friends of Path*. It's a literary contest, but it's different from others.

Here, there are no established critics to choose winners. Instead, writers themselves act as judges, evaluating the narratives of other contestants in successive rounds. Through that cycle of reading and voting, stories that resonate most, evoking something in those who understand the creative journey from within, are gradually chosen.”

The young man nodded and remembered well when this contest was mentioned to him, after his companion had accidentally read one piece and suggested he enter some competition. That initial conversation was brief, almost casual, but it had left him reflecting on his own urge to write, on stories he felt compelled to capture. Yet doubt and fear always held him back.

Now, he found himself reconsidering. For a moment, in the silence, he drifted back to the memory of that initial conversation.

“Did you write this yourself?” his companion had asked, surprised, upon seeing a messy draft he had left on the table.

Embarrassed and evasive, he had tried to hide his papers as he answered.

“No, well... yes. But it’s nothing serious. I just write to vent... I’m not interested in being a writer, really.”

The other person had looked at him with a mixture of curiosity and compassionate understanding.

“Why not? You have talent as shown in these pages. With time and dedication, it could develop even more.”

He had smiled, though with a touch of bitterness or fear.

“It’s not that simple. Think about what some great writers went through... like Melville. The man wrote Moby-Dick, such a profound and complex work ahead of its time, and yet he practically died in poverty, working as a customs inspector in New York to make ends meet. Or think of Kafka, who never saw his works published in his lifetime, dying in solitude, convinced his writing was a failure. Many of them, even Dostoevsky, struggled with debts and illness. I don’t want to live through that, you know? I don’t want to leave everything behind in an endless pursuit that hardly gives anything back.”

There was a moment of silence, and then his companion looked at him with understanding.

“It’s true; the path is hard. Many have sacrificed much, and yet, there is a deeper purpose. What good is a light kept hidden? Your stories, when offered in love and sincerity, may not change your life in ways you expect, but they can become beacons for others, shining in the darkness. History is full of examples like those you mention. Flaubert, after writing his masterpiece Madame Bovary, also faced harsh criticism, even a trial for immorality. Balzac lived his entire life hounded by debt, too. But there’s something you’re not considering...”

The young man looked at him with a blend of skepticism and curiosity.

“And what might that be?”

The young man, now silent, awaited a response, but his mind began to wander, as if those words had opened a door to a past he still couldn't quite close. His father, a man of grand ambitions and unfulfilled promises, had stopped appearing when he was still a child, leaving him to grapple with a void he didn't understand but felt deeply.

He'd spend afternoons waiting by the window, with a faint hope of seeing that familiar figure that never returned. His mother did what she could, working long hours, trying to fill the emptiness with bedtime stories and rushed caresses as she left in the mornings.

Sometimes, at school, when asked about his father, he'd shrug and respond with a practiced smile. In truth, he never got used to those questions, and the lack of concrete answers always made him feel, somehow, lesser than the others. He turned to words to find meaning and comfort, scribbling small stories in the back of his notebooks, tales of heroes who left but always returned, or of families that were reunited in the end.

Writing was his refuge, but also his source of anxiety. That internal voice that always held him back now resurfaced, constantly reminding him of the fragility of success, the risk of betting everything on something as uncertain as words. Wouldn't it be better to seek stability, something tangible to keep him grounded, something to ensure he never left others in the uncertainty that had once scarred him?

The lack of unconditional support had left its marks. He'd grown used to doubting himself, viewing every accomplishment with skepticism, always questioning if it was truly enough. Because deep down, he was always waiting for someone to leave him, for promises to fade like the faint memory of a father whose face he could barely picture. The words he wrote were an attempt to connect, to say what he never could to the man who had left, to understand, to find redemption in some way.

And now, sitting across from his companion, he felt those old wounds, invisible but deep, begin to ache again.

The man smiled, his gaze unwavering, and his eyes never blinking, as though time itself held its breath. He seemed poised, about to share a story that could change the young man's perspective on the literary path—a tale that, despite obstacles, might reveal the worth and purpose of pursuing the dream of being a writer.

“Let me tell you about someone who was also afraid, someone who abandoned the dream of being a writer out of fear of not being able to sustain himself. He was a young man like you, with a special gift for writing, but full of doubts and a deep fear of poverty. He decided that following that path was too risky and chose a career that promised stability: engineering.”

The young man listened intently, intrigued by how much the story mirrored his own thoughts.

“For a while, things seemed to go well. He graduated, found a steady job, and began to build a life. But then, his land was struck by a time of great hardship. The price of food rose beyond what many could afford, and people waited in long lines, only to find empty shelves. Neighbors grew desperate, and what once held them together began to tear them apart. The security he had worked so hard for slipped away, and he found himself facing hunger—not alone, but alongside his wife and, later, their children.”

The young man blinked, feeling a strange connection to the story, as if his friend were recounting events he had witnessed firsthand.

“His fear of failure as a writer had led him down a path that proved no safer. And as his country spiraled into chaos, he began to wonder if those stories he had repressed, the ideas he'd never dared to write and share, might have made a difference. Perhaps, if he had found the courage to express what he saw and felt, those stories could have touched others, even if only in a way that transcended personal suffering.”

The companion paused and lowered his voice, as if sharing a personal confession.

“At some point, he couldn’t bear it anymore. He decided to try, even amidst despair. He wrote three stories he felt were urgent and sent them to *The New Yorker*, hoping his voice might be heard. But he received no response. Nothing! And yet, there was a sense of purpose simply in having tried.”

The young man asked for more details about that story, absorbing it with a mix of sorrow and understanding. Feeling something shift within him, he later understood it as a singular hope.

“And what was that writer's name?” he asked.

The man smiled.

“He liked to be called 'The Friend of Path,' someone who, in the end, realized that paths open up when you share your stories, and sometimes, those paths are not just for you but for those you don’t yet know need them.”

The young man remained silent, fighting the good fight of seeking truth.

“Unlike the character in my story,” the Companion said, his eyes shimmering with an understanding that reached into the soul, “your efforts, even if unseen or unappreciated by the world, are never wasted. When you write with love and truth, you plant seeds that will grow in ways you may never witness, but the harvest will come when others realize that cooperation is crucial.”

The young man looked at him, both skeptical and intrigued.

“And why is cooperation important? Isn’t writing a solitary craft?”

“Ah, that’s where you’re mistaken. Yes, writing often starts in solitude, but the stories that endure do so because of a network of support. Writers, across generations, lift each other up. Imagine if Melville, after his lifetime, had been completely forgotten. But some writers later recognized the greatness of his work and ensured it found its rightful place in history. Without that support, many stories would have been lost.”

The young man frowned, digesting the idea.

“How do you know so much about cooperation?” he finally asked.

The man's face shone, as though touched by the light of a distant, cherished memory.

“Because I also received help from another writer, a man named Paul, and from countless others who safeguarded the meaning of my sacrifice.”

The young man nodded slowly, absorbing the depth of his friend's words. He understood that, on some level beyond the earthly, they were all fellow travelers on this path. Just then, his mother entered the room with a tired smile.

“Are you talking to your imaginary friend again?” she asked gently, ruffling his hair.

The young man looked at the now-empty seat beside him, his heart filled with a newfound peace. He didn't answer, but he knew those words would stay with him, like a promise he would one day fully understand—perhaps even enough to write about *The Friend of Path*.

THE END