Chapter 1

Paris, my first teacher

The City That Raised Me.

"Before I learned ideas, Paris taught me how to see."

Before life scattered me across oceans, there was Paris—my first teacher, my first love.

It began with five francs (about one U.S. dollar at the time), a pastry, a cigarette, a bench I had claimed as mine, though no one else knew it.

To some, Paris is the City of Light. To me, it was simply home— where the sidewalks smelled of fresh baguettes and spilled wine from the night before. But Paris was not only shopping windows and the scent of bread. If you looked closely, you could still see the war: a wall pocked with bullet holes, a faded sign half-swallowed by time, courtyards with cobblestones missing. I noticed such things—though I lacked the words to explain them.

At the marché, the women selling vegetables wore thick shawls. They handed over potatoes or carrots with a quick smile.
Sometimes their eyes lingered a second too long—as if they were somewhere else entirely.

The men in the cafés smoked until the air turned gray, speaking in low voices that sometimes lifted into bursts of laughter… and then, without warning, a sentence beginning, "Before the war…"

On my walk home, the city revealed both faces at once. Boulangeries rose like cathedrals of scent—brioche and baguette lifting like incense—while nearby façades still bore the wounds of war: chipped stone, peeling paint, windows patched long past necessity.

Remnants of the Occupation clung on stubbornly: faded posters half torn from the walls, their slogans illegible but their silence louder than words. Children like me sometimes peeled scraps of that paper for fun, making toys out of ghosts we did not yet understand.

Though rationing had ended, its shadow lingered. Housewives bargained sharply, measuring every carrot as if tomorrow might not bring enough. Sausages looked generous but everyone knew they'd been stretched with breadcrumbs. My mother would smile, counting her change, reminding me that "enough" was already a kind of wealth.

And then—just a few streets away—the shop windows glittered with defiance. Mannequins in tailored coats stood at attention, shoes polished to mirrors, scarves in impossible shades of silk. They whispered another Paris: not survival, but style; not scarcity, but elegance.

I pressed my nose to the glass and believed them. Scars and elegance were not opposites. They could exist together, in a wall, in a window, perhaps even in a person.

Mostly, I cared about my religieuse pastry and whether I could get to my bench before it tipped sideways, chocolate oozing onto my sleeve instead of my mouth. Somewhere in me, I was learning: chipped edges didn't ruin the picture—they made it worth looking at twice.

My childhood was woven into the cobblestones: dodging bicycles in narrow alleys, chasing pigeons across sunlit plazas, balancing on the edge of curbs and daydreams.

And mastering the fine art of looking intellectual while doing absolutely nothing at all—a skill that later came in handy when I taught philosophy.

Paris taught me early that life is not a straight line. It is a winding path of conversations, pastries, and unexpected detours—and that the best moments often come when you're lost or at least slightly spun around—ideally near a bakery or a café.

The Bench, the Pastry, and Five Francs

When I became an apprentice, I earned five francs a week— a fortune—if you were willing to believe it. Every Friday, I could hardly wait to collect my wages, the coins practically burning a hole in my pocket before I even left the building.

My first stop was always the pastry shop, where I would proudly trade a few francs for a religieuse—a magnificent two-tiered pastry shaped like a plump, edible nun. The top was a small puff, just larger than a cherry, perched delicately atop a round base the size of a small orange, cloaked in glossy chocolate and filled with rich cream. A scandalous joy for a fourteen-year-old with no sense of restraint—and I had none.

I would cross the street to my favorite bench, sit down like royalty, and devour it. Within minutes, chocolate and cream would be all over my face, my fingers sticky, and my dignity nowhere to be found. But I did not care. I had earned it. Every messy, glorious bite. More often than not, Pierre, who was a sewing machine operator and worked at the same atelier I worked, would see me first, grinning that lopsided grin of an older brother who knows all the stories you're about to tell before you speak. Pierre grinned, shaking his head:

“Toujours la religieuse, eh? One day Mademoiselle will smell the chocolate on you before you even reach your sewing machine — and then it won't be me teasing you, mon ami."

"Careful, petit frère, if you eat any more pastries, we'll have to sew you a new pair of trousers by next week!"

I laughed, but secretly worried he was right—then took a bigger bite, determined to risk it. If growing up meant new trousers, so be it. After wiping my mouth with the back of my sleeve—like a true Paris street kid, no napkin, no shame—I would light one of my weekly Parisiennes. This rebellious little pack of four cigarettes, bought at the corner café-tabac, was made of the darkest, roughest tobacco imaginable—originally produced for soldiers who could not afford a full pack.

I’d lean back, cough dramatically after the first drag (because I was fourteen and still tragically human), and watch the world go by—convinced I was now a man. Five francs in my pocket, chocolate on my chin, and a cough that reminded me manhood was not as elegant as in the movies. Still, I kept puffing, convinced each bluff added something invisible to my future self.

Sometimes, I would catch my reflection in a café window and hardly recognize the boy staring back—chocolate—smeared, smoke trailing, eyes already busy writing novels about the future.

There was a kind of delicious loneliness in those afternoons—a private feeling of being both invisible and invincible at the same time. Freedom, to me, meant: a pocketful of francs, a pastry in hand, and no one waiting at home to scold you for being late.

I learned that independence was not always glamorous; sometimes it meant cold fingers in the winter and an empty stomach when you miscalculated your francs. But each tiny hardship felt like a badge of honor—proof that I was becoming someone new, someone I'd built from tiny rebellions and sweet rewards.

Sometimes I would sit there so long the sun would slip behind the buildings and the streetlamps would flicker on, one by one. The city would change costume for the night—out came the lovers, the poets, the mysterious women in silk scarves who looked like they carried entire novels in their eyes.

I invented stories for those figures—convinced every silk scarf hid a secret, every midnight walks a promise or a regret. Paris belonged to all of us, but in those evenings, it felt like it belonged to the watchers and the dreamers most of all.

I imagined what their stories might be: a quiet heartbreak tucked into a pocket, a stolen kiss on a bridge at midnight, a letter never sent. The café terrace transformed into a stage set under moonlight, where every passing figure played their part in my private theater.

Toward Becoming

My “salary” barely covered pastries and bad tobacco—but at fourteen, that felt like wealth—even if the cream on my face made me look more mischievous than mature. In my heart, I felt rich beyond measure.

Sometimes, I would watch the older men nearby, arguing passionately about politics or poetry, their gestures sharp as knives, their laughter echoing across the square. I studied them carefully, imagining my future self among them, swirling wine, and making philosophical pronouncements I barely understood.

A few years earlier, at eleven, I won the Paris Junior Chess Championship— not because I was brilliant, but because I was patient—willing to sit still and think three moves ahead. My father, Jacques, however, worried I was spending too much time indoors hunched over a board. He wanted my hands to hold brushes and charcoal, not pawns and bishops; a useful skill for a life of reinvention, though I didn't know it yet.

At fourteen, already half-claimed by the adult world, I dreamed. Of grand adventures, of walking through cities I did not yet know. Of elegant suits, long conversations over wine, and a life stitched together by curiosity, ambition, and a touch of daring. And perhaps, quietly, I also dreamed of love—of meeting someone who might understand the wild, tender hopes tucked inside a boy who smelled faintly of pastry cream and black tobacco.

I did not understand love yet—but I knew when a brioche was worth crossing the street for, especially if it had chocolate filling and the baker’s daughter was the one handing it to me, pretending not to notice my red ears or nervous grin.

When you are fourteen and armed with five francs, a cigarette, and a head full of dreams, the world seems ripe for the taking. But Paris, kind as she was to a boy on a bench, could be a little less forgiving once you stepped onto her busy streets looking for your place.

My first real leap toward independence came not with a grand ceremony or a noble announcement, but with a pair of worn-out shoes and a nervous handshake. I found work

at a famous couturière's atelier —in those days, the only way to learn a trade was to become an apprentice. It was one of those tucked-away places in Paris where life hummed along to the steady rhythm of needles, steaming irons, and the occasional colorful curse words that would make even the models blush.

As I sat on my favorite bench, the last of the pastry cream still sticky on my fingers, I watched the world with a mix of envy—pretending I was not halfway between boy and man, and quietly hoping someday I would find my place between those cobblestones and clouds of flour. Pierre, three years older, was an artist in his own right. He treated me like his little brother and protected me from the 16 to 18-year-old girls who flirted, teased, and thoroughly enjoyed my blushing discomfort. I was naïve. They knew it. Pierre? He found it all hilarious.

That workshop became my proving ground, a place where every day I learned something new—not just about the craft, but about myself. I started to notice the subtle shifts: the way I carried myself, the way I responded to the girls' laughter, the way I began to anticipate Pierre's dry humor before he even spoke.

Even the smallest tasks felt significant, as if each task and every shared joke was a step toward adulthood. Some afternoons, I would close my eyes and hear the soft snip of scissors and the low hum of voices, mingling like music.

It was in that noisy harmony that I felt my world expand from a pastry-stained bench to the promise of something bigger.

In the hum of needles and the swirl of conversation, I found a sense of belonging I had not known I was missing. Looking back, I realize that was the summer I first understood

what it meant to come into my own. And somewhere in the chaos of pins, fabric scraps, and teenage crushes,

I started to recognize a version of myself I rather liked. Not fully formed, not polished—but curious, alive, and quietly determined. There was no applause, no certificate, no official moment of "arrival." Just the slow dawning that I was changing—and that perhaps, for the first time, I was choosing who I wanted to become.

And Paris? She was still there, winking at me from across the street, as if to say, "Bien joué, petit."— "Well played my little boy."

A Wink — I came of age with five francs (about one U.S. dollar at the time), and one pastry too many. If the city was my teacher, then my report card read:

Philosophy — learning

Fashion — trying

Pastry consumption — exceeds expectations

Reflection on Paris as Teacher — Paris whispered its lessons through scents and scars. Beauty was never separate from hardship — it was always the other side of the coin. Five francs, a pastry, and a cigarette felt like riches beyond measure, teaching me that wealth is not the size of the purse but the size of the wonder it can buy. My education began not with certainty, but with chocolate stains and the discovery that contradictions can coexist.

Chapter 16a

The Fairy Tale Lady — J.K.O.

A Presence Beyond Style.

"Some women do not wear elegance—they embody it."

I still worked like a man possessed, but I had begun carving out a small sliver of time for something else: special private clients.

These were women who had heard of me through whispers—a friend, a sister-in-law, a neighbor. The kind of woman who wanted more than a label. She wanted a feeling. A fit. A sense of self stitched into every seam.

Some designers chase applause. I chased moments. And none stayed with me more than what happened one Saturday morning. (I only allowed non-professionals on Saturday mornings.)

Before she arrived, four large men—gorillas in suits—entered my showroom. Secret Service. They said little, asked less, and moved with quiet authority. They wouldn't explain why or who they were there for, but politely asked to inspect the premises.

They moved through the racks, into the back room, down the freight entrance—scanning, checking, seeing everything—even the cutting room. My assistant Brenda caught my eye from across the room. Neither of us spoke. We both understood: whoever was coming, she was not an ordinary client. A few minutes later, one of them—clearly the alpha—took out a long silver box and spoke into it.

Several minutes later, she walked in—with another gorilla. Not quite walking—gliding, as if the floor had agreed to receive her.

I couldn't believe my eyes. Was I dreaming? It was Jackie Kennedy. In her early forties, poised as ever—with that ageless elegance that made time seem like her

accessory. Her hair was swept up, a silk scarf at her neck like armor. She removed her sunglasses and smiled. The room adjusted itself.

I had seen her a thousand times—in magazines, on TV, in newspapers, in the collective memory of a generation. Nothing prepares you for reality.

She wore a tailored suit with a brooch on her lapel and high heels—quite different from the usual women who came in sneakers. Her jewelry was discreet: a simple pearl necklace.

“Monsieur Kuper,” she said something I remember clearly, « J’ai lu des articles sur vous dans plusieurs journaux et magazines de mode. J’étais curieuse. »

(I’ve read about you in several fashion newspapers and magazines. I was curious.)

She spoke flawless French. Not learned—remembered. She had a very lovely slight American accent. For a moment, I felt as though I were back in Paris.

She asked for water, then said, “I have a business gala next month, and I need something that makes me feel like I belong in the room. But sporty and casually chic.”

I nodded and began showing her a few pieces from my private collection. She tried on a few jackets. One was flattering. Another fit well. Then I pulled out a midnight blue shirt-jacket suit, detailed with discreet studded ornaments, and said with quiet pride:

“Madame, you’ll be the first to wear this suit—and you’ll look perfectly in your place.”

She stopped me gently, with a half-smile.

« Pas seulement avoir l’air d’être à ma place… le sentir. »

Not just look like I belong… Feel like it.

There it was. And the challenge. In twenty years of dressing women, I had heard every variation of that wish. But the way she said it—quietly, without drama, as if she had been waiting a long time to say it to someone—told me everything. This was not a woman shopping for a gala. She was a woman looking for herself. And perhaps hoping she might still recognize what she found.

I excused myself for a moment and moved through the racks. Past burgundy. Past forest green. Until my hands found it. The midnight blue pant suit. As if it had been waiting not on a hanger, but in time.

She slipped into a midnight blue suede studded shirt-jacket and matching pants studded subtly with tonal detail—I had just finished it that morning. (I had originally made one for my sister Renée.) She asked to try it on in the back.

It was simple, yet structured. A shirt-jacket suit that made her look—and feel—twenty-five again. She was slender, beautifully proportioned—somewhere between a size 7 and 9 by the standards of the time. The suit she chose was an 8, and it settled on her as if it had been waiting. Feminine, never fragile.

She looked like an apparition, and my creation seemed to become more elegant on her.

When Jackie slipped into the jacket, I caught the soft sigh of suede, the flicker of her ring against a studded button, and the faintest trace of her Chanel scent—a memory of Paris, a heartbeat of anticipation. My throat tightened as she studied herself in the mirror, a quiet tension holding between hope and doubt.

When she emerged from the fitting room, there was a moment—just a second—when time seemed to hush. Even Brenda looked up with a smile.

The deep blue caught the light without shouting. It shimmered like confidence held in check. She turned slowly, as if afraid the image might disappear. Then, the smallest nod. Not to me. To herself. That nod women give when they recognize something true in their own reflection. Not fantasy. Not armor. Just… themselves.

« C'est le vrai moi. »

"That's the real me," she said softly.

In that moment, I understood: I had not dressed her. I had restored something. A woman not dressed for a gala, but finally invited back to her own life. Something no seam could measure.

She walked back to the mirror, smoothing the front, then said, almost conspiratorially, "Now, all I need is the right man to spill champagne on it."

"Just make sure he's wearing one of mine," I said, without missing a beat.

We both laughed—and in that laugh was everything I loved about design: not the fabric, not the fame, but the feeling. The quiet alchemy of turning doubt into elegance.

She turned toward the mirror. Straightened slightly, tilted her head—the way women do when they're trying to remember something or forget something. And then… her hand rose to her throat, almost involuntarily, as if catching her breath. Her voice, when it came, was barely a whisper—and heavy with emotion.

« C'est… c'est comme ça que je me sentais. Avant. »

"That's… that's how I felt. Before."

She didn't say before what.

She didn't need to.

We didn't speak much after that. She slipped out of the outfit, folded it with quiet reverence, and nodded. "I'll take it."

While my assistant packed the suit, we spoke about Paris and her French ancestry. I said, "Bouvier is much more French than Kuper." She smiled and replied, "Yes… but Monsieur Kuper is a great designer."

She asked where I was from. Paris, I told her. And how long had I been in America? Eighteen years, I said. She nodded, as if calculating something private.

Then she told me about her grandfather—Michel Bouvier, a cabinetmaker who had emigrated from France around 1815, building from immigrant roots into one

of New York's prominent families. She spoke of it with quiet pride—not the pride of someone displaying a trophy, but the pride of someone who knows where they came from and is grateful for it.

She asked about Coco Chanel—she had heard about my early years in her atelier. Many questions followed—about the workrooms, the discipline, what it was like to be a young apprentice in her orbit.

At one point, she turned to me and asked, in French,

« Vous avez travaillé chez Coco Chanel ? »

You worked with Coco Chanel?

"Yes," I said.

Her eyes softened. « J'adorais Chanel, » she told me—and then, almost quietly, that on that afternoon in Dallas, she had been wearing a pink Chanel suit.

She said nothing more. Neither did I.

For a brief moment, the room felt smaller—as if history had stepped inside and chosen not to leave.

Words I have carried ever since, reconstructed from memory—but never doubted in meaning.

Her curiosity was genuine, her knowledge of fashion deep. She told me she loved Women's Wear Daily—read it religiously. For a moment we were simply two people who loved fashion, talking about the world that had shaped us both.

I offered her a glass of wine. She smiled and shook her head gently.

« Merci, mais je surveille ma ligne… »

“Thank you, but I must watch my figure.”

What struck me most was this: she made me feel like an equal. Not a supplier, not an immigrant, not a designer lucky enough to have her in his showroom. Just a person speaking to another person about the things they both loved. There was no trace of the First Lady, no distance of fame. Just a woman—feminine, gracious, and entirely, disarmingly real.

She offered to pay. I didn’t want to take her money. I knew the fashion world would soon know she was wearing a Roger Kuper suit—and that was worth more than anything she could have paid. But she insisted. One of the gorillas paid me in cash. I did not want to take it. He placed the money on a showroom table and left. No one asked for a receipt.

At the door, she paused and looked back. Her eyes held something like gratitude—and something like disbelief. Then she said something I have carried ever since—words I have reconstructed from memory, but whose meaning I have never doubted:

« Vous ne m’avez pas seulement habillée. Vous m’avez rappelé qui je suis. »

(You didn’t just dress me. You reminded me who I am.)

She said it quietly, almost to herself—the way one states something long true but only just spoken aloud. I wanted to say something worthy of the moment.

Instead, I simply smiled and nodded. Some words, I have learned, are best received in silence.

That moment has stayed with me ever since. It was the greatest compliment I have ever received. Because what she needed was not a garment—it was permission to stand tall again, to feel seen.

Fashion cannot erase loss, or time, or heartbreak. But it can whisper: you're still here.

That was the day a legend walked into my showroom—and reminded me why I became a designer.

A Wink — They say fashion is superficial. Yet there she was, blinking back tears over a jacket. If that's superficial, then so is a sunrise, a song that brings you home, or the way a scent can make your heart skip. Superficial? Please. That woman didn't just try on a blazer—she tried on a memory. And it fit.

Reflections on True Fit — Real fit isn't about inches or seams—it's about the private dialogue between a woman and her own mirror. The pattern is only geometry; the magic lives in that quiet gasp when she sees not just her shape, but her story. A good tailor adjusts the fabric to the body. A great one adjusts the spirit to possibility. The right garment doesn't hide—it illuminates. It doesn't transform her into someone else; it guides her gently back to herself, like an old friend at a train station saying, there you are… I've been waiting.

Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis understood this instinctively. She was a true lady—sensitive, elegant, and possessed of that rare understanding that style is not merely what one wears, but how one chooses to be seen.

I could not help but notice the precision of her presence.

Nothing about her felt accidental, yet nothing felt labored. Each gesture, each pause seemed to carry its own quiet intention. In the fitting room, away from the public gaze, you could sense something softer—less the icon, more the woman. She would stand very still for a moment, looking carefully, as if listening to what the mirror was telling her.

Her elegance did not shout; it whispered. And in that whisper lived dignity, intelligence, restraint, and a quiet power—a quality of presence that never asked for attention, yet never failed to receive it.

Chapter 16b — Fashion Buying Offices

The Power Behind the Racks.

"What reaches the floor is not always what begins the story."

What Is a Fashion Buying Office?

(For those curious about the backstage players of the fashion world.)

Fashion buying offices are the quiet powerbrokers of the industry—acting as intermediaries between retailers and designers. Their job is to help department stores, specialty shops, and boutiques discover, source, and purchase the right collections for their customers. They offer more than just matchmaking—negotiating prices, streamlining orders, forecasting trends, and managing quality control. I remember standing at the edge of my showroom, pretending to adjust a mannequin or flip through suede swatches—but really watching every raised eyebrow and whispered comment. I remember standing at the edge of For a retailer, a good buying office is a lifeline, offering a trusted eye, savvy negotiation, and access to a curated world of brands they might not otherwise discover. In essence, these offices don't just help buy fashion; they help shape what fashion becomes. During Market Week in New York, the city would transform into a buzzing hive of creativity and commerce. Buyers from all over the country—and often from abroad—would descend upon the showrooms, eager to discover the next big thing. It was a ritual as much as a business trip: the latest collections carefully laid out, racks rolling past like silent parades of possibility. Their buying offices acted as trusted guides, escorting them from one designer's showroom to the next. Orders were written on the spot, decisions made with a mix of instinct, data, and a practiced eye for what would resonate back home.

I remember standing at the edge of my showroom, pretending to adjust a mannequin or flip through suede swatches—but really, I was watching every raised eyebrow and every whispered comment. There was a particular electricity in those moments—a mixture of pride and vulnerability so sharp it felt almost physical When a buyer's eyes lit up at a piece I had agonized over at 2 A.M., it felt like silent applause—a private standing

ovation I carried quietly inside me. And yet, the tension was just as real: one misread trend, one wrong hemline or color story could erase an entire season's orders. But the triumphs—those moments when they nodded, scribbled an order, or asked for a piece in every color and size—made every sleepless night, every sketch, every stitched seam worthwhile. In those moments, it wasn't just business. It was connection. A silent conversation between my imagination and their intuition, played out in suede, leather, and whispered excitement.

The Jackie Kennedy Story

Among all the buyers, there was one in particular—a legendary figure from a major San Francisco department store, a woman whose nod could make a season. She paused in front of my midnight blue suede shirt-jacket pantsuit with tonal studded detail—the piece Jackie Kennedy had purchased just a few days earlier. Strong yet soft, refined yet quietly daring, it was my tribute to the understated power and grace she embodied. The deep navy suede caught the light like moonlit water, and the subtle tonal studs added a glimmer only visible when she moved—hinting at modern boldness beneath classic elegance.

As she looked closer, I felt my breath catch in my chest— that sharp, electric tension that comes when dream and risk stand side by side. I tried to keep my hands busy, smoothing an imaginary wrinkle, but inside every nerve hummed like a live wire. She ran her fingers lightly along the suede, as though reading a secret message embedded in the grain. Then she turned to her assistant, her expression brightening into a knowing smile. And finally, she looked at me—a glance that felt like silent approval and a shared secret all at once. She gave a single, decisive nod.

After she wrote the order, I leaned in and said, “You have excellent taste. Jackie Kennedy bought that exact suit just a few days ago.” She went wild—her eyes widened, her smile turned electric, and she practically danced on the showroom floor. In that moment, she wasn’t just a buyer. She was a woman swept up in the magic of fashion—the thrill of sharing in a piece of living elegance.

That small gesture released the breath I didn’t realize I’d been holding, flooding me with a quiet, dizzy relief. It felt like a private standing ovation—as though all the late nights, the doubting sketches, the whispered hopes stitched into that suit had finally found their echo. That midnight blue suede suit would go on to become one of my most iconic pieces that season—an anthem of elegance and confidence, worn by women who carried a touch of that Kennedy mystique. Even now, I can still see the buyer’s eyes—not just recognizing a garment, but seeing a story, a feeling, a carefully whispered invitation to share in something beyond fashion.

The Offices Behind the Curtain

Some of the buying offices that carried my collections: A.M.C., F. Atkins, Van Buren–Neiman, Steinberg–Kass, Certified Buying, May Co., Mutual Buying, Sophie Feltz, Henri Doneger, and many more.

A Texan Interlude

I was invited to do another trunk show at Neiman Marcus. Around 1 PM, the president of the store came to me and said with a big smile “DeJewJeyett’ I had no idea what he was saying, so I said, “I’m sorry, I did not understand the word you said, could you please repeat it?” And he said ““Oh, I’ll say it slowly—“Diid yiiuu eat yeett” which in Texan

means Did you eat yet!

Some of the other stores I sold to included: Bloomingdale's, Henri Bendel, J.L. Hudson, Sakowitz, Meir and Frank, Hudson Bay, and Famous Bar.

Chapter 30 —Philosophy in the Real World

Or: Learning to Live Without Answers - Essays

"The unexamined life is not worth living." — Socrates

I have come to believe that philosophy does not live in books.

It lives in moments.

In the way we meet a missed train… a conversation…

a loss… a second chance.

I. The No Man's Land

I once came across a definition of philosophy by Bertrand Russell that stayed with me. He described it as something that lives between science and theology— between what we know… and what we believe. A kind of No Man's Land—at first, it sounds abstract. But the longer one lives, the more familiar that territory becomes. Because so much of life unfolds precisely there. Not in certainty. Not in doctrine. But in questions that resist both. Science can tell us how things work. Religion may tell us what to believe. But neither can fully answer the quiet, persistent questions that follow us through a lifetime:

Why this path… and not another? What makes a life meaningful? How does one begin again—after everything has changed?

These are not questions for experts. They are questions for the living.

And so, without quite noticing, we all become philosophers. Not in libraries. Not in lecture halls. But in moments. In a decision we hesitate to make. In a loss we struggle to understand. In a silence that asks more than words can answer.

I have spent much of my life in that No Man's Land. It offers no certainty. But it offers freedom. Freedom from rigid answers. Freedom from borrowed truths. Freedom to think… and to choose.

And perhaps that is what philosophy is, in the end: Not a system, but a way of standing in uncertainty—without fear, and without illusion.

II. The Examined Life

Russell also suggested that most people move through life surrounded by beliefs they have never truly examined. At first, it sounds like criticism. But I no longer hear it that way. I hear an invitation.

Where did this belief come from? Is it mine… or something I inherited? Do I hold it because it is true—or because it is convenient?

These questions unsettle. But they also clarify.

I have always admired Simone de Beauvoir—not for being provocative, but for being lucid. She once wrote: *"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."* A simple sentence. And yet, it unsettled an entire world. Because much of what we believe to be natural… is simply inherited.

There is also this thought from Arthur Schopenhauer: *"Five minutes after birth, your name, your religion… are decided for you—and you spend your life defending what you did not choose."*

It takes time—and courage—to question these inheritances. Not to reject everything. But to choose what remains.

And then, there is the other failure—not questioning, but surrendering. The worst form of absurdity is to accept this world as it is, rather than fighting for the world as it ought to be. The examined life is not a passive one. It demands something of us.

III. Presence

I used to think that positive thinking meant seeing everything as good. Life corrected me. Missing a subway train is rarely pleasant. But it is also neutral. What gives it weight is the story I attach to it.

Over time, I have learned that positive thinking is not optimism. It is perspective.

I remember a small, almost trivial moment—positive thinking in its most practical form. I used to walk down the subway stairs, and just as I reached the platform, I would see the train leaving. It irritated me. I felt late, unlucky. Now, the same thing happens… and I find myself smiling. "Perfect," I say to myself. "I'm early for the next one."

Réflexion — *Ce qui change n'est pas le monde… mais le regard que l'on porte sur lui*.

(What changes is not the world… but the way we see it.)

IV. Solitude

There is a moment when solitude changes. It stops feeling like absence… and becomes space. Room to breathe. To think. To become. And from that place, something quiet emerges: Peace.

V. Tolerance

I once believed that understanding would lead to agreement. Life corrected me. Tolerance is not agreement. It is allowing another to exist… fully… without reshaping them.

Not every conversation deserves our presence. Silence, sometimes, is wisdom.

There is a story about Mahatma Gandhi that I have always appreciated. Faced with insult, he simply stepped away. No argument. No escalation. Just distance. Dignity does not need to defend itself.

VI. What We Hold

Marcus Aurelius asked: *"What are you afraid of losing… when nothing belongs to you?"*

We hold on to everything. But everything is borrowed. We do not lose things. We return them. And strangely, that realization brings freedom.

VII. Meaning

There are lives that teach not through theory… but through what they endure. Viktor Frankl showed that what sustains us is not comfort—but meaning. A reason. A thread tying us to tomorrow.

A man's true worth is measured by his audacity. Dare. Attempt. Even fail. That, in itself, is your success.

VIII. The Partners We Choose

Life keeps offering invitations. Another conversation. Another chance. Courage is not the absence of hurt. It is the refusal to close the door.

IX. Time

Time does not stop. It gathers. And one day, we realize: Much of life is already behind us.

That is not sadness. It is clarity. Because it reminds us: Now matters.

Regret nothing. Own your screw-ups—they are yours. And above all, live life to the fullest. We grow old far too quickly. Wisdom can wait until we're in the grave.

X. What Remains

There is a passage by Jean d'Ormesson that stayed with me. We know almost nothing. We live briefly. And yet—this brief moment is everything.

Life does not always make sense. And still… there are moments that justify everything. A conversation. A memory. A glance.

I have no fear of ceasing to exist. It seems to me the natural order of things. And since I believe there is nothing waiting on the other side, the very notion of death does not trouble me.

I no longer ask if life has meaning. Perhaps it is enough to live it. Fully. Honestly. And one day, to say: It was what it was. And somehow… it was beautiful.

The happiest people are not those who have the very best of everything. They are simply those who make the very best of everything they have.

La vie n'est pas une théorie à comprendre… mais un chemin à parcourir. (Life is not a theory to understand… but a path to walk.)

Final Reflection

At the end of a life, the questions change. Not What did I achieve? But: Did I live? Not Was I right? But Was I true? Not Did I understand everything? But Did I pay attention?

We begin by seeking certainty. We end by accepting mystery. And somewhere in between, we learn: Life is not something to solve… but something to experience.

I have spent years thinking. And yet, the clearest truths arrived quietly—

in a conversation, in a loss, in a moment of joy.

If there is something I understand now, it is this: life does not ask us to be certain.

It asks us to be present.

The time you spend not loving is time that never returns.

Do not delay.

And where love is absent, do not linger.

For deep down, there is only one race—

the human one.

Nostalgia is that quiet ache when the body cannot go

where the soul still longs to travel.

And when the time comes to close the book, I would hope to say:

I did not understand everything.

But I was there.

Réflexion — Comprendre n'est peut-être pas l'essentiel… vivre l'est.

(Understanding may not be essential… living is.)

A Final Wink

I taught philosophy for many years. Students sometimes asked me which philosopher I agreed with most. I always said: the one I haven't read yet.

I hope at least one of them understood that the answer… was also the lesson.

If life is a question…

perhaps it was never meant to be answered —

only lived.

Coda

— My Third Life

« L'homme n'est qu'un roseau, le plus faible de la nature ; mais c'est un roseau pensant.

(*Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature; but he is a thinking reed.*) — Pascal

Last Tuesday, I woke up shaking.

Not from cold — from within.
My hands trembled so violently I could not lift a glass of water. My legs resisted standing. The room felt slightly unsteady.

I dressed slowly and walked to my doctor with a cane, my panic button pressed against my chest — a small, silent admission that something was not right.

Pneumonia, he said.

Antibiotics.

Blood tests.

An X-ray.

Then a CT scan.

By Saturday, I felt stronger.

He studied the images then said quietly,

“I have never seen such a severe pneumonia. You almost died.”

I felt no fear.

Only acceptance—

and, unexpectedly, gratitude.

But one moment unsettled me.

I could not remember the blood test.

Nor the urine sample.

I had been present — yet absent.

For a few hours, my mind — the instrument I have trusted all my life — flickered.

That frightened me more than the trembling ever could.

The body can weaken.

Muscle returns.

Breath deepens again.

But the mind…

That is the true frontier.

And yet, it too returned.

Clarity resurfaced quietly.

Memory reassembled its furniture.

Thought regained its music.

Reflections — On Fragility and Return

The body is a temporary garment.

The mind, a delicate instrument.

Both demand humility.

We do not own them—

we borrow them.

This was not my first encounter with that frontier.

Ten years earlier, I lay in a hospital bed with a scar running down my chest — a deliberate, almost couture seam.

That was my second life.

It was the moment I understood that the heart does not care about résumés.

It cares only about rhythm.

The first life was survival.

The second was ambition.

This one feels like awareness.

During those days, something else became unmistakably clear.

We do not walk alone.

Messages arrived.

Food appeared at my door.

Voices reached across distance.

Illness stripped life down to its essentials.

Titles fade.

Schedules dissolve.

Strength wavers.

What remains… is connection.

What remains… is love.

Reflections — On What Remains

We imagine strength as independence.

It is not.

Strength is the invisible thread

that ties us to one another

when we can no longer stand.

My doctor told me not to dance for three weeks.

I obeyed.

Not out of restriction —

but out of reverence.

I move differently now.

Not cautiously.

Consciously.

The future no longer feels like something to conquer,

but a path already unfolding beneath my feet.

The trembling has stopped.

The breath remains.

And so I take the next step — not in haste, not in fear — but in gratitude.

Forward.

In the days that followed, I shared these thoughts.

And words returned to me — not as praise, but as mirrors.

“You are a poet… an erudite of life and beyond…” — Teresa

“The depths that lie below your charm and wit—mon dieu…” — Kathleen

“We will dance next time I see you.” — Irina

“May the sun continue to shine… within your heart and mind.” — Terese

I read them quietly.

Not as applause.

As a reminder.

A Wink —

Someone once asked me what I would do differently.

I thought about it for a long time.

Then I ordered another espresso.

My doctor calls it recovery.

I call it philosophy.

Reflections — On the Third Life

We spend our early years trying to become someone.

Then life, with quiet persistence,

begins to remove what is not essential.

What remains is not who we built—

but who we are.

This was never a story about fashion,

or philosophy,

or even reinvention.

It was a story about becoming—

again and again,

in different rooms,

under different names.

A boy with pastry on his fingers.

A man with chalk, with fabric, with words.

None of them final.

All of them true.

Craftsmanship—and the enduring question of who we are becoming.

The first life asks us to survive.

The second asks us to succeed.

The third asks only one thing:

To be present enough…

to understand the difference.

If these pages have done anything,

perhaps it is only this:

To remind us that a life is not measured

by what it achieves,

but by how deeply it is lived—

and how often it dares to begin again.

« Si j'étais faiseur de livres, je ferais un registre commenté des diverses morts.

Qui apprendrait aux hommes à mourir leur apprendrait à vivre. »

(If I were a maker of books, I should compile a register, with comments, of different deaths.

He who should teach men to die would teach them to live.) — Montaigne

———

« Et maintenant ? … On danse. »

(And now? … We dance.)

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