



FIRST DAY

(of Enlightenment)



Chuck Trunks

Introduction

When I first heard the term “enlightenment,” I assumed it was merely a grandiose label for an alcohol- or drug-induced euphoria given by societal rejects who couldn’t keep up with the demands of mainstream living. Then, after learning more about what it means to be enlightened, I figured this level of spiritual insight was reserved for special people, like monks, swamis, and gurus, who are willing to live under extreme measures and look a certain way to achieve such lofty awareness. I imagined an old man with a long, white beard, sitting in the lotus position on a mountaintop, looking oddly like Kwai Chang Caine’s master from the 1970s television series “Kung Fu.” Now, after having taken the path to enlightenment for myself, I realize that the journey is not only a rite of passage, but it’s also open to anyone (at any age) should they possess the desire and courage to do so.

I came up with the idea to write “First Day (of Enlightenment)” after reading Hermann Hesse’s novel, *Demian* (1919), a coming-of-age story that follows ten-year-old Emil Sinclair from his elementary school days to his first year of university studies. As he transitions from childhood to adolescence, Sinclair meets and befriends another boy, Max Demian, who turns out to be his fated spiritual guide, turning up time and again in moments when Sinclair needs him most. It was then that I realized that the path to enlightenment can begin as soon as one enters the world without Mommy or Daddy. But that wasn’t the only revelation; I soon discovered another aspect of enlightenment—one that I had failed to capture in my book, *Pillars of Society* (2026), an allegorical tale of personal transformation revealing the true costs of enlightenment: that society is more than just an amalgam of evil-inspired abominations.

“First Day,” like *Pillars*, offers an emblematic premise disclosing the harsh realities and social costs of budding awareness; however, it also sheds light on the elusive upside of enlightenment—that moments of splendor do exist if one knows

where to look. In “First Day,” a fictional family dinner frames a deeper philosophical discussion on the true nature of enlightenment—a strikingly different setting than the make-believe caterpillar colony in *Pillars*. “First Day” opens in its first section with a young mother anxiously waiting for her five-year-old son, Christian, to return home from his first day in kindergarten. In the second section, you’ll learn why Christian stepped off the bus in tears, and by the end of the third and fourth sections, you’ll come to understand why he has trouble relating to the outside world.

Over the last three sections, where the family of five is gathered for dinner around the kitchen table, the story’s emphasis shifts from Christian’s inner world to his parents, who use their son’s first-day-of-school experience as fodder to launch into a lecture about the path to enlightenment. Working together like tag team wrestlers, Adam and Eve teach Christian and his two older sisters, Mary and Josephine, how enlightened people differ from the unenlightened and explain what impact abominations and splendor have on each. It’s a story that will not only ease the mind of the enlightened—those who can’t help but see that the world is governed and policed by the blackest of hearts—but it will also offer the unenlightened a chance at personal redemption—a chance to reconnect with nature, spirituality, modesty, simplicity, fellowship, and, most importantly, themselves.

He’s Had a Rough Day

Eve paced back and forth at the foot of the driveway. Her eyes did the same, bouncing between looking at the time on her phone and the crest at the top of her street, where a yellow school bus should’ve appeared five minutes ago. Understandably, she was nervous, thinking about her son Christian’s first day of school at Pine Branch Elementary. She would have driven him, but her husband, Adam, had taken their only car to work—one of the few drawbacks of an agreed-upon minimalist lifestyle. She inhaled deeply, letting the air out slowly while

convincing herself that her sensitive five-year-old needed to start experiencing life without his parents or sisters holding his hand. Eve, again, gazed hopefully at the top of the hill.

Suddenly, the jarring sound of a gas-powered leaf blower swept her thoughts away. Across the street, she saw her neighbor, Reed, wearing the offending contraption over his shoulders, like a metallic backpack from the future—but instead of lifting him into the sky, it created clouds of cut grass, dry leaves, and dust. Even with a wife and two middle schoolers, Reed spent most of his downtime doing yardwork. His latest toy—the leaf blower backpack—was clearly his favorite, at least from what Eve could tell as she'd seen him climb on his roof with it to scatter clumps of brown pine needles off the eaves. She sighed heavily, longing for simpler times when rakes and brooms didn't obliterate the peaceful sounds of nature—or one's thoughts.

Before Reed could turn around to lift freshly cut yard debris into the air from the other side of his driveway, Eve quickly busied herself by checking the mailbox. It wasn't that she disliked Reed or that she was antisocial; she simply wasn't in the mood for small talk with a man obsessed with lawn care. Unfortunately, it wasn't one of Eve's luckier days.

"Howdy, neighbor!" shouted Reed over the idling two-stroke engine.

Eve turned and acted surprised. "Oh, hi, Reed. Did you quit your job to work full-time in the yard?" she joked while closing the mailbox lid.

Reed walked toward her wearing khaki shorts and a white V-neck t-shirt that did nothing but accentuate his potbelly. Glancing at it, Eve suddenly recalled hearing her late father say how a belly looks a lot worse on a thin man. "I wish," he replied. "I'm just working from home today." He dropped the blower tube and made air quotes as he said, "working from home." Reed chuckled at his inference,

drawing Eve's eyes to his jiggling paunch, making her think it obeyed an unknown law of physics. "So, what are you guys going to do about your yard?" he asked.

Three months earlier, in the middle of an unusually wet summer, a tornado had whipped through the old, tree-lined neighborhood, haphazardly uprooting trees, one of which landed on Eve's front lawn, leaving deep depressions after it was chopped up and hauled away. She was about to tell him—for what would've been the third or fourth time—that she and her husband planned to fill in the holes with sand and topsoil next spring, when the school bus crested the hill like a perfectly timed superhero, rescuing her from the clutches of a man whose self-worth is tied to the appearance of his lawn. Eve reflexively looked at the time on her phone and back to the approaching bus. "I'll talk to you later, Reed," she replied.

"If you guys need any help, don't hesitate to ask," he offered before reengaging the throttle of his leaf blower.

Without taking her eyes off the bus, she stepped back into the driveway and shouted, "Thanks!" to Reed, who was already blowing chopped leaves and grass toward his neighbor's yard.

Eve put her phone in the back pocket of her shorts and watched the bus roll to a stop; its brakes squealed in protest. The doors opened mechanically, allowing Eve to make eye contact with the driver, a large black lady with an easy smile. "Christian!" she shouted while looking over her shoulder. "This is your stop, honey!" She turned back to Eve with an expression that said, "He's had a rough day." Christian was too short for Eve to see her son making his way to the front of the bus. When he appeared at the top of the stairs, she could see that he'd been crying. "I'll see you tomorrow, sweetheart," said the bus driver as he climbed down toward the pavement.

Eve dropped to one knee and opened her arms, giving her son a target to crash into. Unlike her two daughters, Christian looked like her; he had her angular face, hazel eyes, and wavy brown hair. He wore a light blue long-sleeved t-shirt over dark brown shorts because short sleeves made him feel “too exposed.” When he came closer, she saw that he had two stains a few inches below the collar. She recognized one of them as mustard, most likely from the turkey sandwich she packed for him that morning. He made a beeline toward her, his legs comically churning, averting his eyes as he stepped into his mother’s embrace.

As the bus pulled away, a boy teasingly yelled, “See you tomorrow, *sweetheart*,” through an open window, putting the kibosh on the precious mother-son bonding moment. Within a few seconds, the lumbering vehicle came to an abrupt stop, followed by the admonishing tone of the bus driver. “That wasn’t a nice thing to say, Jeffrey.”

“But I was just saying goodbye to Christian,” he explained innocently.

“That sounded more like teasing, Jeffrey. You know the rules,” she continued. “Since you need a babysitter, come sit up front next to me.”

Eve and Christian listened to the stifled giggles from the children when they heard the word “babysitter.” They could still hear them from the corner where the big yellow rectangle turned right at the bottom of the hill.

How Was Your Day?

Eve removed her son’s backpack as he continued sobbing into her shoulder. She set it down next to her and wrapped her arms around him, pulling him closer. She felt the little spasms pulsating against her chest—the result of his diaphragm trying to keep up with the demands of his lungs. Oddly, he made very little noise—only an occasional whimper or snuffle. The sheer volume of Christian’s

tears saturated the upper right quadrant of her blouse, making Eve wonder when she had last cried as vehemently as her son. A pang of jealousy bubbled up within her consciousness—a selfish wish that she, too, wanted to ‘let it all out’ sometimes.

When his steady heaving slowed to sets of soft hiccups, he let go of his mother. Despite the dirt-lined tear streaks and damp eyelashes, Christian had regained his composure, proving, once again, that one always feels better after a good, long cry.

Eve wiped his cheeks with her thumbs and asked, “What happened today?”

Christian picked up his backpack and slung it over his shoulder. “Can we go inside?”

“Why don’t we sit and talk on the front patio instead, okay?” She gestured toward the two wrought iron chairs between the front door and the kitchen window.

One of the benefits of living in an old neighborhood, in a nicer part of town, is that all the houses are set back behind expansive front lawns, allowing cautious homeowners to people-watch without the obligation of having to acknowledge them. Eve enjoyed sitting out front. Besides the distance from the street, the front patio was encased in wrought iron fencing and boxy-looking hedges cut at near-perfect angles, offering even more of a protective barrier between her and prying eyes. Once they sat down, Christian unzipped his backpack and began digging through it, saying, “I’m supposed to give you something.” While she waited, Eve watched Reed move about his front yard like an insect, fastidiously clipping, weeding, gathering, and edging.

“Here you go,” said Christian, handing over a crinkled piece of paper that was damp at the bottom.

“Eww! Why is it wet?” She held the paper away from her with her fingertips as if it smelled, too.

“I can’t get my water bottle to close all the way,” he replied, zipping up his backpack.

“Oh, it’s just a list of activities you’ll be doing in September,” she confirmed, setting the paper down on the little wrought iron table between them. “Now tell me what happened today.”

“I don’t want to go back.”

“Why?”

He absently rubbed a purple splotch on his knee and said, “The kids are mean and the teacher doesn’t like me.”

“What happened to your knee?”

“Matthew pushed me into a desk.”

Eve moved Christian’s hand away to inspect the damage. There was indeed a small bruise with two scrapes on either side—one twice as long as the other. She gently rubbed his knee and waited for her son to continue.

“I was playing with a Rubik’s Cube,” explained Christian. “Matthew came over and said he was playing with it first and wanted it back. I never saw him with it and told him he could have it after I was finished. That’s when he pushed me.”

“That’s awful. What did your teacher do?”

“Mrs. Thompson came over and told me to stop crying and that I have to learn to share. Then she took the Rubik’s Cube from me and gave it to Matthew.”

Eve fought the urge to overreact, knowing that if she did, her son would experience the indignity all over again. She knew Christian was highly observant, noncompetitive, and diplomatic. She couldn’t have asked for a better son than the one sitting in front of her. Instead, she remained calm and said evenly, “Okay. Did anything else happen today?”

Christian’s eyes followed the low trajectory of a swooping cardinal and replied, “These two girls said I was stupid for carrying my backpack around.”

“I see,” acknowledged Eve. “Don’t the other kids hang their backpacks on hooks at the back of the classroom?”

“They do. But I didn’t want anyone going through my stuff.” Christian pulled his backpack up to his lap and reached into a side pocket for a baggie of partially eaten pretzel twists.

Suddenly, the high-pitched sound of a gas-powered string trimmer startled both Christian and his mother, making Eve roll her vexing eyes toward their next-door neighbor’s yard. She looked at her son, careful not to say anything negative about Pastor Joe in front of him. She stood up and peeked around the bushes to confirm what she already knew. There he was—a tall man in his early 70s, circling the small trees in his front yard, carrying what tall grass and weeds would call “a weapon of mass destruction.” He wore music headphones over a black cap and pretended not to notice his dog defecating on the front lawn of the house next to Reed’s. For a family man who split his employment between a Baptist church and a funeral home, Pastor Joe, in Eve’s opinion, was a self-centered prick.

She sat back down and smiled at her son, who was busy chewing. “Is there anything else you’d like to tell me?”

Christian put the remaining pretzel twists in his mouth and replied, “I got in trouble for lowering the blinds in Mr. Beck’s classroom because I didn’t ask for permission first.”

“Did he punish you?”

“No,” replied Christian, who reached for his backpack to retrieve his leaky water bottle.

“Then why do you think you got in trouble?”

He gulped from the open spout, spilling drops of water on his shirt. “I told Mr. Beck that the sun was in my eyes and everybody laughed at me.”

Eve picked up the paper and stood up. “Let’s talk more about this at dinner,” she said, looking down at her son. “I’m sure Daddy and your sisters will want to hear about your first day, too. In the meantime, why don’t you work on your big drawing while I get started making your favorite dinner, okay?”

“Spaghetti?” asked Christian, a tinge of hopefulness in his voice.

“Wait. What? Do I even know you? I thought liver and onions were your favorite,” she teased.

Christian giggled and yanked his backpack from the ground. He ran around his mother and fumbled for the storm door handle. Eve watched him pull on it and then push in the front door while maneuvering his lumpy load into the house.

“Don’t forget to put your water bottle and lunch box in the kitchen!” she shouted after him.

Eve wanted to retrieve the stack of mail she’d seen in the mailbox earlier, but the scene in front of her made her decide to wait until later. While Reed carved his already-sculpted bushes with a hedge trimmer, his big brown dog barked wildly from the backyard at Pastor Joe’s big black dog. Both men kept their eyes peeled on the business ends of their screaming weapons like grizzled generals after having declared war on nature decades ago. On the street between them, two other men, walking in opposite directions, scuttled along, each staring at their phones while being pulled forward by their leashed best friends. One wore flip-flops; the other, a pair of Crocs—neither footwear would suffice should an emergency arise. Eve sighed heavily and folded the still-damp paper in her hands, mumbling, “What the hell happened to men?”

Ten Times Better

The moment Christian saw the rug underneath the little chairs and tables in the library’s reading area for children, he was inspired to create something even more intricate. At first glance, the rug simply looked like a mosaic of superimposed squares and rectangles; however, on closer inspection, he realized it was a city map of sorts, complete with roads, buildings, bridges, parks, and more. Later that same afternoon, Christian convinced his dad to cut out one of the sides of the big white cardboard box that had been sitting in his office ever since he pulled his new monitor from it. Christian was excited after his dad handed him the smooth drawing surface that would soon contain the metropolis he had already erected inside his mind. If anyone asked him about it, he’d tell them it was light as a feather and as big as an oven door. As ironic as it sounded, Christian had his work cut out for him.

As the only boy, he didn't have to share a bedroom, a gender-based dynamic his sisters accepted without protest after having grown accustomed to sharing late-night confessions with each other, especially after becoming exceedingly aware of cute boys and mean girls. Christian's room was a reflection of how he processed life; it was tidy, organized, and curated, displaying previous works of art he was most proud of. There was the blue snowman, the thinking girl, the psychedelic turkey, and his favorite, the shoe machine. In his five-year-old mind, all would be topped by his current project—an entire city bisected by a river of snowmelt, surrounded by foothills with hiking trails, campgrounds, creeks, and grassy meadows. In other words, it would be ten times better than the rug in the library.

After such a stressful and unpleasant first day of school, Christian found comfort in his artwork. His mother had suggested he lean the cardboard against something to mimic the position of a drafting table, but he preferred to lay it flat—either on his desk or on the braided rug between his bed and the window. That way, he could lean over it like a surgeon performing life-or-death medical sorcery. But instead of a scalpel and a pair of forceps, Christian created magic with a ballpoint pen and a pencil. Later, when everything was outlined and detailed, he'd color it using a combination of colored pencils and watercolors. When his parents and sisters asked him if he was copying something, he'd point to his head and tell them, "Nope. It comes from here."

While carefully darkening the pencil lines of a bridge with his pen, Christian almost made a mistake when his oldest sister, Mary, stepped into his room, startling him. "Mom said to tell you that dinner is at six-thirty. That's when the big hand is on the six and the little—"

"I know what six-thirty looks like on a clock," he interrupted without turning away from his masterpiece.

Mary stepped closer and hovered over her brother's back, who was crouched underneath the window. "Why aren't you sitting at your desk?"

"There's better lighting over here," he replied.

"Well," she began matter-of-factly, "you're going to hurt your back and ruin your eyes. Your face is like an inch away from the cardboard."

Mary acquired her physical traits from their father's side of the family. The gangly 13-year-old preferred her long dark hair free, unencumbered by headbands, ties, or barrettes. Her face was wider and rounder than her brother's, with steel-blue eyes, thin lips, and a ghostly-white pallor. From the way she dressed and carried herself, people assumed she was carefree and easy-going; but as her little brother, Christian thought she was bossy, overprotective, and too assertive—personality traits more becoming of a nagging mother than a big sister.

Christian looked at the Spider-Man clock squeezed between a bag of plastic army men and a box of Legos on his bookshelf. In glowing red numbers, it read 6:06. "Is Daddy back from his run yet?" he asked.

Their father worked as a business analyst for an established biotech company specializing in gene therapy. Despite having been employed at Gen-Core for nearly 16 years, starting out as a junior research assistant fresh out of college, Adam felt his days were numbered due to the lure of advanced greed technology—courtesy of artificial intelligence. In short, he believed it was only a matter of time before his job was reassigned to a machine. He began his weekdays early, chauffeuring his daughters to their middle school, conveniently located on the opposite side of the business park where he worked. After school, Mary and 11-year-old Josephine simply walked to Gen-Core's child care center to wait for their father while spending time with friends, participating in activities, and getting a head start on any assigned homework. As a lifelong cardio junkie and a

man who knew how to wash away corporate stress, Adam always looked forward to his three-mile run before dinner.

“I doubt it,” replied Mary. “We got home later than usual. We had to stop at the store to pick up milk and some other stuff. Mom said you had a rough first day, and that’s why we’re having spaghetti tonight.”

Christian nodded in acknowledgement without looking away from his drawing, penning the final strokes of a brick pattern covering the main bridge. “Well, that’s it for today,” he sighed, standing up with the cardboard in his hands.

Mary stood in front of Christian’s desk with her arms folded across her chest. “So, what happened at school?” she pried.

“Mom said we can talk about it while we eat,” replied Christian. “Now can you move, please? I have to put this away.”

Mary left her brother’s bedroom as if he had thrown a dirty sock at her. While she clambered down the wood staircase to the living room, Christian positioned his work-in-progress on his desk, standing it upright against the wall and sliding his piggy bank in front of it so it wouldn’t slip forward on the smooth surface. He was very careful with the things that mattered to him.

Buried Treasure

Christian was about to join his sister downstairs when he heard the sound of two familiar voices coming from the backyard. After setting the pen and pencil next to an oblong pink eraser on his desk, aligning them in a manner that clinicians would diagnose as obsessive-compulsive, he strode toward the window to look outside. Below, Josephine was sitting at the patio table in front of an open workbook with her yellow backpack spilling half its contents beside her. She, too, inherited most

of her physical features from her father's side of the family, except her shoulder-length, straight hair was sandy brown with blonde highlights. Whereas Christian was the "creative one" and Mary was the "bossy one," even-keeled Josephine was known as the "studious one." She simply wasn't satisfied being a top student in her sixth-grade class; she had to be *the* top student.

Across from her, on the other side of the table, Adam was using one of the patio chairs to stretch his hamstrings. Christian figured he hadn't been there long because he was still wearing his running vest, which contained dog deterrents, including an air horn, pepper spray, a collapsible baton, and his cell phone to document the aggressiveness of both the dogs and their owners. When Christian asked his father why he didn't run inside to avoid the scary dogs and mean people, he told his son that gyms make him sad because everyone ignores each other; they just look at their phones and listen to music through earbuds. From downstairs, Christian heard his mother ask Mary to set the table. "In a minute, Mom!" she shouted, followed by Eve shouting back, "Okay, I'm watching the clock!" The smell of pasta, spaghetti sauce, and garlic bread wafting up from the kitchen made his mouth water.

Christian turned his attention back to the conversation going on beneath his window. Although he couldn't hear what they were saying, he instinctively knew his father was consoling Josephine about something because he was patting her hand from across the table and murmuring in a hushed tone. It seemed to him that he wasn't the only one who had had a rough day. As he stood up to stretch his lower back, he saw Christian looking down at them.

"Hi, Christian," he said while rotating his hips. "I see you up there."

Christian waved from behind the screen. "Hi, Daddy."

Josephine swiveled in her chair and craned her neck toward her brother. “Hi, Christian. Are you working on your drawing?” Out of everyone in the family, Josephine was the most interested in his art projects, preferring to lay on his bed or sit at his desk while he silently worked on the floor.

“I’m almost finished with the bridge,” he replied excitedly.

While she nodded and turned back to her open workbook, Adam walked closer to the house so that he was looking straight up at his son. “Mom told me about your first day while I was changing into my running stuff,” he said.

Christian felt his heart move into his throat. “I don’t want to go back.”

“I know. That’s what your mother said. We’re going to eat soon, so let’s talk about it then, okay? Right now, I need to jump in the shower.”

“Okay, Daddy.”

Christian watched the top of his father’s head disappear beneath him and heard the back door open and close in quick succession. He turned his attention to the spacious backyard—the inspiration for many of the nature scenes in his current art project. A row of four-foot gardenia bushes separated the cement patio from the grassy center of the backyard, which was as expansive as the front. White oak and sweetgum trees, growing among thickets of shrubs and smaller trees, lined much of the outer edges of the property, making the backyard a bastion of shade at any hour of the day. Looking into the far distance, Christian admired the majestic Loblolly Pines, which bordered the nearby army base. He liked their height and the way they appeared to move in slow motion no matter how strong the breeze.

In the far-right corner, two dilapidated sheds, one in the shape of a barn, contained old furniture, forgotten household items, and boxes of ancient junk

from a bygone era—left behind by the previous owners. Christian recalled hearing his parents complain about the cluttered storage spaces, but he loved scouring the dusty sheds for buried treasure whenever they were unlocked. His latest finds were salvaged only a week earlier—an amber-colored glass ashtray and a handful of stainless-steel ball bearings. He enjoyed the sound of the balls rolling on the glass so much that he brought the whole assembly up to his bedroom and put it on his dresser. Christian, even at five years of age, tended to gravitate toward the things that calmed him. As he took one last look outside, he hoped he could convince his parents to let him stay home instead of going to school. In his mind, his bedroom and the backyard were more than enough for him.

Dinner Time

When Christian came downstairs, his father and Josephine were already seated at the kitchen table. Mary stood dutifully next to her mother holding a plate of steaming spaghetti while Eve ladled the sauce with the intention and flare of a TV chef. “That one is for your brother,” she told her daughter. While his mother and Mary dished and distributed the comfort food, Christian pulled out his chair and sat down in front of a big glass bowl of salad and a platter of buttery garlic bread. He was delighted to see cans of cold Pepsi in front of everyone’s place mat. Normally, he and his sisters drank milk at dinner while his parents sipped wine or shared a beer.

Adam noticed Christian eyes moving from can to can. “We figured that since everyone had a challenging day, your mother and I thought we should treat ourselves with a little soda,” he explained.

Although the family had a separate dining room with a large table and windows facing the forest-like backyard, they preferred to squeeze themselves around the much smaller kitchen table, which gathered more of the late afternoon sunlight and allowed them to see out toward the street while they ate. The circular table

was pushed against the sill of a large double window covered by open blinds and flanked by heavy red drapes. Adam and Eve typically sat across from each other closest to the window while the children sat between them, with Christian separating his two sisters. While Eve was looking for the parmesan cheese in the refrigerator, Christian's eyes settled on his greatest find thus far in his young life.

A few weeks after his fifth birthday, he had accompanied his mother to Goodwill, where he spotted a small lamp that he believed would be perfect for the kitchen table. It had a round, tan-colored shade attached to a ceramic square base with an abstract, whimsical pattern, containing colors that matched the drapes and the framed art prints hanging on the kitchen walls. He remembered everything about that afternoon in the store:

“There you are,” she huffed. “Don’t scare me like that, Christian. You need to stay with me.” Then she saw what was in his hands and asked, “Do you want that for your room?”

“I thought we could put it on the kitchen table,” he said while holding up the lamp as his mother approached. “I don’t like the overhead lights on the ceiling.”

Eve took the lamp from him and turned it upside down. She saw the eight-dollar price written on a yellow tag stuck to the base. “You don’t? Why not?” she pried.

“They make me feel nervous. They’re too bright,” he explained.

Having located the parmesan cheese, Eve closed the refrigerator door and turned off the harsh overhead lights, signaling Adam to switch on the lamp. Although everyone liked how the lamp gave the dinner table a cozy ambience, nobody articulated it in a way that matched Christian’s feelings about it. He felt the softer low light brought everyone closer together, making them feel relaxed and their discourse more calm and pleasant.

Just as they were about to begin eating, Christian suddenly shouted, “Listen!” It was the sound of a certain melody that always seemed to find his ears before everyone else’s—a distant bugle playing the music of retreat, officially ending the day at the nearby army base. Ever since his father told him about the sunrise and sunset ceremonies, Christian liked to imagine all the soldiers standing at attention, saluting the flag as it was raised and lowered. After having called attention to the wistful song of the solo bugle so many times before, he thought his parents and sisters would’ve shushed him, but they appeared to appreciate the somber moment of reflection as much as he did.

Mid-way through the meal, after Christian recounted what had happened to him at school that day, Adam looked at Josephine and asked, “Would you like to tell everyone what happened to *you* today?”

Without a shred of emotion, Josephine replied, “Beth Shillingford, the other girl in my class who gets straight A’s, told me she doesn’t have to study all the time like I do to get excellent grades. Her mother said that she’s naturally smart while I’m only book smart.”

“What an awful thing to say,” blurted Eve. “Kids can be so cruel—and to think her mother would say such a disparaging thing about a wonderful girl like Josephine. My goodness!”

“It’s okay, Mom,” said Josephine. “Daddy and I talked about it. It doesn’t bother me anymore.”

Adam reached for another piece of garlic bread to soak up the residual spaghetti sauce on his plate and asked his other daughter, Mary, the same thing he had asked Josephine.

Unlike her sister and brother, Mary wasn't as confident expressing herself verbally; however, she had no issues with delegating and giving orders. "Well," she began cautiously, "class was boring as usual, but I saw something I wasn't expecting today at the child care center after school."

"How come you didn't tell *me* about it?" interrupted Josephine. "I was with you the whole time today."

"No, you weren't," replied Mary.

Adam intervened immediately. "Let her tell her story, Josephine."

Mary took a sip of her Pepsi before continuing. "There's this big bush on the side of the building. It's not close to any of the play areas, so none of the kids go near it. Even though it doesn't have any flowers on it, I wanted to take a closer look. When I did, I noticed that there were so many ladybugs on its leaves. Then I saw what I thought was a *big* ladybug, but it turned out to be two ladybugs having sex."

Eve laughed out loud, making Adam shake his head and say, "Well, that makes two of us, Mary, because *that* wasn't something I was expecting you to say."

"No way," said Josephine. "You're making that up."

"What? Ladybugs have sex?" pondered Christian.

Mary's posture took on a more authoritative air as she sat up straighter and shifted in her seat to face her unconvinced sister directly. Using her hands to represent the mating insects, she explained, "The boy ladybug was sort of behind—"

“Okay, Mary. We get it,” interrupted Adam. “Now let me tell you why I asked each one of you to tell me something about your day. It has something to do with the path to enlightenment.”

Christian loved to listen to his dad explain things because he was so passionate, animated, and easy to understand. Even so, he still wanted to be excused so he could go search for ladybugs in the backyard.

Abominations & Splendor

Eve started to get up to clear the dishes from the table, but Adam asked her to wait and let the kids do it after he was finished telling them about the path to enlightenment. He looked at his children and said, “Before we can talk about the path to enlightenment, we have to know what enlightenment is, right? Ultimately, it’s knowing who you are—what you like and don’t like—without needing someone to tell you. It’s understanding how the world works and knowing where your place is in it. It’s grasping the reasons why certain things are a reality while others aren’t. And lastly, it’s having the wisdom to reimagine the world in such a way where everyone could be happy, healthy, successful, and fulfilled.”

“Today, like the two of you,” he said while nodding at his daughters, “Christian had his first day of school, or as I like to call it, his first day of enlightenment. This morning, as he climbed onto the bus, Christian took his first steps along the path to enlightenment. In doing so, he left the comfort, familiarity, safety, and the unconditional love and support of his family, venturing into a frenetic world filled with people who think enlightenment is just an excuse for not being able to keep up with a society coerced into pursuing validation from strangers and forced to obey the god of profit.”

Eve noticed the look of confusion on Josephine’s face and explained, “Your father is referring to people who only care about acquiring more money than

they'll ever need and getting likes and comments on social media, like Facebook and Instagram.” She looked at her husband and recognized the gleam in his eye; he was on a roll.

Adam continued his monologue. “It’s not uncommon for a newly enlightened person to suddenly notice the cruelty, brutality, corruption, hypocrisy, etc.—or what I call the abominations underpinning a supposed civilized society where the rules are arbitrary and the game is rigged to maintain a status quo that benefits only a few.”

Eve found herself needing to fill the role of interpreter. She shifted the children’s attention from Adam to her. “What your father is saying is that when you first start to become enlightened—or aware of the world around you—there’s a natural tendency to only notice the bad things, the abominations. For instance, when Christian told us about his day, he *only* mentioned the abominations of being shoved into a desk and having the Rubik’s Cube taken away from him. Josephine’s report wasn’t much different than her brother’s; her top story focused on the hurtful words of a fellow student.”

The heads of the three children rotated toward Adam as he began to speak. “Your mother is exactly right,” he began. “Abominations are only one part of the enlightenment story. The other part has to do with what’s beautiful and decent about the world we live in, or what I like to call splendor. As the enlightened person begins to mature, they soon realize they’ve become consumed with detecting and pointing out all the needless suffering and injustices of the world. They become so adept at seeing abominations that they overlook all the splendor.”

Adam met Eve’s eyes, asking for her input on what he had just said. They made an effective team as life partners and as parents. “Thanks to Mary’s story about the bush at the child care center, we have a wonderful example of what your

father is talking about,” she said. “Mary found splendor in the form of a colony of ladybugs that made the bush their home. Plus, she was amazed to see that insects find mates just like animals do.”

“Your mother made an excellent point,” interjected Adam, causing the kids to turn their heads yet again as if they were watching a tennis match in slow motion. “Whereas Mary *found* splendor, *abominations* found Christian and Josephine in the form of unwanted harassment. It doesn’t seem fair, but that’s how life works—the abominations seek you out; splendor awaits your discovery. For example, when I was sitting at my desk today contemplating what I wanted for lunch, I received an email from a coworker and a phone call from my boss; both were abominations asking for more of my time without considering my current workload. I decided to pick up my usual Italian sub at the deli across the street, but when I walked outside, I noticed a food truck parked in front of the trade school in the business park.”

“Was it a black food truck?” interrupted Mary.

“Yes, it was,” replied Adam.

“Did it have Vicious Biscuits painted on the side in big gold letters?” she pressed.

“It did,” he answered skeptically. “How did you know?”

“I’ve seen it parked at the construction site next to the school. Some of the teachers bought food from it. They said the biscuits are really, really yummy.”

“You’re right, honey,” said Adam while putting his arm around his daughter, “and your teachers are right, too. I ordered the Fat Boy biscuit with fried chicken, and I can’t remember having tasted something more decadent. One of the guys in line

told me they just opened a new restaurant in town, and I was thinking we could all go there this weekend.”

“Let’s go late Sunday afternoon and have an early dinner,” suggested Eve. “That way, we’ll have enough time to prepare for the week before settling in for a family movie night.”

The mere mention of family movie night incited an immediate three-way campaign of movie ideas among the children, requiring Adam to restore order at the dinner table. “Hey! I’m not quite finished,” he said. “We can vote on a movie title another time. Right now, I want to finish what I started talking about.”

“Sorry, Daddy,” said Josephine.

“Yeah, me, too,” said Christian.

“It’s okay. You’re just excited,” explained Adam. “I mentioned the Vicious Biscuits food truck because it’s an example of splendor. It didn’t come looking for me; I had to stumble upon it on my own—and now we have a wonderful Sunday plan because of it. That’s the nature of splendor. So, now that you know the difference between abominations and splendor, I have one more thing to tell you before you kids clear the table.”

Conclusion

Adam looked at his wife with an expression that said, “If you’ve changed your mind and don’t want me to tell the kids this last part, I’ll understand.” But Eve remained steadfast; she felt her children could handle what her husband was about to tell them. Plus, in her mind, she believed she and Adam had given Mary, Josephine, and Christian a healthy balance of a carefree childhood along with sobering lessons about society and the world in general. She was confident these

fundamental truths would help guide them toward sustainable peace and happiness while steering them away from meaningless distraction, trivial pursuits, and those who only want to steal their joy.

Adam wanted to preserve his children's remaining childhood, keep them worry-free, and avoid making them fearful of the outside world. So, to him, it was mission critical that he deliver the final part of the lecture in the most upbeat and positive way possible. Although it took him several attempts to persuade his wife to fully understand his take on the ratio of abominations to splendor, Adam had her full support going forward. He looked at each one of his kids and said, "If you asked an ordinary person—the kind who has no interest in enlightenment—whether abominations outnumber moments of splendor, they'd likely agree. 'Of course they do,' they'd scoff. 'For every glimpse of splendor, there are at least ten abominations.'"

"But that won't happen to us," decreed Mary. "Because we're enlightened, it'll be the exact opposite for us: 10 splendors for every one abomination, right?"

Adam looked at Eve and then Mary. "No, honey, it's much worse for those who choose the path of enlightenment over a life of indoctrinated servitude."

"What your father is saying—and you kids already know this—is that it takes courage to go your own way, away from the crowd mentality, to do your own thing, to be your true self rather than conform to what's deemed safe, acceptable, or popular."

"For the enlightened person, it's an unfair reality," interjected Adam. "There are 10 times more abominations that seek the enlightened than the unenlightened."

Josephine lifted one of her legs and placed her bare foot on the chair, pulling her knee to her chest with her wiry arms. "So, for every single splendor we manage to

find, we'll have to deal with 100 abominations?" she asked, her voice choked with incredulousness.

Adam again looked to his supportive wife, who nodded solemnly as if to say, "Don't hold back." He turned toward his youngest daughter and said, "Yes, but that's not all, sweetheart. Splendor is more elusive for the enlightened as well."

"What does elusive mean?" asked Christian.

Eve scooted her chair back and motioned to her son to come sit on her lap. "It means that something is difficult to find," she answered, wrapping her arms around Christian as he leaned his back against her chest.

"Not only is the majority of society made up of unenlightened people," continued Adam, "but it's also designed and governed by the unenlightened, who despise those who can think and discern for themselves, who aren't motivated by what motivates others, and who can't be brainwashed into believing slavery is freedom. That's why people like us are confronted by so many abominations and why splendor is so elusive. An unenlightened person might jump for joy after winning tickets to a Taylor Swift concert, proclaiming the moment as pure splendor. But for the enlightened soul, this is far from splendor; it's hours of traffic, outrageous parking fees, and exploitative concession stands; it's watching phone-addicted people document themselves dancing in front of their seats; it's clapping for a billionaire whose average ticket price for floor seats is \$500."

"So, where do people like us find splendor?" asked Mary.

Adam smiled because he and Eve had planned to end the lecture on that very note. "I'm glad you asked, Mary, because the splendor of the enlightened is 10 times better than the so-called splendor of the unenlightened. The enlightened find splendor in places that the unenlightened rarely take time to visit; but even if they

did, they still wouldn't recognize it. For people who are enlightened, splendor exists in spiritual, intellectual, and creative pursuits; it constitutes all of nature and the cosmos; but most importantly, it resides within human qualities like tolerance, kindness, generosity, loyalty, honesty, empathy, trustworthiness, and, of course, unconditional love and support."

"Your father is so right about this," added Eve, squeezing Christian with one arm and reaching for Josephine's hand with the other. "The most difficult challenge for the enlightened person is not to allow the many abominations to consume their thoughts or fill them with dread. You kids must learn how to cope and protect yourselves from the abominations while always being on the lookout for splendor. Sometimes, you'll have no choice but to manufacture moments and situations that'll improve your chances of finding something meaningful and satisfying. For instance, Josephine could offer to tutor those who are struggling to keep up with the class, and Christian could bring some of his artwork to school for show and tell. In both cases, they might make a friend or two since fellowship is another source for splendor."

"What about me, Mom?" asked Mary, who was feeling left out despite having her dad's arm around her.

"Oh, I didn't forget about my natural-born leader," replied Eve, referring to her oldest daughter's preference to boss and delegate. "I thought we could go through the sheds and figure out what we should keep, donate, or throw away. I know for certain there's an antique desk and a matching mirror in one of them. I was thinking we could restore both and put them in yours and Josephine's room. That way, you girls wouldn't have to always use the dining room or patio tables."

Mary liked the idea, especially the one-on-one time she'd have with her mother. "Can we paint them pink?" she asked hopefully.

“Maybe, but I think—”

“And can we put the mirror on the wall between the closet and dresser?” interrupted Mary.

Eve understood her daughter was just excited. “Shouldn’t you check with—”

“And can we move Josephine’s bed to the corner so the desk can go in front of the window?” pressed Mary.

“No way! I like my bed where it is,” huffed Josephine.

“Don’t worry, Josephine,” cautioned Eve. “Nothing is going to change without your consent. Your sister needs to learn the difference between a dictatorship and a democracy, which means the two of you will have to agree to an arrangement before any furniture is moved into your bedroom. Right, Mary?”

“Okay, Mom.”

Adam removed his arm from around Mary’s shoulders and stood up. “Well, kids, that’s all your mother and I wanted to tell you this evening,” he announced. “Now you know what enlightenment means and why it’s a path few will choose to take. However, in this family, we have no choice but to embrace the journey toward enlightenment; it’s our destiny, given to each one of us by the universe. We simply must accept a life full of abominations, especially earmarked for the enlightened. At the same time, we must also be grateful for the top-tier splendor that’s reserved for the special few who can see and appreciate it.”

After Eve put the leftovers in the refrigerator, she joined her husband on the front patio, leaving the kids to finish their after-dinner chores. It was Christian’s job to wipe the table and sweep the floor while his sisters washed and dried the dishes.

As he dumped the contents of the dustpan into the pull-out trash bin, Christian thought about his next art project—the one he'd immediately start after finishing what he titled "City Mountain." He put away the broom and dustpan and walked directly into his father's office to inspect what remained of the white monitor box. To his delight, he saw that his dad *would* be able to cut a second piece from it—one just as big as the first. After going out to the patio to ask, his father agreed and questioned Christian what he planned to draw next. "It's a surprise," he replied before heading up to his room.

With the twilight fading, Christian decided to work on his current art project from his desk. He switched on the lamp and noted the time. He had no more than 30 minutes before he had to start getting ready for bed—plenty of time to finish the bridge and draw a parking lot, complete with little arrows and lines for each space. Christian wasn't exactly sure what his mom and dad were talking about at dinner, but he somehow felt he and his family were too soft for this world. All he wanted was to feel good and be nice to others—that's why his next art piece would be a present for his oldest sister, a big green bush with red ladybugs on every leaf. He planned to call it "Lady Bush."

The End