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Hunger

There are two tragedies in life. One is to lose your heart's desire. The other is to gain it.

—George Bernard Shaw

Hunger is defined as the life-condition of desire. Simply desiring something, however, isn't what traps us in the world of Hunger. What traps us in the world of Hunger is obsession.

Desire itself, we should be careful to note, is neither good nor bad. It's merely the engine that makes our lives move. Whether it does so in a positive or negative direction depends entirely on what we desire and how that desire causes us to behave. Few people would consider the desire to live a principled life, for example, to be a bad thing. But when even a virtuous desire intensifies to the point of obsession—whether for a person, a thing, a state of mind, or anything else—we're more likely to convince ourselves that the ends justify the means and act in a way that causes grievous harm. History is filled with examples of people so consumed by their desires that they disregarded all moral concerns and became monsters.

On the other hand, sometimes obsessing over our desires enables us to move beyond a devastating failure when we might otherwise have given up. To achieve greatness, some degree of obsessiveness may even be necessary.

Yet even when it leads us to greatness, obsession exacts a price: it drives all other concerns into the background, leaving us uninterested in, or even dissatisfied with, what we already have. This in turn only enhances our sense of desperation to achieve our desire, as if our failure to attain what we want is a mistake we can't afford to make.

Yet, ironically, when we're trapped in the world of Hunger, attaining our desires does little to satisfy us as the joy of acquisition or accomplishment fades almost as quickly as it appears. This in turn creates a sense of emptiness that pushes us on toward the next thing, the next obsession, which then captures our thinking entirely, leaving our previous desire, which consumed us only just moments before, nearly forgotten.



Ash had been telling me about a patient he believed was from the world of Hunger named Patrick, who'd come to see him because of severe anxiety.

"If I could just get over this one thing, I'm sure I'd be fine," Patrick told Ash at their first meeting as he slumped down in his chair. "Everything else is great."

"Get over what?" Ash asked him.

Patrick stared at the scene outside Ash's window for a few moments. "I know she's going to leave me," he answered finally. "She's trying to be subtle, but I know what's really going on. She's cheating on me. I'm sure of it."

His expression grew sullen, and he began to rock back and forth in his chair, gnawing at what was left of his already-mangled nails.

"Maybe you should start from the beginning," Ash said.

Patrick said he'd come in because of his growing concern that his girlfriend was about break up with him. He'd been having trouble sleeping, sometimes for the entire night, and couldn't focus during the day. When he wasn't with her, he had to fight with himself constantly to avoid calling her to find out where she was and what she was doing.

"How long have you been dating?" Ash asked.

"A little over a week. But we've seen each other every day," he added quickly in response to Ash's surprised expression. "I've never felt this way about anyone

else in my life. She's just so beautiful. She could be—and I don't want to jinx this—but she could be the one. That's what scares me so much."

That Patrick had developed such a powerful attachment to someone in so short a time made Ash wonder what was compelling him to seek love so obsessively. Fear of loneliness? Poor self-esteem? Fear of missing out? Before Ash made any suggestions about how to achieve long-lasting relief from anxiety, he preferred in general to pin down its root cause as definitively as he could. Did it rotate around a specific issue or set of issues, or was it more generalized, not connected to any one particular thing? Many therapists made symptom management their main focus, often recommending behavior modification or medication to reduce anxiety quickly regardless of its cause. But Ash had learned that helping patients control anxiety too well at the outset often reduced or even eliminated the main force driving them to investigate the reason they felt it. So while he never wanted to leave anyone incapacitated by worry, neither did he want to resolve his patients' worry too quickly.

Ash's first step, therefore, was to assess each patient's level of distress. Did Patrick possess sufficient coping skills to prevent his anxiety from overwhelming him? Patrick said he wasn't sure. But he agreed that seeking the central cause of his problem was a good idea. How else was he going to solve it once and for all? "Sometimes my anxiety is so intense," he said, "it nearly stops me from functioning."

"Are you feeling that way now?" Ash asked.

"No. It helps to talk about it. It's good for me to get it out in the open."

"Good," Ash said, and then suggested they start by exploring the context that was triggering his anxiety, promising to make himself available by phone if Patrick found himself suddenly unable to cope with it. If Patrick started experiencing full-blown panic, Ash told him he'd have one of his psychiatry colleagues prescribe an anti-anxiety medication. Patrick readily agreed.

"So what's her name?" Ash asked.

"Angie."

They'd met three weeks earlier at a painting class. Even as she started setting up her easel next to his, Patrick had felt the first stirrings of chemistry between them. To his eye, she looked far younger than her twenty-five years, which he found titillating. By the time the class ended, she'd agreed to go out to dinner

with him. By the end of that first date, they were back in his apartment having sex. Patrick told Ash he knew then that he was in love.

Within a few days, however, he'd begun to suspect Angie was cheating on him. When Ash asked what had triggered his concern, Patrick told him she'd stopped answering his calls on the first ring. When Ash then asked how this amounted to evidence she was cheating, Patrick replied he was worried she wasn't able to answer immediately "because she was giving some guy a blow job."

"You think she can't answer you because she's performing oral sex on someone else every single time you call?"

Patrick sighed. "I'm just so bad at this."

"What?"

"Relationships. Trust." He waved his arm dismissively. "She swears nothing is going on. I yell at her and tell her I don't believe her. I make her cry. Then I cry." He seemed suddenly exhausted. "I don't know why I do it. I know I'm being totally ridiculous, but I can't stop myself."

Ash was encouraged to find Patrick had at least some insight into the inappropriateness of his behavior. "Can you imagine anything she could do to make you believe she's telling the truth?"

Patrick thought for a moment and then shook his head.

"Do you think she'd be willing to come in to therapy with you?"

Patrick's eyes widened. "Actually, yeah!" Angie was already "sick to death of his jealousy" and desperate for him to stop hounding her, he said, so she had good reason to agree. Also, Patrick added in a breaking voice, if Ash had a chance to get a read on Angie, he might then find a way to convince Patrick once and for all that his suspicion she was cheating on him was nothing more than a paranoid delusion, something he knew in his head but still couldn't quite convince his heart.

Anxiety as an Event

Where Hell is considered the world of suffering, Hunger is considered the world of pain. It's painful, after all, to be separated from a desired attachment. The intensity of our desire may be so minor we don't realize it *is* pain, but desire, at its core, is an ache.

Desiring something also frequently creates the worry that we won't get it. But anxiety itself isn't generated by a core delusion. As Ash told April, it's generated (when not by a neurologic abnormality) by the perception that we're unsafe in some way¹—whether because our mother just died leaving us alone in the world, or we think we're about to be abandoned by a girlfriend.

Though anxiety is, of course, a feeling, it could also be considered an event—like a car accident or a marriage proposal. This means that anxiety, like any event, will affect us in keeping with the core delusion it stirs up.

“So,” I said, “if your anxiety draws your attention more to the belief that you can't solve the problem that's causing it, you won't believe you'll be able to end your anxiety, so you won't feel able to tolerate it. And if you don't feel able to tolerate it, your anxiety becomes a pain that makes you suffer, thrusting you into the life-condition of Hell. Which is why for people like April anxiety is paralyzing.”

“But if you're Patrick,” Ash said, “and you believe that you *can* solve the problem that's causing your anxiety, then your anxiety isn't paralyzing. It's motivating.”

“Meaning it motivates you to solve the problem that's causing it,” I agreed.

“So maybe *that's* the reason we become obsessed in Hunger with getting what we want,” Ash said. “Because getting what we want *ends our worry that we won't get it*. Maybe the core delusion of the world of Hunger is that to be happy you need to be rid of anxiety.”

“Except that would mean anxiety is what drives every desire anyone would ever have.”

“Every *obsessive* desire—yes. Anxiety *is* incredibly common. It's not a bad guess.”

“I'm not disagreeing that people go to incredible lengths to avoid anxiety,” I said. “But just because you're obsessed with something doesn't mean you're worried about being denied it. Not everyone trapped in the world of Hunger is anxious. Not by a long shot.”

“Name an obsession you think *isn't* driven by anxiety,” Ash said.

I thought for a moment.

“Stamp collecting.”



Angie was every bit as beautiful as Patrick had described, with shoulder-length light brown hair and the toned body of a dancer. As Patrick held Ash's office door open for her, he seemed to swell with pride. He chuckled with an awkward, giddy excitement as he introduced her, as if he'd accomplished something important by connecting himself to so attractive a woman. He evinced none of the anxiety that had been evident in their first session.

"I really appreciate your coming in, Angie," Ash said. "I know this is a bit unusual."

"Whatever I can do to help," Angie replied. She seemed confident and comfortable, as self-possessed as Patrick seemed sophomoric.

Patrick beamed and hugged her with one arm. "Isn't she great?"

After they were seated, Ash dug right in. "In the two weeks you've known each other, Angie, how often would you say Patrick has become jealous?"

"A lot," Patrick interjected.

"Dr. Ash, no joke," Angie said, "I probably spend at least two hours a day trying to convince Patrick I'm not cheating on him."

Patrick stroked Angie's hand awkwardly and then said, "Patrick's sorry, baby. He's such a little jerk. He trusts you. Yes, he does. Yes—he—does." He sounded like a parent cooing at an infant. He lifted her hand and rubbed the back of it over the tip of his nose playfully.

Even more startling was Angie's reply. In the same singsong voice, she said, "Angie wuvs her widdle Patrick. Yes, I *do*. Yes, I *do*."

"I wuv you so much," Patrick said.

"I wuv you more."

Ash held up his hand. "Hold up a minute, guys." They both looked at him. "Do you realize you're both talking like . . . uh . . ."

"Infants," Angie said, embarrassed, as if she'd just realized he was still in the room. "Yeah."

"It's a thing we do," Patrick explained. "Baby talk."

"Baby talk?"

"Yeah," said Patrick.

"Why?" Ash asked.

"We know it's weird," Patrick acknowledged. "But it makes us feel better."

“Feel better about what?”

“It just makes us relax,” Angie offered. She looked at Patrick expectantly. “I don’t know, not take things so . . . seriously?”

“When do you usually do this?”

Angie thought for a moment. “When we’re making up after a fight.”

“After sex,” Patrick added.

Ash’s first thought was that this represented a bizarre form of regression. He could readily imagine why it might happen after they fought, especially if Angie was as receptive to it in their personal lives as she appeared to be in his office. What better way to mitigate the potentially fearsome consequences of conflict than to collude in making their fights appear as if they were occurring between children?

It might also explain, Ash thought, why Patrick had sought professional help. Regression is one of the most primitive defense mechanisms and is therefore easily overwhelmed. Ash wondered if when Angie wasn’t present in Patrick’s immediate environment to regress with him, his fear of being abandoned was free to mushroom—and apparently often did—into nearly full-blown panic.

Ash thought he might learn something about Patrick’s fear of abandonment if he could convince them to reenact an argument that Patrick’s jealousy had triggered. But despite his prodding, neither of them felt comfortable enough to do so. So he spent the remainder of the session using direct questioning to tease out the thoughts and feelings Patrick experienced that would lead him to accuse Angie of cheating. But this approach proved fruitless. With Angie present, Patrick simply had no access to his jealous nature. By the end of the session, Ash felt stymied and frustrated.

Patrick, on the other hand, felt Angie’s presence had been of tremendous benefit and told Ash he wanted her to attend all his therapy sessions. This brought Ash to the only insight he was to have in the session: Patrick had wanted Angie to come to therapy for the same reason he would pull her into acts of regression—namely, to provide him relief from his anxiety.

Ash countered by proposing that he continue to see Patrick alone while agreeing to remain open to inviting Angie back if it seemed purposeful. When Patrick started to protest, Angie herself began to question the value of her involvement.

She thought Patrick's usually incisive insight had been dulled by her presence and concluded that he would likely get more out of therapy without her there. Overwhelmed, Patrick expressed his love for her several more times and then agreed that she knew best.

Two days later, Patrick phoned Ash to tell him that Angie had broken up with him. "What am I going to do!" he sobbed.

"Take a deep breath," Ash said. "Tell me what happened."

In a trembling voice, Patrick told him that Angie had announced "she couldn't handle his jealousy anymore." Patrick was certain now that he'd driven her away for good. He loved her so much he was going out of his mind. This was a pain he couldn't bear one more minute, an ache he felt along every limb, a throbbing in every joint.

Ash offered to see him immediately. But to his surprise, Patrick declined. "I don't want to talk about it anymore," he said suddenly.

Ash was concerned that Patrick's refusal represented another primitive defense mechanism—denial—and pressed him to come anyway. But Patrick remained adamant. "I'll be okay. It's just par for the course for my sorry ass. Maybe I could come in next week after I've had a chance to chill out a little."

When further entreaties failed to change his mind, Ash made Patrick promise to call if he felt like doing anything impulsive, hoping he was hearing more fatigue in Patrick's sullen voice than a desire to end his pain by ending himself. Patrick agreed, and they scheduled their next session for the following week.

But at the appointed time, Patrick failed to appear. Ash called his home phone and cell phone several times but to no avail. The next morning, without a word from him still, Ash began to worry in earnest. Though a suicide contract was often effective at preventing patients who struggled with depression from killing themselves, it was far less effective with histrionic patients whose suicide attempts were more impulsive.

Later that day, however, when Ash walked into his waiting room in between patient appointments, he found Patrick sitting in a chair reading a magazine.

Ash stared at him. "What happened to you yesterday?"

"What do you mean?"

"We had an appointment at one o'clock."

“We did? Are you sure? I’m sorry.” He sounded genuinely apologetic. “I thought it was for today.”

Ash was completely nonplussed. “No, it was yesterday. I was actually pretty worried about you. You sounded pretty upset last time we spoke.”

“I’m fine,” Patrick replied dismissively. “I’m totally over that situation. Angie just wasn’t the one, you know? But I’ve got something totally amazing to tell you that you won’t believe! I’ve met the real woman of my dreams. She’s engaged to another guy—but not for long. Her name is Lily.”

The Need for Validation

“You’ve got to be kidding,” I said. “He gets over Angie—the love of his life—in one week?”

“He’s looking for love,” Ash replied. “It doesn’t matter who he gets it from. It’s the love he wants; the person is incidental.”

“That *does* actually sound like the world of Hunger.”

“I’m definitely beginning to see how it’s not such a fun place to be.”

“And the baby talk?” I asked. “You said you thought he was doing it to make their fights seem less serious?”

“Or to get her to see *him* as a baby.”

“Why would he want to do that?”

“I’m not sure. To send the signal that he’s dependent on her? To make her feel responsible for him? I mean, think about it. What woman would leave a helpless baby?”

“What kind of man wants a woman to think he’s helpless?”

Ash shrugged. “Maybe he believes he can only be happy if he has someone to take care of him.”

“Or someone to protect him?”

“Or maybe just someone to be with him. Maybe the core delusion of the world of Hunger is that to be happy you need to be in a relationship.”

“But how would believing that to be happy you need to be in a relationship cause you to become obsessed with things that aren’t related to relationships?” I asked.

Ash frowned. “Right. It wouldn’t.”

“On the other hand: looking for love and terrified to lose it. Sound like someone else we know?”

“April,” Ash agreed.

I nodded. “So maybe *that’s* the explanation for the baby talk. Keep things light and silly not to make her think he’s helpless but to hide his insecurities.” As we’d both observed in our respective practices, people with poor self-esteem typically derived their sense of worth from the value other people assigned them. I wondered if this was why even though Patrick had been terribly hurt by Angie’s rejection, he felt compelled to place himself at risk for being rejected again by pursuing Lily. Perhaps his need to find someone to validate him was so strong that it overpowered his fear of being judged worthless, compelling him to form relationships that filled him with dread.



Less clear to us was the reason Patrick might be struggling with low self-esteem at all. Ash wondered if he was using his romantic relationships to rewrite the ending of some critical scene, or series of scenes, from his past, ones in which he’d been denied the regard he seemed to be so desperately seeking now. So at their next visit, he told Patrick he wanted to construct a genogram.

“What’s that?” Patrick asked.

Ash explained that a genogram is a family tree that documents a comprehensive history of relevant facts about immediate and extended family members. It includes everything from mental illnesses, addictions, and divorces to abuses, feuds, and family secrets, as well as the patient’s reactions to being asked about them all. When the patient talks about his family, what’s his mood? When does he get angry? Bitter? Indifferent? What does he remember? What doesn’t he remember? What’s difficult to talk about? A well-constructed genogram could predict a patient’s pathology much in the same way a nearly completed puzzle predicted the shape of its missing pieces.

Patrick thought it was an interesting idea and proceeded to share a number of his observations about *Lily’s* family—whom he’d already met—before quickly turning to Lily herself. Ash pulled out a notepad and began jotting down some

of the phrases Patrick used as he talked about her. Then he pulled out his notes from their first session and started reading some of the phrases Patrick had used in connection with Angie. They were almost identical.

Patrick looked down at the two notepads placed side by side as if he'd just found a piece of gum under his shoe. Then he looked up at Ash, a confused, worried look creeping onto his face. "What does *that* mean?"

"It means none of this is really about Angie *or* Lily."

Patrick agreed to begin constructing a genogram immediately.

At their next session, however, he reported several fires had flared up in his life in the intervening week that required dousing. First, he'd decided to quit his job as waiter to commit himself full-time to painting. Then only three days after that, he'd decided to go into advertising. He was tired of being poor, he told Ash. He put his resume together and scheduled interviews with several advertising agencies, thinking to get into copywriting. He expressed great concern that if he didn't get the job he wanted, he had no idea "how he was going to survive."

All of these changes required processing, which Ash felt duty-bound to provide, especially given the breakneck pace at which they were occurring. But at the following session, Ash told him that they could spend the next several years dealing with the various manifestations of Patrick's anxiety and never come close to identifying the underlying cause of it. To do that, he argued, they needed to focus at some point on creating the genogram.

Patrick replied that he could provide his family history "in a few minutes." He wasn't close to his parents and never had been. His father was a surgeon and his mother a stay-at-home mom.

"Well, that's a start," Ash said. He stood up, walked over to his whiteboard, and picked up a marker. "But think about a genogram as a tree with lots of branches and leaves. We'll start at the bottom and work our way up and out." He pulled the cap off the marker and touched it to the board. "Why don't you start by telling me about your grandparents?"

Patrick groaned, but then dutifully began answering each question Ash asked. He did so, however, in an uncharacteristically stolid manner—a stark contrast, Ash noted, to the hyperbole that was his usual fare. They recorded the basic

structure of Patrick's extended family, but the process rendered Patrick almost mute. At the end of the session, Ash announced his intention to discuss Patrick's immediate family next time, more as a warning than anything else.

But at the beginning of the next session, Patrick seemed once again his usual theatrical self and displayed no interest in continuing to work on the genogram at all. "You're not going to believe what happened!" he announced as he sat down in his chair. "Lily postponed her engagement! Can you believe it? She won't say it's because of me, but give me a break! And I got a job at an ad agency! This has been an unbelievable week. There's so much I want to talk about."

This time Ash actually found Patrick's opposition to continuing with the genogram encouraging. Most therapists considered resistance to be a signal that an important truth was about to be exposed. So when Ash said he wanted to hold off on discussing the events of the week and instead continue with the genogram, he wasn't surprised to see the excitement drain from Patrick's face. Undaunted, Ash picked up the marker and stood next to the genogram on the easel.

"Let's talk about your parents," Ash said. "What kind of relationships did they have with *their* parents?"

Patrick sighed. Then in a subdued voice he told Ash that his father hadn't gotten along well with Patrick's grandfather at all. Apparently, his grandfather had lost all interest in Patrick's father soon after Patrick's father left for college. His grandmother had died when Patrick was a child. His father rarely, if ever, talked about her.

"What about your mother's side?" Ash asked.

His mother was the youngest of six children, Patrick told him. She was the baby of the family, and apparently everyone had taken a turn caring for her at some point. His mother's family was extremely close, Patrick said, which he found "really weird."

"Any siblings?"

"A brother and a sister."

"Are you close to either of them?"

"Not really. My sister is fifteen years older than me and my brother is two years older than her. They were practically out of the house by the time I was old enough to notice them."

“Do you know if your parents planned to have children so far apart in age?”

After a moment’s pause, Patrick answered, “I was an accident. I pretty much ruined the plans they had for their golden years. At least that’s how my dad always put it. He took it out on my mom all the time.”

“On your mom?”

Patrick nodded and then stared down at the floor.

“And what about you? Did he make *you* feel like an accident while you were growing up?”

Without looking up, Patrick nodded again.

“Tell me a little about that,” Ash said.

“There was this one day . . .”

Ash waited. Patrick opened his mouth, then shut it. Then finally he said, “He was just going to let me walk out the door. He didn’t care at all.” He gave a half shrug.

“Tell me what happened.”

Patrick took in a breath and said he’d been ten. The second storm of the Blizzard of ’79 had just struck the Chicago area over the first weekend in January. The city and surrounding suburbs had been completely unprepared for the onslaught of snow that piled up to twenty-seven inches, a new record. By Monday, the roads had become impassable, forcing Patrick to stay home from school and his father to stay home from work. Patrick had suggested they build a snowman or go sledding together, but his father hadn’t been interested. Instead, he’d picked on Patrick the entire day. Why hadn’t his room been cleaned? Why hadn’t his homework been done? Why weren’t his grades better? He’d been freeloading, his father had said, sucking all the fun out his father’s life with his mother. His father hadn’t yelled, but every criticism he’d levied had been like a stab wound, leaving Patrick weak and dizzy with pain. They’d been standing in Patrick’s room, his father marching out one issue after another, when Patrick announced he couldn’t take it anymore and started crying. When his father started disparaging him for that, too, Patrick had darted from his room and down the stairs. He ran to the front door, opened it, and turned around to look back up at his father, who’d followed him as far as the top of the stairway.

He'd told his father that he hated him and that he was going to run away and never come back, and he meant it. He saw that his father believed him, and he felt a thrilling sense of power in anticipation of the pain he was about to inflict.

"But that's not how it went," Patrick said.

"How did it?"

Patrick finally looked up at Ash, his eyes shining. "He told me to make sure I closed the door after I left so the snow wouldn't get in."

After a moment, Ash told him he thought it was one of the worst things he'd ever heard a father tell his son.

The Desire for Love

"So what if we suppose for a minute that one of Patrick's primary drivers is his need to be loved and accepted by his father," I said. "What might that cause him to believe he needs to be happy?"

"You mean aside from being loved and accepted by his father?" Ash asked.

"Aside from that, yes," I replied dryly. "Something more general. More generalizable."

"How about just love and acceptance, period? From anyone?"

"That could explain his obsession with women. . . ."

"But not all the jobs," Ash said.

"You don't think so?"

"Love and acceptance from a job?"

"Not love and acceptance," I said. "Validation."

"Maybe. . . ."

"The need for love *is* one of the most universal needs there is," I pointed out.

"So is the need to be free of anxiety."

"True."

Then Ash shook his head. "It doesn't make sense. Do people become obsessed with—I don't know—*eating* because they're looking for love?"

"Sometimes."

"I thought *sometimes* wasn't good enough."

"Yeah, no, it's not," I conceded. "We're looking for a belief that explains *all* obsessions."

“Are people obsessed with *money* because they’re looking for love?”

“Yeah, okay—”

“Power?” Ash added. “Survival?”

“Right,” I agreed.



At their next visit, Ash told Patrick about a book titled *Man Enough*. The author, Frank Pittman, a psychiatrist, argues that sons who failed to be “anointed” men by their fathers will spend their lives not only trying to prove themselves men but also trying to resolve their anger at their fathers for not providing them enough respect and admiration when they were little. How do fathers “anoint” their sons? Not in any one single act, but in consistent, small ways throughout their childhood and adolescence: by attending their baseball games, by showing up to their graduations and smiling with pride for their pictures, by listening to their fears without judgment, and by accepting them so completely that no chip could ever form on their shoulders.² Properly anointed men, Pittman argues, feel no need to prove anything in their adult lives because they’ve already proven everything they felt necessary to prove when they were children. Pittman argues that men whose fathers haven’t anointed them struggle to anoint themselves in three ways: by philandering, by overachieving, and by competing. The best way for these men to break out of these destructive behavior patterns, Pittman says, is to focus their energies not on anointing themselves but rather on anointing sons of their own.³

Patrick devoured Pittman’s book in one night and affirmed at their next session that it read like a case study of his life. He believed now that his obsessive desire to find the “perfect woman” hadn’t arisen out of a need to shore up his self-esteem but from a need to demonstrate to his father that he was a man.

After that, Patrick’s progress in therapy began to accelerate. He started to report recurrent, albeit brief moments in which he felt “more self-contained, more whole.” These feelings were subtle, occurring at odd times and for no reason he could figure out. Yet it was undeniable. Coming to understand just how much he’d needed his father’s approval as a child had improved his ability to approve of himself as an adult.

Soon Patrick found his anxiety had receded enough that he no longer felt the need to continue therapy. Though Ash thought he had more to uncover and said as much, he told Patrick he'd support whatever choice he wanted to make. So they shook hands and said their goodbyes.

A Universal Anxiety

"Any final conclusions about what was causing his anxiety?" I asked Ash.

"I'm still not sure," Ash said. "Fear of not measuring up as a man? Fear of disappointing his father? Fear of failure? Fear of *being* a failure?" He shrugged.

"But now his anxiety is gone."

"Seems to be."

"You think he's still from the world of Hunger?"

"I think he *was*," Ash said. "I'm not sure if he still is."

"Because he's not anxious anymore?"

"No, because . . . well . . . I don't know." Ash paused. "Yeah, because he's not anxious anymore."

I considered this. "So maybe anxiety *is* the right answer." But then I shook my head. "Except I still don't see how it could be the universal driver of *every* obsession—"

"That's the problem with *everything* we've suggested," Ash said. "The need to be free of anxiety, the need to be in a relationship, the need to be loved and accepted—none of them are universal enough. We're trying to figure out why we want things obsessively, but instead we keep coming up with different things we all want."

"It's the *way* we want them that's the problem. Like our lives are at risk if we don't get them."

"So maybe we've been asking the wrong question," Ash said. "Maybe instead of asking why people trapped in the world of Hunger are obsessed with getting what they want, we should be asking what they believe will happen if they don't."

"I guess there could be a *deeper* anxiety at work here," I offered. "Not a specific anxiety about losing your girlfriend or disappointing your father or being a failure, but an existential anxiety. A universal anxiety."

“Yes! Maybe that’s why Patrick doesn’t seem like he’s trapped in Hunger anymore. Maybe he’s freed himself from *that* anxiety.”

“But anxiety about what?”

“Being abandoned? A loveless existence? Death? I don’t know,” Ash said. “But something elemental. Something we haven’t figured out yet. The thing that really trapped Patrick in the life-condition of Hunger. The thing that traps us all.”



Three years later, Patrick called Ash again. He was doing well, he said, still mostly anxiety-free, but he had a new problem that he wanted to discuss. Did Ash have room in his schedule to see him? Ash did and arranged for them to meet the following week.

When Patrick arrived, Ash noticed he’d gained some weight—enough to round out the edges of his face—and wore his hair shorter and neater than he’d remembered, making him seem more meticulously groomed. “You look different,” Ash told him.

With a self-deprecating laugh Patrick admitted he hadn’t been exercising much or following as rigorous a diet. His obsession with fitness had waned. “Which I’m sure is why this chair feels so tight against my ass.” His tone was light, innocently self-mocking. Charming, even.

Ash was intrigued. Patrick’s demeanor had changed almost entirely. No trace of his previous awkwardness remained. The frenetic mannerisms, the dramatic rise and fall in the pitch of his voice, the worried expression that spoke of a persistently distracting anxiety—all had vanished and been replaced by a steadiness of bearing and a calmness of tone that struck Ash as polished and powerful. He found himself thinking that where before he’d been presented with an anxious boy, now he saw before him a full-grown man.

Patrick quickly summarized the intervening three years of his life since he’d last seen Ash. He’d learned to confront anxiety maturely and proactively. Rather than regress, now he would take definitive steps to solve whatever problem was causing it. He’d been involved in a serious relationship with a successful, intelligent woman until six months ago when he himself had ended it. He’d been dating her for a little over a year when vague but persistent feelings of dissatisfaction

had led him to conclude she simply wasn't the woman for him. The breakup had been painful, but not inappropriately so. He hadn't dated anyone since.

But the reason he'd come back to see Ash had nothing to do with any of that. He'd come back, he said, because after he left therapy three years ago, he'd decided to write a book.

Pittman had inspired him. He'd wanted to write about the numerous ways father-and-son relationships failed and how devastating the consequences of such failures could be. However, several agents to whom he'd pitched the idea had all pointed out not only that he lacked the credentials to write such a book, but also that the book had already been written—and written well—by Pittman himself.

Refusing to be discouraged, Patrick decided he would turn his idea into a work of fiction. By that point he'd also started business school, so he told himself that sleep was for the weak and started writing immediately.

After two months, physically exhausted but mentally energized, he finished the first draft and showed it to a writer friend. His writer friend, however, shortly returned it with pencil slashes scrawled across nearly every page pronouncing the prose amateurish and the story predictable and uninspiring. Patrick accepted the feedback stoically but was terribly hurt. He paused for a week to let the sting fade and then arranged to audit some writing classes.

After honing his writing skills for six months, he decided to rewrite the book from beginning to end. Rather than risk being criticized by his friend again, he decided this time to query literary agents. In short order, though, each one sent him back a rejection letter. At that point, almost everyone he knew urged him to put his manuscript in a drawer and to focus on business school.

Instead, he decided to rewrite the book a second time. By the time he'd graduated and found a job as a management consultant, the rewrite was done. This time he decided to send out query letters to publishers who, according to *Writer's Market*, accepted unsolicited submissions. By then, he told Ash, his desire to become a published author had completely taken over his life, becoming an itch just beyond the reach of his fingers to scratch.

Over the next four months, even as the rejection letters began to accumulate, he continued to open each successive response with a sense of hope, quickly shrugging off the pain of each rebuff, one after another. He continued in this

way until he received the final response from the last of the publishers—it, too, was a rejection—and then his hope had crumbled. He couldn't understand it. What had he been doing wrong? Could he have been that deluded about the quality of his work?

His mother had recognized his distress and pulled him aside to encourage him. She'd told him she thought the book was good but that it read as though someone else had written it. Where was his quirkiness? The book was too serious. It needed an edge.

Patrick felt instantly re-energized and decided to rewrite the entire thing from beginning to end a *third* time but with humor, sarcasm, and wit, allowing his personality to roam wildly over the pages. It took him five months. Then he sent out this new and improved version to the same publishers—only then to be quickly and summarily rejected by them all again.

He'd felt then that he simply couldn't continue, that as badly as he wanted to publish his book, as much as he believed in it, he couldn't take any more disappointment. So he'd busied himself with other interests, hoping his desire to become a published author would pass or perhaps diminish enough to cease hurting him. He'd been about to shred the entire manuscript and delete all the files from his computer in a final effort to free himself from his obsession when he received an unexpected call from his friend, the writer. Patrick had impulsively sent the fourth version to him when it was making the rounds with publishers the second time. His friend had just finished reading it, he'd called to say, and he wanted Patrick to know that it was now, in his opinion, a publishable book. When Patrick replied that every publishing house to whom he'd sent it had disagreed, his friend suggested that he publish it himself.

Instantly, Patrick's heartache vanished, replaced by a swell of excitement, which in the next moment was joined by a sense of urgency to implement his friend's suggestion as quickly as he possibly could. By this time, however, he'd left his consulting job to try his hand at real estate development with two of his management consultant friends, so he had little cash on hand. Nevertheless, he began a search for an on-demand printer he could afford and soon found one who agreed to charge him a thousand dollars to print five hundred copies. He could print as many more as he wanted as long as the orders were placed

in minimum batches of five hundred. Marketing, distribution, and sales would be up to him. Elated, Patrick had written them a check, purchased an ISBN number, and then gone in search of someone to design the cover.

He'd turned then to the business of selling and promotion. He asked every independent bookstore in the city to stock it, but they all turned him down. Frustrated, he'd started selling the book himself, at first to family and friends, then soon also to friends of friends, and then eventually to their friends as well.

After three months of "shameless self-promotion," he'd finally managed to sell all five hundred copies. By then a small following had developed online. Encouraged, he sent the finished book in manuscript form to a few carefully selected agents, one of whom agreed to represent it. Within a month it had sold to a publisher. Contracts were signed, a marketing plan developed, and a new book cover approved.

And now, nine months after that, a first run of five hundred copies were poised—finally—to land on the shelves of bookstores across the country. Patrick was about to realize his dream of becoming a published author at long last. And that, he concluded to Ash, was the reason he'd come back to therapy.

"Because . . . ?" Ash asked.

Patrick spread his hands helplessly. "Because it feels completely empty."

A Worthless Life

When we're trapped in the world of Hunger, no matter what we may have or what we may have achieved, we're continually dissatisfied. We're always turning to something *else*, to our *next* desire, something bigger, something better, perpetually hoping to find the one thing that will resolve the painful sense of emptiness that continuously permeates our life. The world of Hunger is indeed the world of pain.

The root cause of such dissatisfaction? Psychologists Timothy Wilson and Daniel Gilbert argue we routinely overestimate both the intensity and duration of the emotions we expect to feel in response to future events, and therefore the degree to which getting what we want will improve our well-being.⁴ In other words, we're predisposed to want things out of proportion to the pleasure or satisfaction that they're likely to give us.

“But that doesn’t mean we’re all disappointed by the pleasure or satisfaction we get,” Ash said.

“No,” I agreed.

“So then why would Patrick be?”

I shrugged. “Maybe he’s just sitting on the far right of the curve. Maybe his expectations are so unrealistic that he *never* gets as much pleasure or satisfaction as he thinks he will, so what pleasure or satisfaction he does get seems, in contrast to his expectations, insignificant.”

“But why would he keep expecting so much? Especially if he keeps being disappointed. You think he’d figure it out.”

“Maybe it’s not about *expectation* so much as *desperation*,” I said. “Maybe the wound his father inflicted hasn’t mended. Maybe all the things he’s been doing have actually been attempts to heal himself in some way.”

“I’m not sure what that wound would be at this point. He’s clearly not looking for love anymore. And these days his self-esteem almost looks healthier than mine.”

“I agree it doesn’t sound like he’s still having trouble valuing *himself*. But I wonder if he’s having trouble valuing his *life*.”

“That sounds like a distinction without a difference,” Ash said.

“It’s not. You can value yourself but still feel that the things you’re doing aren’t meaningful or important.” Maybe, I said, his skipping from relationship to relationship and from job to job hadn’t been a search for validation but for *meaning*—an attempt to fill a void left by an indifferent father whose final legacy to his son was an inability to feel good about any of his accomplishments. Nothing Patrick did was ever good enough for his father, so nothing he did was ever good enough for Patrick himself. He may have freed himself from the belief that he needed his father’s approval and in so doing from the belief that he was worthless. But I wondered if his inability to find satisfaction in nearly everything he had or did had stemmed all along from a persistent belief that no matter what he was doing there was something else more meaningful he should have been doing instead. That although he’d discovered worth in himself, he nevertheless felt he was living a worthless life.



Patrick jerked his head back and blinked several times. “You mean not even publishing a book—” He stopped and heaved out an angry breath. “So I’m still damaged goods.”

“What do you mean?” Ash asked. “No you’re not. Why are you saying that?”

“I spent my entire life trying to please my dad, and now I have no idea how to please myself!” He shook his head in disgust. “All those years I wasted trying to do what *he* wanted me to do.”

“How do you figure you did what he wanted you to do?” Ash challenged him. “Maybe you’ve spent your entire life trying to please him, but not by doing what he wanted. You did it by trying to accomplish great things! You’ve always known exactly what you wanted and aimed to accomplish your goals with a determination that’s been nothing short of amazing. How else could you have pushed through all those obstacles if you didn’t know exactly what you wanted? You may believe you’re living a worthless life because painting and copywriting and getting your MBA and real estate development and publishing a book have all left you feeling dissatisfied, but in no way were you ever uncertain that you wanted to pursue each and every one of them.”

“Then why aren’t I any happier? Why does everything I do always—*always*—seem so goddamn empty?”

“Maybe you just haven’t found the right—” Then Ash stopped. “Or maybe . . .” He tapped his fingers together. “Hang on a second.” Another moment passed. Then he asked, “Patrick, what exactly do you think you need to be happy?”

Patrick looked at him helplessly. “That’s the problem. I don’t know.”

“Actually, I think you do. I think you always have. You just don’t know you know it. Just give me the first answer that pops into your head. What do you think you need to be happy?”

“I don’t know,” Patrick repeated. “That’s why I’m here.”

“You’re not getting it. What do you think you need to be happy? Your father’s approval? A girlfriend? The right job? A published book? Which one?”

“Stop asking me! I don’t know! Fuck! All of them! How about that? Every single goddamn one!”

“That,” Ash said, “is exactly right.”

Miswanting

“The core delusion of the world of Hunger,” Ash announced, “*is that to be happy we need to get what we want.*”

“Interesting . . .,” I said.

“Think about it. Why would Patrick be so obsessed with everything he wants and at the same time be so dissatisfied by everything he gets? Because he doesn’t expect just to *enjoy* the things he gets. He expects them to turn him into a *happy person.*”

I blinked several times. “Right! It’s the belief that fulfilling your desires will *change* you. What drives every obsession there ever was and ever will be? The fear that if you don’t get what you want, you won’t be able to be happy at all. *That’s* the universal anxiety we’ve been looking for!”

Yet getting what we want doesn’t improve our long-term happiness in the slightest. For one thing, the intensity with which we want something doesn’t predict how happy we’ll be when we get it. Neurologically, it turns out that *wanting* and *liking* are two entirely different processes created by entirely different circuits in the brain, involving entirely different neurotransmitters.⁵ This is how it’s possible not only to want something far more intensely than we like it, like a fourth piece of chocolate cake, but also to want something we don’t like at all, like a ride on a rollercoaster. This is something Gilbert and Wilson call *miswanting*.⁶

A second reason that getting what we want doesn’t turn us into permanently happy people is that what makes us happy *today* often make us *unhappy* tomorrow. Think of an alcoholic who wants to drink, a dieter who wants to overeat, or a student who wants to see a movie instead of studying for a test.

Finally, even if what makes us happy today *doesn’t* make us unhappy tomorrow, it’s unlikely to keep making us happy the day after that. The principle of *hedonic adaptation* is as straightforward as it is difficult to avoid. Simply stated, for most of us, most attachments have the power to make us happy—or happier—only temporarily.⁷ Getting what we want, in other words, is like chewing a piece of gum. It tastes sweet at first, but eventually the flavor fades.

“Except for most people, it fades slowly,” Ash said. “With Patrick, it fades the minute he pops it in his mouth. Why would that be?”

“I think it’s just what we’re saying: When he finds that getting what he wants doesn’t turn him into a happier person, he thinks the problem is that he just hasn’t found the *right* thing to want. He doesn’t realize he’s nursing this open wound, this inability to find *any* of his accomplishments meaningful. So he goes immediately back to the trough, trying to make himself happy by accomplishing something else. He never has a chance to feel joy because he turns his attention away from the things he accomplishes the moment he accomplishes them.”

Feeling that we’re not happy enough—or that we could be happier than we are—likely explains why we sometimes *all* fall into the world of Hunger and become convinced that the entirety of our happiness depends on getting something we want. I reminded Ash of my own reaction to the success we’d had in optioning a television pilot to DreamWorks Television a few years earlier. We’d both been stunned by the studio’s interest in our script and by the possibility that we might—dared we imagine it?—have the opportunity to write and produce a television series. For a period of several months that was all I thought about, all I dreamed about, all I worried about being denied—so much so that I couldn’t sleep. I constructed an entire herd of rationalizations to justify not only why I wanted it to happen but also the actions I took to make it happen. I even rationalized actions I knew had hurt others—more actions than I care to admit—convincing me that the power of the world of Hunger to obliterate moral concerns can’t be overestimated.

“Because we don’t enter the world of Hunger just by wanting something,” I reminded Ash. “We enter the world of Hunger by becoming obsessed with what we want. When what we *want* becomes something we think we *need*.”



“So what are you saying I should do?” Patrick asked Ash. “Just . . . stop wanting things?”

“I’m not sure how you could do that even if you wanted to,” Ash replied with a shake of his head. “Wanting things isn’t the problem. Wanting things is what makes life interesting. Wanting things is why people raise children and take care of the sick and write books and paint paintings and do everything else in life

that matters. Think about it. Life without desire wouldn't only be boring but also short—lacking, as you would, the desire to continue it.”

“Hah!”

“The problem isn't that you want things. The problem is you believe each and every thing you want is the key to your happiness. That if you could only get this or that *one thing*, you'd live happily ever after. But there is no happily ever after. So you jump from obsession to obsession, disappointed by everything you get because nothing you get makes you feel as good as you think it should.”

“But why?” Patrick asked. “Why doesn't it?”

“Because nothing you get will ever fill the hole you have in your heart. That's just not how you fix those kinds of things. We all dip in and out of the world of Hunger sometimes, but believing that getting what you want will heal whatever wound you're trying to heal—that it will finally enable you to love yourself or make something meaningful out of your life, or whatever—that just traps you in the same place. It just locks you into a perpetual state of *wanting*.”

Patrick eyed him silently.

“Do you remember the first thing you ever said to me?” Ash asked. “If I could just get over this *one thing* I'm sure I'd be fine.”

“I was talking about getting over my belief that Angie was cheating on me.”

“Because you were obsessed with hanging on to the *one thing* you thought you needed to be happy: Angie herself.”

“I guess that's true. . . .”

“Obsession is like a tidal wave,” Ash said. “It washes away every other concern you have in life. It fills you up. And what a relief that feeling is if you felt empty before. Especially when the object of your obsession is a person. But the problem with becoming obsessed with a person is that a person isn't a thing. A person has value independent of any thoughts you have about her. But when you objectify someone—whether you put her up on the highest pedestal or dehumanize her in the worst way—you start to think that she only has value in proportion to your desire for her. And when you idealize her—like you did Angie—it isn't just *her* you idealize. *You idealize what you expect her to make you feel*. And what you expect her to make you feel is rarely matched by what she actually does.”

“So you’re saying it’s okay to want things as long as I don’t want them too much.”

Ash shook his head. “It’s hard to accomplish anything if you don’t want it badly. How else do you stop yourself from giving up when you run into a roadblock? You know that better than anyone. To accomplish anything that’s difficult—to publish a book, to lose weight, to run a marathon—you *need* to be just a little bit obsessed. To achieve some goals—goals that are actually important and good—obsession might even be necessary. If you have high cholesterol, you probably need to be at least a little obsessed about avoiding saturated fat. If you have life-threatening allergies, you should definitely be obsessive about avoiding peanuts. The key is to become obsessed with something just enough that it fuels your endurance but not so much that you start to believe it holds the key to your happiness. Because the moment you start to believe that, your obsession ceases to be your servant and becomes your master.”

Patrick closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose with his fingers as if he were in pain. “This conversation is officially making me insane.”

“You just need to learn to want things in the right way for the right reasons,” Ash said. “Don’t let yourself fall into the trap of thinking that only the specific things you want can make you happy and nothing else. Don’t expect that getting anything will *make* you happy. Not in the long run, at least. It’s the degree to which you’re happy in the first place that determines how much you’re able to enjoy whatever it is you get.”⁸

“But how can I be happy in the first place if I feel like I’m—like I’m living a worthless life.” He stopped suddenly. “You know what? That’s actually true.”

“*What’s* actually true?” Ash asked. “That you *have* been living a worthless life? Or that you’ve always *believed* you’ve been living a worthless life?”

Patrick paused. “As long as I can remember, whenever I wanted something I went after it with everything I had. Just like you said, like my happiness depended on it. And I’ll tell you, to endure the agony of wanting all those things I’ve told you about wanting—and it really was *agony*, man—to fight for them as hard as I did, to keep fighting no matter how discouraged I got, and then only to achieve *one* of them—well, you’d think it would feel like the greatest victory in the world. But it doesn’t. It feels like absolutely nothing. So you tell me: why *else*

would it feel that way? Yeah, I believe I'm living a worthless life. I always have."

Ash studied him. "And how does it make you feel to recognize that now?"

"I guess . . . I guess when I really look at it square in the face it's like . . . whatever." He shrugged. "I'm more surprised it's taken me all this time to figure it out. But it really is just completely true." He tilted his head curiously. "I guess I'm not sure why it's not bothering me more."

"Maybe because in realizing you've always believed you've been living a worthless life you've also realized that you haven't, in fact, been living a worthless life at all."

"Huh," Patrick said thoughtfully. "Maybe so . . . that could be . . ." Patrick's gaze drifted sideways. He seemed lost in thought.

Ash waited. "What are you thinking now?"

"I'm thinking . . ." His expression went slack for a moment. Then he blinked and his eyes came back into focus. "I'm thinking—shit, man, I published a book. That's what I'm thinking. I published a book." And all at once his face lit up in a dazzling smile.

Ash smiled back at him. "Yes, you did."

Thinking he was seeing in Patrick's smile a long-overdue recognition that his life was far more meaningful than Patrick had previously believed, Ash found himself marveling at how wisdom seemed to possess a sentience of its own, a sentience that itself appeared to choose when and how it arrived. Usually, Ash reflected sardonically, it was with an unpredictability that made therapists want to wring their hands.

"That *was* quite an accomplishment, don't you think?" Ash said.

Patrick stared past Ash out the window behind his desk. His pupils constricted as the sun came out from behind a cloud and the room brightened.

"You know what?" Patrick said in a voice that seemed filled with equal measures of surprise and pride. "That is goddamn right."

Key Points

- Hunger is defined as the life-condition of desire.
- People trapped in the life-condition of Hunger typically experience persistent feelings of restlessness and yearning. They often feel a great sense of emptiness that they look to fill through the attainment of their desires.
- The life-condition of Hunger also fuels persistence, however, driving people to move past obstacles and disappointment when they might otherwise give up.
- The core delusion of the world of Hunger is that to be happy we need to get what we want.