

**Dear Gian,**

Today is your birthday. You are turning six years old.  
 I am writing to you because I've been thinking about you lately.  
 My therapist recently guided me through an exercise where I visited you  
 in a difficult memory—to ask what you needed from me.  
 But today, I'm visiting you not to ask, but to tell. To tell you a story.  
 Your story. My story. Our story.

I became someone I never chose to be.  
 Shaped by what surrounded me, by voices and silences, I clung to whatever felt solid.  
 In a world full of questions, I reached for answers that promised control.  
 And like so many boys and men, I believed the lure:  
 that strength would make me certain,  
 that control would make me safe,  
 that becoming a man meant knowing exactly who to be  
 and never doubting it.

I'm visiting you because something in me has changed.  
 And when I look back at who I was, I do so with compassion, and with fear.  
 Compassion for the boy who was doing his best to survive a world he didn't choose,  
 with rules he didn't understand.  
 Fear for the man I might have become if I hadn't changed.  
 The kind of man the headlines are full of—men still trapped in the armor they were handed,  
 doing unspeakable things just to keep from asking who they are beneath it.

I know, it seems strange—I'm writing to you in English—a language your six-year-old  
 self does not yet speak. This letter would sound like wind to your ears.  
 But I'm not really writing to that moment. I'm writing through it, across time.  
 I'm leaving this for the part of you that will one day learn these words and then carry them  
 like tools. I reach for you in English not because it was ours, but because it became mine.  
 I use it now to create distance from the wounds too fresh to name in German.  
 In English, pain can be whispered at arm's length.  
 The words come gentler, with more room to breathe.  
 They don't ricochet quite as sharply against my heart; I can cradle them  
 before offering them to you. Here, I find the space to describe fear, shame,  
 and hope, without reopening old scars too raw to touch.

And maybe you don't need to understand the words.  
 Maybe what matters is that they're there at all.  
 That someone, even silently, is trying to speak gently to you.

Because that's what you need most. Not answers. Not even protection.  
 Just someone who saw your fear—and didn't turn away.

Just as you must learn the rules and rhythms of becoming a man, I had to learn  
 this foreign tongue. And so, I hope as you grow deeper into this language—as you grow  
 deeper into yourself—you'll begin to hear what I meant beneath the words.  
 Not just with your mind, but with the softness you've learned to bury.  
 Not just the language, but what I tried to whisper beneath it.

### **Cinema**

Birthdays are uncomfortable for you, I know.  
 You don't like the attention. I'm sorry to give you more of it now.  
 You're standing beside your father at the cinema counter. He's taken you to see  
*The Jungle Book* for your birthday. You can't see what's going on, but you hear him shouting.  
 The ticket seller won't let you in—you're too young. Your father argues. He insists he  
 should decide what films his son sees. The seller says «Nein!», the age restriction is six  
 and you're not old enough. You want to speak, but no one listens.  
 So you squeeze your father's hand, feel it pull away into battle, when what you long for is care.

Later, outside the cinema on the sidewalk, your voice will tremble as you whisper,  
«But I am six now. It's my birthday.»  
Your father will beam. He has won. He'll stride back in, ID card in hand, victorious.  
In your seats, he will be proud. You will be small. You'll still feel the fear in your bones.  
You always do when he yells.  
You will watch the film, sinking into the too-big cushions, wishing someone would hold you.  
And you will scold yourself: «Don't cry. You got what you wanted!».  
But you didn't. You got what you had been taught to want.

That day, you'll begin to learn a lesson that will repeat itself: what it means to be a man.  
You'll learn it from your father's anger, from the ticket seller's authority, from the movie  
on the screen. You'll learn it again and again, in moments and in stories.  
And soon, you'll begin to tell those stories yourself.

### ***Cage***

Ocean Vuong's line echoes in my mind as I write these words to you:  
«I did not know then what I know now: to be an American boy, and then an American boy  
with a gun, is to move from one end of a cage to another». I didn't know then what I know  
now either: that everyone suffers in the myth of the strong man.

The weak suffer because they can't be strong.  
The strong suffer because strength is a mask they cannot remove.  
A mask that demands the sacrifice of softness, of wonder, of the quiet parts that make us  
whole. And in becoming what they must, they abandon what they are.  
It's a cage built of barbed wire. It cuts you when you cry in secret. It cuts you when you  
tell your own story but only once it's tidy and triumphant. It cuts your friends who listen  
and believe they, too, must never be tender.

The tale of the hero is ancient: Greek myths, Bible verses, fairy tales, *Star Wars*,  
and *The Jungle Book*. It maps the way to manhood.  
You will chase it like a phantom, always slightly out of reach.  
When the credits roll and the lights come up, you'll want to be like Mowgli—brave, wild,  
strong—but you'll still be scared. You didn't want to go to the cinema at all. You wished  
for comfort. But you'll learn that this wish is dangerous. That fragility must be hidden.  
And so you'll begin to amputate parts of yourself to fit the shape you're told to become.

### ***Lessons***

You'll hear your stepfather say, «I don't argue with boys who cry».  
And you'll stop crying—for years.  
You'll be mocked for expressing joy. Called a girl for showing emotion.  
Labeled gay for having friends who are girls. For liking clothes. For not loving soccer.

At school, you'll learn that strength only counts if others are weaker.  
You'll do everything you can to be one of the strong, stomping on the weak  
to avoid being reminded of your own fragility.

At summer camp, your clothes and blanket will be taken by the other boys.  
You're still not strong enough. You'll cry silently, cold and ashamed.  
You won't call your father, thinking you'd disappoint him.

In adolescence, you will compare yourself to the men you see online.  
You'll want their bodies, their control. You'll confide in your father, and he'll answer  
with heroic legends of his own. Always capable. Always ready.  
You'll believe him. Not knowing his strength was just fear in armor,  
a helpless attempt to equip you with what is necessary to survive this world of men.  
I wonder what it must have felt like for him, seeing his son walk into that world.  
Knowing he couldn't protect you.  
Hoping you would come out only bruised—and not fully broken.

### ***Intergenerational Echoes***

This is where your truth will start to echo his.  
Because long before you, he had his own tales—of fear, defiance, and silence.  
You'll hear stories of your grandfather—his rage, his fists.  
You'll admire your father for standing up to him. You'll ask for that memory again and again.  
It will become legend.  
You will imagine him—more than double the age you are now but still a boy—trembling inside but refusing to run. And this moment—his resistance—will shine like a talisman in your imagination. Proof that cycles can be broken.  
He'll become your hero for never striking you, for holding the line, for not becoming a monster.

Later, you will come to understand how much he still carried with him,  
how much of that violence remained, reshaped but not erased.  
That resistance was not the end of the story but only a chapter.  
The shadow of your grandfather still lingered in your father's voice,  
in his anger, in the pressure he put on himself, and on you.  
You'll start to see that even those who try to end cycles pass something on.  
Just in different forms.

You'll see him unravel around his own father.  
The tension will begin days before the visit, a quiet storm gathering in his voice,  
in the way he packs the car, in the edge that creeps into ordinary conversation.  
You'll drive together in silence, your father gripping the steering wheel just a bit too tightly.  
And when you arrive, you'll see the ritual unfold: the offer of alcohol—your grandfather's medicine, his way of greeting, of control—and your father's stiff refusal.  
It will feel like watching a battle in slow motion, one with no weapons except memory and posture. The air will thicken with things unspoken, with stories too dangerous to say aloud.  
You'll watch your grandfather shrink in old age and still cast a long shadow.  
And in those moments, you'll see how hard your father tried. How much he wanted to be different. And you'll realize that you are part of that effort, part of his legacy, part of the proof that he broke a chain even if not every link.  
You'll see that you are his monument, a living testament that he did better.  
But monuments, too, cast shadows.

### ***Fear and Fragility***

You'll learn to fear your father too.  
You'll come home from a failed camping trip and hear him scream at himself in the kitchen,  
hurling dinner into the trash as if failure could be flung away.  
You'll watch his shame spill out and try to hold it, though you are too small for such weight.  
You'll comfort him even as you shake. You won't understand. Not yet.

Later, you will. In many ways.  
You'll see his anger towards you—a reminder of his own fragility.  
You'll see his anger toward his mother and feel your own toward yours,  
for not protecting you.  
But you'll also start to understand that there are rules to this game of manhood. Rules no mother can teach. Because manhood, as we were told, happens in a land without women.  
And that, too, is a loss.

That is why you will be able to be soft with women and become hard as soon as a man enters the room. That is why you will become condescending to women when you know a man's ears are listening. Because you will whisper to him in a tongue only men speak:  
«I am worthy. I am hard. I am not to be excluded.».

You'll envy the girls who try on identities like outfits.  
You'll wish you could do the same. But you won't.  
Because being a man is defined not by what you are, but by what you are not.  
Not weak. Not vulnerable. Not joyful. Not feminine.  
And you will become what is left after all the notes.

## ***Leaving Home***

And still, you will love your father. And feel that he loves you.  
You will see him cry when you leave.  
You will understand, without anyone needing to say it, that those tears are sacred.  
That tenderness between men is something shared only in secret. And you will keep it safe.

At seventeen, you'll move out. You'll sleep on the floor of your attic room, using your jacket as a blanket, too proud to tell anyone you're without a bed.  
You'll drink with friends, laugh when you don't want to,  
numb what you can no longer cry out.

You'll have hardened.  
And strangely, this will feel like relief.  
Because it is easier to survive in the land of men once the stories settle into your skin,  
once your body no longer fights them.  
The lineages you once resisted begin to live inside you, unchallenged.  
You'll stop producing antibodies. You'll stop flinching. What once felt foreign and cruel  
will become familiar and necessary. The virus will become the bloodstream.  
And before you'll even notice, you'll have become that man the stories praised.  
The tales you absorbed as truth will echo in your posture, in your silence.  
And Kollegah's words will become your gospel. «Mein Selbstvertrau'n wächst mit dem  
Bizepsumfang / Nie mehr Liebeskummer, ich werde emotionskalt / Lernste, dass ich nur mir  
selbst trau'n kann im Notfall.»

You'll believe that's the way.  
And maybe it is—in the land of men.

You'll discover photography. You'll walk with a camera and choose what to see.  
You'll edit images. Look at them again and again. Tiny portals to another world,  
one where you choose what matters, your utopia. But even there, the hero persists: Cartier-  
Bresson's decisive moment. Capa's dare: «If your pictures aren't good enough, you're not  
close enough».

Things will shift again:  
You'll see your father struggle with what comes easy to you.  
Technology, directions, systems, beliefs.  
And something will crack. You're no longer just his child.  
You've become a man in your own right.  
You speak the same harsh language now. You explain.  
And with that comes fear—for both of you.  
His fear of your judgement.  
And your fear of having become just like him.

You'll begin to see him more clearly.  
Not just as the hero of your childhood, but a man bruised by his own boyhood.  
And he'll begin to see you as both his proof and his reckoning: the son he raised,  
and the man who now sees his broken parts.  
Maybe that's what growing up means: learning to see more fully.  
Holding contradiction without needing resolution. Realizing that even those who tried their  
best still hurt you—and that you, too, will hurt others, despite your best intentions.

Maybe your father became someone his younger self would have felt safe with.  
And maybe he hoped, with all his heart, that you would feel safe too.

## ***Becoming***

You will learn that not all stories are true.  
That the men most afraid of not being heroes tell the most heroic myths about themselves.  
That those most terrified of their own weakness cast themselves in the strongest light.  
That they rewrite their past until even they believe the hero was always there.

That they speak in legend, not in truth.  
And that fear, when dressed in armor, calls itself a hero.

What I want to tell you is this: reality is made up of many stories.  
Some heroic, some funny, some deeply sad. Most are filled with contradictions.  
And you'll learn to listen to them, to carry them, to tell them.  
Not just the ones where you were brave or clever, but the ones where you were simply human. They won't make your life easier—but maybe, they will make it softer.

I don't want to undo what came before.  
I want to add to it. To expand it. To hold it gently.  
To father you—myself—the way we needed.  
What I'm offering you is not a doctrine, but a possibility.  
And even if it's impossible to pass knowledge back through time, perhaps I can offer this:  
Becoming someone you would feel safe with.

May you grow into the man who holds his own hand with kindness.  
Who asks for help without shame.  
Who shares his tears and laughter in equal measure.  
Who does not mistake silence for strength, or control for love.  
Who knows that tenderness is not something to outgrow.  
Who speaks gently to the child still living in his chest.  
Who knows how to stay, how to leave, and how to return.  
Who listens to stories of pain and beauty, and learns to tell his own.  
Who knows he doesn't need heroes, but friends, family, and lovers.  
Who makes room—for others, for himself, for all he used to hide.  
May you grow into the kind of man you once needed.

I'm here with you, adding what I've gathered to your bag of stories.  
One day, when you read this, I hope you'll feel the warmth of your older self,  
reaching back, whispering:  
You are already enough.

Gian