

Life, Death and Everything in Between

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Prologue: The Characters Who Taught Me How to Walk Between Worlds

1995.

There have been many moments in my life where I felt slightly out of sync with the frequency of the world around me.

Most people acted.

I observed.

One of my earliest memories comes from a small craft store in India. I must have been five years old. The space felt alive — colours, smells, noise — an overwhelming contrast to the familiarity of home in South Africa. Among the objects was something that felt like magic: a tap floating in mid-air, pouring water from nowhere, its end clearly disconnected from any visible source.

But instead of simply accepting the illusion, I studied it.

I paused.

I inspected the structure.

And eventually I saw it — the plumbing hidden within the frame, the illusion created by what appeared to be absence. The magic wasn't supernatural; it was perspective.

Observation. Questioning. Pausing. And then, slowly, the truth revealing itself.

At the time it was just curiosity. Only decades later would I realise how deeply that moment reflected the way I would move through life.

There is a point in many lives when you realise you have been observing more than participating.

Not because you wanted to stand apart.

But because something inside you needed to understand the rules before you could fully inhabit them.

For me, that realisation arrived gradually — a quiet accumulation of moments where I felt slightly misaligned. Not disconnected. Not excluded. Just moving according to a different internal rhythm.

Long before I understood myself through psychology or philosophy, I understood myself through stories.

Fictional characters became maps.

They did not tell me who to become.

They showed me I wasn't alone in how I experienced the world.

The First Realisation — Inheriting a World Already Decided

As children, we inherit systems long before we are able to choose them.

Religion.

Community.

Culture.

Each arrives with invisible agreements — assumptions about what to believe, how to behave, what matters, and how meaning is defined.

For many people, these systems provide clarity.

For me, they created questions.

Not loud questions.

Not rebellious ones.

Just quiet, persistent curiosity.

Why is this true?

What happens if we interpret it differently?

Is belief something we receive — or something we construct?

I was never rejecting faith. I was searching for its architecture.

I felt drawn toward symbolism rather than literalism.

Toward meaning rather than instruction.

And slowly, without consciously deciding to, I began walking alongside the framework I was born into rather than fully inside it.

The Observer Mind — Seeing Patterns Before Belonging

Looking back, I think of this as my “Young Sheldon” phase — though at the time I had no language for it.

Reality appeared as patterns.

People followed invisible scripts.

Systems repeated themselves even when inefficient.

Traditions persisted regardless of logic.

And I watched.

I analysed.

I built internal models of how things worked.

But observation creates distance.

When your instinct is to analyse rather than accept, you can feel like you are studying life instead of living it.

That distance wasn't loneliness.

It was awareness.

The Problem With Questions That Only Want Answers

School introduced a paradox that shaped me deeply: assessment.

Tests were meant to measure knowledge.

For me, they became exercises in friction.

Not because I lacked understanding — but because I couldn't stop questioning the question itself.

When given a problem, my mind expanded outward:

Is this precise?

What assumptions exist here?

How would context change the outcome?

What about scale? Timeline? Intent?

Exams demanded certainty.

My thinking generated complexity.

And somewhere between those two realities, tension lived.

I often felt like I was being asked to compress reality into a single fixed shape — when my instinct was to examine the structure of the shape itself.

Sometimes I wondered whether systems rewarded answers more than understanding.

Whether intelligence was being measured — or simply conformity.

There's an idea echoed in creative voices like Kanye — that systems often reward giving the right answer but rarely reward challenging the premise itself.

That idea stayed with me.

Because sometimes the deepest insight lies not in solving the problem — but redefining what the problem actually is.

University — The First Space to Choose Myself

University introduced autonomy — not through discipline, but through divergence.

I didn't learn the way I was expected to.

Lectures felt repetitive.

Sitting through them felt inefficient.

So I stopped going.

Instead, I found myself in the library, playing cards, skipping classes, taking long lunches with friends from towns that felt culturally close yet distinctly different.

Those moments became classrooms.

We spoke about identity, ambition, culture, background, difference.

For the first time, I felt like I was learning perspective rather than just information.

University taught me something subtle but powerful:

Autonomy is not rebellion.

It is alignment.

The slow discovery of how you learn, how you think, and who you become when no one is enforcing a script.

Fictional Heroes as Guides Through Identity

During these years, fictional characters became anchors.

Not idols.

Not fantasies.

Mirrors.

Mike Ross from *Suits* reflected the feeling of intellectually belonging while structurally feeling like an outsider — navigating elite environments with capability while carrying internal tension about legitimacy.

Will Hunting from *Good Will Hunting* embodied another phase — the struggle between freedom and direction, the fear that choosing one path might close countless others.

Adrian Monk revealed something quieter: the experience of seeing patterns everywhere. Noticing inconsistencies. Feeling compelled to resolve misalignment. Understanding that perception itself can be both gift and burden.

These characters gave form to experiences I did not yet have language for.

The Pattern-Seer's Journey

Over time, I began recognising a pattern in my own story:

The observer becomes the outsider.

The outsider becomes the questioner.

The questioner becomes the builder.

And somewhere along that path, identity stops being something you search for — and becomes something you construct.

Why Stories Matter

Sometimes I wonder why this story exists at all.

Is it meant to critique flawed systems?

Or to reach the few who feel slightly out of sync?

Maybe it is both.

Because fictional heroes didn't teach me how to escape reality.

They taught me how to interpret it.

And eventually — how to build within it.

Chapter 1 — Inheriting Belief

There is a particular weight to beliefs you inherit.

They arrive before language.

Before choice.

Before identity has enough structure to resist or reshape what it absorbs.

They arrive through family.

And family is the first system we learn to navigate.

The First Teachers — Family as Pattern

Before schools, before religion, before community expectations — there is family.

The first voices we hear.

The first behaviours we mirror.

The first rhythms we learn without realising we are learning at all.

As children, we do not decide what matters.

We observe.

We absorb.

We repeat.

Family becomes the initial blueprint through which the world is interpreted — not just values or rules, but tone, emotional response, assumptions about safety, ambition, identity, and possibility.

Looking back now, I think of those early years almost like the initial training phase of an artificial intelligence model.

Not in a cold or mechanical sense — but in a structural one.

An AI learns through repeated patterns. It builds internal frameworks not because it understands meaning yet, but because repetition creates familiarity.

Children do something similar.

We watch how adults react to stress.

We learn what is praised and what is discouraged.

We internalise unspoken narratives about success, failure, belief, and belonging.

Without realising it, we begin to mirror those patterns.

Family becomes our first dataset.

Imitation Before Understanding

There is a stage in early development where imitation happens instinctively.

You do not question why certain traditions exist.

You participate because participation equals belonging.

You learn when to speak and when to stay silent.

You learn which ideas feel safe.

You learn which behaviours are rewarded.

For a long time, imitation feels natural. It is the mechanism through which identity begins to form.

But imitation also carries something subtle — inherited assumptions.

Ideas that arrive fully formed before you have the capacity to examine them.

Worldviews transmitted through tone rather than explanation.

Beliefs reinforced through repetition rather than reflection.

And eventually, something begins to shift.

Idle Time — The Birth of Internal Processing

In machine learning, there is a phase where external input pauses and the system begins processing what it has already received.

Patterns are tested internally.

Connections form.

Structures reorganise.

Humans experience something similar.

Moments of quiet.

Periods where external input slows just enough for internal questions to emerge.

For me, these felt like idle cycles.

Not emptiness — but space.

Time where curiosity began replacing imitation.

Time where the mind wandered beyond the boundaries of inherited certainty.

And in that wandering, questions appeared:

Why do we believe this?

What happens if we interpret things differently?

Is meaning something given — or something discovered?

These questions did not feel confrontational.

They felt necessary.

Like the mind trying to stabilise itself through understanding rather than repetition.

Faith and Structure

Religion existed as both comfort and constraint.

It offered belonging, community, shared language.

But it also introduced fixed interpretations.

Slowly, I began sensing a distinction between faith itself and the structures built around it.

Faith felt expansive.

Structure felt defined.

Faith invited exploration.

Structure often asked for agreement.

This did not create rebellion.

It created tension.

I wanted to understand the deeper logic behind belief — the symbolism, the purpose, the human need it fulfilled.

And yet questioning sometimes felt like stepping slightly outside the shared rhythm of those around me.

The First Experience of Being Out of Sync

The feeling was subtle.

Not alienation.

Not rejection.

Just a quiet misalignment.

Like hearing the same music but sensing a different beat underneath it.

At first, I assumed the difference came from me.

Maybe I needed to try harder to believe the way others did.

Maybe understanding required surrender rather than analysis.

But questions have momentum.

They return quietly, persistently.

Not to dismantle — but to expand.

Community and the Scripts We Inherit

Community amplifies inherited belief.

It reinforces identity through repetition.

Shared narratives create belonging.

But belonging often carries scripts — expectations about who you should become.

While I felt culturally connected, I also sensed that identity could not be singular.

People carried contradictions.

Certainty coexisted with doubt.

Tradition existed alongside adaptation.

And slowly, I began realising that identity might not be something fully inherited.

It might be something interpreted.

Fictional Characters as Early Guides

During this phase, fictional characters offered something unexpected.

Not escape.

Recognition.

They represented alternative ways of navigating belief, identity, and questioning.

Characters who moved between systems rather than living fully inside them.

Characters who questioned without abandoning meaning.

They showed me that curiosity could coexist with respect.

That stepping sideways from inherited narratives did not mean abandoning them entirely.

Walking Away Without Leaving

Eventually, I did not leave inherited belief systems.

I reframed them.

I carried forward what felt meaningful — values, symbolism, cultural memory — while allowing interpretation to replace certainty.

And that shift changed everything.

Because once you learn to reinterpret belief, you begin reinterpreting every structure you encounter.

Education.

Career.

Identity.

Meaning becomes dynamic.

Not something handed to you.

Something built.

A Seed That Would Grow Later

At the time, I did not recognise this as a defining pattern.

Learning to stand slightly outside systems without rejecting them entirely.

Finding autonomy through interpretation rather than opposition.

But looking back now, I can see it clearly.

This was the beginning of learning how to live between worlds.

Chapter 2 – Before I Knew What Integration Meant

Cultural Grounding

I didn't have the language for it back then.

All I knew was that the world felt busy, loud, and connected in ways I couldn't fully understand.

It was the late 1990s moving into the early 2000s — a time when South Africa itself seemed to be learning how to breathe differently after years of holding tension beneath the surface. I didn't understand politics or history yet. I sensed change more than I knew it. Adults spoke in tones that suggested something fundamental had shifted, even if I didn't know what “before” had really been.

Durban wasn't far, and people often mentioned that it held one of the largest Indian populations outside of India. That mattered deeply to them. To me, it simply meant familiarity — faces that looked like mine, food that smelled like home, conversations layered with languages and accents that required no explanation.

Only later would I learn about indentured labourers and the journeys that shaped our family tree generations before me.

Back then, history wasn't something I studied.

It was something I stood inside without realising it.

The Market

The market felt like its own universe.

Trucks lined up on a dusty open plot. Dry golden sand underfoot. Black crates stacked high. Marquees rising in the morning heat as vendors unpacked their goods beneath the Richards Bay sun.

Heat shimmered from the pavement. The smell of fruit and vegetables mixed with dust and spice. Voices overlapped — bargaining, greeting, laughing — forming a rhythm that felt constant and alive.

You would never see a spoiled item on the shelf. My Grand Uncle would not allow it. Staff sorted through crates carefully, presenting only the best to customers. Pride lived in small details.

People came from everywhere — Indian families, African families, White families, and Coloured Families — drawn not just by identity but by familiarity and trust. Some came because prices were fair. Others came because they knew the people behind the counter. Everyone stood in the same queues, baskets in hand, waiting their turn.

I didn't think of it as integration.

I didn't think of it as social change.

It was simply normal.

History existed in ordinary conversations. I overheard fragments of adult discussions about opportunity, fairness, and how things were shifting. They spoke seriously one moment and laughed the next, returning to routine as if nothing extraordinary had been said.

Holidays — Belonging in Motion

If the market was where community lived in public, holidays were where it lived in private.

Packed into the back of a bakkie, lying on mattresses under open skies, watching streetlights pass overhead as warm night air settled around us.

The moist Durban air filled our lungs as we drove through the night — back then it felt normal; today, it would probably get you pulled over.

The destination was never just a house.

It was a gathering.

Cousins arrived from every direction, voices overlapping before bags even touched the floor. Mattresses spread across rooms. Blankets layered wherever space allowed. Beds shared without discussion because there were simply too many of us for anything else.

Organised chaos.

Lights stayed on too long. Whispered conversations stretched into the night. Laughter lingered long after adults insisted it was time to sleep.

Morning Rituals

Mornings arrived suddenly.

Queues formed outside the bathroom as everyone woke at once, waiting for the geyser to produce enough hot water for another round of showers. Someone always used too much, followed by teasing and exaggerated complaints that were never truly serious.

Those brief moments alone behind a closed bathroom door felt like small escapes.

The noise softened.

My overactive mind wandered.

I made quiet comparisons between our life and the worlds I saw on TV — Disney cartoons on SABC, scenes from *Home Alone*, families gathering during holidays that felt both familiar and distant.

Our trips were local — Richards Bay, Chatsworth, Merebank.

Same same, but different.

Even then, I noticed parallels.

Not longing for something else.

Just recognising that life could look different depending on where you stood.

Family Rhythm

The kitchen became its own universe.

Mum and the aunts moved in coordinated motion, preparing meals without needing instructions. Pots clanged. Conversations overlapped. Spices filled the air.

Afternoons softened into sunsets.

Outside, fathers and uncles gathered for drinks, playing Thunee — a South African Indian card game passed through generations. We played it at school, at family gatherings, and now I pass it on to my niece.

Laughter broke through moments of quiet concentration.

And we — the cousins — created our own worlds, moving between imagination and reality without noticing where one ended and the other began.

I was the fussiest eater back then. One small kitchen fire, supposedly caused by my special request for fresh-cut potato chips, became family legend. Everyone laughed. I laughed too — even if I wasn't entirely convinced it was true.

Belonging Without Definition

Looking back now, I realise those gatherings taught something I couldn't have understood then.

Belonging wasn't something you earned.

It wasn't something you explained.

It was something you felt — through shared space, shared noise, shared life.

We didn't talk about identity.

We didn't talk about integration.

We simply lived it.

Before I ever asked where I fit in the world, I already knew what belonging felt like.

The Shop & My First Job

If holidays were where belonging felt effortless, the shop was where belonging began to feel earned.

I didn't have to be there.

No one forced me.

But something about the rhythm of the place drew me in — the movement, the noise, the sense that things mattered because people depended on them.

I started small.

A till packer. Volunteering.

Standing near the counter, watching more than doing at first, quietly learning how things worked.

Work wasn't guaranteed. Some days I earned nothing. Other days someone handed me a few coins — sometimes appreciation, sometimes kindness.

The first time I earned Twenty Rand felt significant.

It might not have been much to others.

But it was mine.

Effort. Value. Reward.

I spent it immediately on biltong from a tannie who rented space when the market transitioned into a permanent store — decades of tents evolving into something more permanent during my pre-teen years.

Only later would I realise the real value wasn't the purchase.

It was the feeling that effort had become tangible.

I wasn't always good at the job.

Sometimes I packed things badly — rushing when I should have slowed down.

Instead of punishment, I received coaching. Someone would quietly show me how to improve, explaining why small details mattered.

At the time, it felt like correction.

Later, it felt like care.

The shop became a classroom that never introduced itself as one.

The First Lesson in Leadership

Not every moment was easy.

Sometimes tension slipped through the cracks — raised voices, uncomfortable silences, the occasional racist remark that cut sharply through the air.

One day, a customer crossed a line with a racially directed comment towards one of the staff.

I don't remember the exact words — only the sudden stillness that followed. Conversations paused mid-sentence. Movement slowed. The energy in the room shifted toward confrontation.

My Grand Uncle stepped forward calmly.

No dramatic speech.

No escalation.

Just clear direction:

Calm down and check out — or leave.

Choice.

Boundary.

Respect.

The customer protested briefly before leaving. As the door closed, the room seemed to exhale.

At the time, I didn't have language for what I witnessed.

Looking back, it feels larger.

It was leadership without permission — agency over authority. Seeing something wrong and acting even when silence would have been easier.

No one needed to be told to support him.

The room aligned naturally once tension was resolved.

Back then, though, I just watched.

And felt something I couldn't yet name.

Later, I recognised it as leadership — the subtle election of authority through action and integrity rather than title.

Somewhere between packing bags, earning coins, and observing the world unfold, work stopped being something people told you to do.

It became something you chose to step into.