What Men Live By

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LEO TOLSTOY

Born into the Russian aristocracy, Lev Tolstoy had already earned widespread literary acclaim within Russia by the time he turned 30. At the time of his death in 1910, he had become the most well-known Russian writer abroad and the world's first international literary celebrity; his death in 1910 ran on the front pages of newspapers worldwide. After a stint as an officer in the Crimean War, Tolstoy spent most of his adult life living on the country manor in central Russia where he had been born. He fathered 13 children, managed several large estates, set up a school for the peasants who worked on his land, and wrote his two most famous novels, *War and Peace* (1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1878). In the 1870s, Tolstoy experienced a major moral crisis followed by a religious awakening, which he wrote about in *A Confession* (1882). After this point, many of his works were written in a more explicitly moral and Christian register. Tolstoy always idolized the Russian peasantry, and the moral philosophy of his later life was based on charity, pacifism, vegetarianism, reverence for poverty and simplicity, and a rejection of governmental and religious institutions—the latter of which he believed failed to center the true teachings of Jesus. The Russian Orthodox Church excommunicated Tolstoy in 1901. Towards the end of his life, Tolstoy also began to express a deep distrust of art and music, which he believed made people act immorally. At the very end of his life, Tolstoy gave away all of his money—including the rights to his novels—and ran away from home in the middle of the night, planning to live out his final days as an anonymous peasant. Only ten days into this experiment, however, he died of pneumonia in a train station in the town of Astopovo, about 220 miles south of his estate.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Tolstoy's pivot to radical Christianity in the 1870s was motivated by his own personal (and marital) turmoil rather than by any large-scale movement in Russian social or literary culture. However, his choice to set "What Men Live By"—and many of his other moral fables—in a rural Russian village (rather than in Moscow or St. Petersburg) and to cast its central characters as peasants (rather than landowners of his own social class) reflects a fascination with the peasantry that he shared with many of his contemporaries. Although the extremely low literacy rates of the lower class throughout the 19th century meant that almost all Russian writers were, like Tolstoy, born into the aristocratic class, Russia's rural lower class—who were serfs until 1861 and "peasants" afterwards—became important characters in Russian literature long before they could be creators or consumers of it. Beginning with Nikolai Karamzin's highly sentimental portrait of a peasant girl in "Poor Liza" (1792), the poor peasant became, for many Russian writers, a glorified symbol of Russian spirituality. In the peasantry, writers like Tolstoy saw a simple, soulful, irrational, and distinctly Russian worldview that Western Europe—in spite of its technological advances—could neither match nor understand. This idealization of peasant spirituality can be found throughout Tolstoy's oeuvre, most famously in the character of Platon Karataev in *War and Peace*.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"What Men Live By" is one of 20 so-called "Folk Stories"—or "Stories of the People"—written by Tolstoy in the last 30 years of his life. Other famous stories from this set include "Where God Is, There Love Is," and "How Much Land does a Man Need." Many of the stories were loosely inspired by peasant folklore, and many of them carry explicitly Christian messages. Not only is "What Men Live By" a story *about* peasants, but the manuscript's revision history—and Tolstoy's comments about it—suggest that he wanted the story to be read *by* peasants. He intentionally strove to write it in a simple, pared-down style that could be comprehended by Russian peasants who were learning how to read. Outside of Tolstoy's own body of work, the story's most significant literary connection is to the Gospels of the New Testament. Although the story's four epigraphs are all drawn from the Gospel of John, its moral message is also heavily influenced by portions of the Gospel of Matthew. The Sermon on the Mount—from the Gospel of Matthew—was Tolstoy's favorite part of the Bible and formed the basis for much of his own religious philosophy. "What Men Live By" is also referenced in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*; having turned to Tolstoy's corpus in the last days of his life, the patient Yefrem Podduyev is struck by the story's assertion that what men live by is love; he conducts an informal survey of the other cancer patients in the ward, asking each of them what *they* believe men live by.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** What Men Live By
- **When Written:** 1881
- **Where Written:** Russia
- **When Published:** 1881
- **Literary Period:** Realism
- **Genre:** Short story, fable, morality tale
- **Setting:** A small village in Russia

- **Climax:** Mikhail reveals himself to be an angel and explains his three mysterious smiles.
- **Antagonist:** Selfishness
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Name Change in English Translation. Tolstoy's first name, Lev, means lion in Russian. When his works were first being translated into English, Tolstoy insisted that his English-language readers understand the significance of his name; for this reason, he and his translators decided to render his name as "Leo" rather than Lev for his readers in the anglophone world.

Influence on Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. Tolstoy's later moral writings, particularly his philosophy about nonviolent resistance to evil, heavily influenced Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi wrote to the aging Russian writer for advice after reading Tolstoy's "Letter to a Hindu," and the two then engaged in a long-term written correspondence. Gandhi's own teachings on nonviolence—many of which he developed over the course of his communication with Tolstoy—in turn strongly influenced Martin Luther King Jr.

PLOT SUMMARY

A poor Russian shoemaker named Semyon sets off to a nearby village to buy sheepskins for a new winter **coat**. He and his wife are so poor that they share one coat between them, and they have been saving money for several years to buy a new one. Before Semyon can buy the skins, he needs to collect money that is owed to him by several villagers. However, his debtors, who are themselves very poor, are all unable to pay him what they owe. The sheepskin seller refuses to sell Semyon the skins on credit. Discouraged, Semyon spends the little money that he does have on vodka and stumbles home drunkenly, musing resentfully about his debtors' selfishness.

Passing a church on the way home, Semyon notices a naked man leaned up against one side of the chapel. He isn't sure if the man is alive or dead, and recognizes that if the man *is* alive, he will likely freeze to death soon. Semyon convinces himself that he has no obligation to approach or help this man, since he is already struggling to feed and clothe his own family. Moreover, he reasons, if the man is the victim of a crime, and Semyon is found at the scene "helping" him, he might get in trouble himself. Having decided not to get involved in the situation, Semyon passes the church. A few steps later, however, he suddenly feels a twinge of conscience. He turns back to the church to help the naked stranger.

Semyon is surprised to find that the man, whose name is Mikhail, appears young, strong, and uninjured. When he asks how Mikhail came to be naked and alone by the side of the church, Mikhail says he cannot explain. Semyon takes Mikhail to his home, where his wife Matryona is waiting. Matryona has been hard at work all day and is dismayed to find that Semyon has not only failed to buy the sheepskins but has also spent their precious money on vodka *and* brought home another mouth to feed. Matryona explodes at Semyon, lambasting him for his thoughtlessness and refusing to feed the naked stranger. However, when she looks at Mikhail's pitiful posture, Matryona's heart softens, and she relents, offering him their last piece of **bread** and a place to stay. Mikhail, who until now has seemed quiet and removed, suddenly smiles.

The next day, Semyon begins to train Mikhail as his apprentice shoemaker. Mikhail has an immediate talent for shoemaking, and his superb workmanship soon attracts many customers to Semyon's business. One day, after several years of this newfound prosperity, a rich gentleman comes to Semyon to commission a pair of boots made out of extremely expensive leather. The gentleman, who is very rude, warns Semyon that the boots must last for a whole year and that he will punish Semyon severely if they do not meet his standards. Fearing the gentleman's wrath, Semyon is unsure about whether to take the job; Mikhail, however, encourages him to accept it. As Semyon is taking the gentleman's measurements, Mikhail's face again breaks into the strange bright smile. This is the first time that Mikhail has smiled since the original day when Matryona gave him dinner.

Mikhail begins to make the boots for the gentleman. As she watches Mikhail work, Matryona notices that he seems to be making the shoes incorrectly. The gentleman commissioned sturdy winter boots, but it appears that Mikhail is sewing the leather into light slippers. Matryona holds her tongue, assuming that Mikhail knows what he is doing. But when Semyon sees Mikhail's work, he is distressed. He doesn't understand how Mikhail could have made such a huge mistake, and he begins to worry about the punishment that awaits them. Just then, the gentleman's servant arrives with a message: the gentleman died the previous day on the way home from Semyon's shop. His widow now wants the expensive leather to be made into light slippers for her husband to wear in his coffin. This is the exact kind of shoe that Mikhail has already made.

More time passes. Mikhail remains hardworking, quiet, and mysteriously solemn. One day, a woman named Marya comes to the shop to buy boots for her twin daughters, one of whom has a crippled leg. Marya tells the story of how she came to be these girls' guardian. They are not her biological daughters, but she adopted them when they were infants after both of their parents died. Throughout Marya's story, Mikhail behaves very strangely, staring at the young girls. When Marya and her daughters leave the shop, Semyon and Matryona notice that Mikhail is once again beaming.

When Semyon asks Mikhail why he is smiling, Mikhail says that

God has forgiven him. Mikhail's whole body has begun glowing, and Semyon and Matryona suddenly realize that Mikhail is not a human being but an angel. They ask him to explain the meaning of his three mysterious smiles, and Mikhail tells them that he had been punished by God and sent to earth to learn three lessons; each time he smiled, it was because he had learned one of the three lessons and was one step closer to returning to heaven. He was punished, Mikhail explains, because he disobeyed God: God had told him to take the soul of a woman who had just given birth to twins, but Mikhail took pity on the woman and let her stay alive to take care of her daughters. Hearing that Mikhail had disobeyed him, God made Mikhail go back to earth to take the woman's soul, and then to stay there as a mortal until he had learned three truths: what dwells in man, what is not given to man, and what men live by.

Mikhail learned the first truth when he saw Matryona's heart soften toward him; he realized that what dwells in man is love. He understood the second truth when the rich gentleman commissioned boots for a whole year, not knowing, meanwhile, that he would die the same day: what is not given to man is knowledge of his own death. And he understood God's third truth when he saw the twin girls, who were the daughters of the woman he had initially tried to save. Mikhail had allowed the girls' mother to persuade him that they would not survive without her, since children need a mother's care. However, when he saw how well the girls had been cared for by a stranger—and witnessed the strength of Marya's love for them—he understood the mistake he had made in believing their dying mother. He understood that what men live by is not parental love but love in general. Having learned these three truths and finished telling his story to Semyon and Matryona, Mikhail ascends into heaven in a column of fire.

CHARACTERS

Semyon – Semyon is an impoverished Russian peasant who struggles to make ends meet as a shoemaker. Semyon feels oppressed by his financial hardships and resentful of his neighbors, whom he considers stingy and selfish when they are unable to pay their debts to him. At the same time, however, Semyon's own financial calculations make him similarly ungenerous. When he sees a helpless stranger, Mikhail, naked and freezing on the side of the road, his first response is not pity but defensiveness. He balks at the impossibility of providing for another person and convinces himself that he can't possibly be expected to help this man. Semyon feels so burdened by the situation that as he passes the suffering man, he says, "Please God, help me!" Almost immediately, he is hit by a wave of remorse. He is ashamed of his own conduct and decides to turn back and help the man. After this moment, Semyon's character changes in a major way. Not only does he begin to behave more selflessly, offering Mikhail food and a place to stay indefinitely, but he also seems to shed much of his financial worry. For example, after Semyon and his wife Matryona give Mikhail their last piece of **bread**, Matryona asks him how they will plan to feed their family the next day. Semyon responds with surprising equanimity, telling her not to worry about it, but that they'll get by some way or another. Semyon also urges his newfound selflessness onto Matryona, imploring her to act with the "love of God within" her and to extend hospitality to the stranger. After this change in Semyon's character, we never again see him worry about money. Although he still doesn't know where Mikhail came from or how he ended up by the side of the road, Semyon also seems to approach this lack of information with more peace and acceptance.

Mikhail – Mikhail is the strange man whom Semyon finds naked and freezing on the roadside. He later becomes an unofficial member of Matryona and Semyon's family, moving in with them and working as Semyon's shoemaking apprentice. From his very first appearance, Mikhail exudes a mysterious energy. Not only is he strong and uninjured (which strikes Semyon as strange, considering his very vulnerable position when he was out naked in the road), but he also refuses to explain how he ended up there, or to shed any light on his past in general. Indeed, over the course of the next six years, Mikhail divulges very little about himself. He is a hard worker and a very talented shoemaker who quickly masters everything that Semyon teaches him, but he remains quiet and serious, seeming to hold himself slightly apart from the rest of the family. That Mikhail only smiles three times—at seemingly odd moments and with a strange, private intensity—also increases his aura of mystery. Mikhail also seems to understand things that are not clear to the other characters. For instance, he knows to make the rich gentleman light slippers even before the man's death is announced. At the end of the story, Mikhail explains his mysterious presence by revealing himself to be an angel; having disobeying God, he was sent to earth in the form of a mortal to learn three lessons.

Matryona – At the beginning of the story, Semyon's wife Matryona is defined by many of the same worries and beliefs that shape her husband's character. When she is first introduced, she is absorbed in frugal financial calculations, simultaneously worrying that Semyon will be scammed by the sheepskin seller and trying to decide whether she can make the last piece of **bread** last for a few more days before baking a new one. When Semyon arrives home with a stranger in tow, Matryona initially reacts with the same selfish fear that her husband felt when he first passed Mikhail on the roadside. Given that she and Semyon have barely enough food for their family as it is, she finds the idea of feeding another hungry person inconceivable and nearly appalling. In fact, although similar thoughts ran through Semyon's head when he first saw Mikhail, Matryona's inclination toward selfishness (or self-

preservation) seems even more deeply-ingrained than Semyon's, as indicated by the vitriol with which she at first refuses to feed Mikhail and because when Mikhail himself later describes his first interaction with Matryona, he recalls that her selfishness was even more palpable and frightening than Semyon's had been. Like Semyon, however, Matryona undergoes a significant character change early in the story. The combination of her husband's religious entreaties and the pity-arousing sight of the tired stranger at her table together cause her heart to soften. That said, Matryona's newfound ethos of love and compassion proves slightly less steady than her husband's. That first night, after she and Semyon have fed Mikhail, Matryona seems to slightly regret their generosity, remarking that it seems they are always giving and never receiving. After chapter 4 of the story, Matryona becomes a significantly less important character in her own right. For the rest of the story, her views largely echo and duplicate Semyon's: they exhibit identical astonishment at the cruel rich gentleman, for example, and Matryona and Semyon seem to think with one mind when they interrogate Marya about the twins' origin story.

The Gentleman – The gentleman is a customer who comes to commission boots from Semyon after Mikhail's workmanship has given the business a good reputation. The gentleman is extremely well-fed and large—so large, in fact, that Semyon's measuring tape does not fit around his leg. The gentleman's size astounds Semyon and Matryona, who are very thin from never having quite enough to eat. And, beyond his powerful build, the rich gentleman's personality frightens Semyon and Matryona. He is rude and domineering, clearly used to having his way in all situations, and repeatedly threatens Semyon with severe repercussions if the boots do not meet his (impossibly high) standards. It also confuses and infuriates the gentleman that Mikhail is inexplicably smiling. And, although the gentleman clearly has more than enough money, he is remarkably ungenerous, offering to pay Semyon only half the value of the leather itself—and only if the boots last a whole year without losing their shape.

Marya – Marya is another customer of Semyon's. It turns out that she lived next door to the woman whose soul Mikhail was sent to take. Just a few days before the woman (Marya's neighbor) gave birth, her husband died in an accident; then, the woman herself died in childbirth and in the process of dying crushed the leg of one of the newborns. Marya found her neighbor dead beside her newborn twins, and because Marya had her own infant at the same time, she was able to nurse and care for the babies in the days after their mother died. At first, Marya planned only to nurse the healthy baby, figuring that the twin with the crippled leg would die soon anyway. However, she later had a change of heart, deciding to nurse both twins. Marya's biological son died as a toddler, which meant that the twins became her only children and the most important people in her life. Six years later, Marya comes with the twins to Semyon's shop to buy them shoes. there, she relates the story of how the girls came to be under her care. Marya is so moved by her love for the twins that, as she tells the story, she begins to cry.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MYSTERY

Tolstoy's "What Men Live By" abounds with mysteries and unanswered questions. When the shoemaker Semyon and his wife, Matryona, take in a naked stranger, Mikhail, they are unable to glean concrete information from the man about his past and identity. In addition to Mikhail's mysterious history, his behavior bewilders Semyon and Matryona: in the six years he lives with them, he smiles only three times. (Moreover, it is not clear to the couple what exactly prompts these rare and puzzling smiles.) Even though they don't understand Mikhail's origins or behavior, however, the couple accepts his mysterious presence in their lives, even coming to love him. And although at the end of the story Mikhail finally *does* reveal his identity as an angel—and explains to Semyon and Matryona the reason for his three smiles—the idea of mystery remains central to the moral that he delivers. Each of Mikhail's three life lessons in some way involves an open question—a crucial element of life that it is not "given" to men to know. Both Mikhail's presence and his lessons suggest that what people *don't* know is more significant for a life of love and faith than what they do know. Through his religious parable, then, the story suggests that living with mystery—that is, accepting what one doesn't know—is an essential part both of loving one's neighbors and of knowing God, because it forces people to live with greater trust and generosity than they would otherwise.

Through Semyon's relationship with Mikhail, the story suggests that love should not depend on perfect understanding. Semyon and Matryona don't know anything about Mikhail when they meet him, which at first disturbs them. When Semyon first encounters a cold and naked Mikhail outside of a church, he is frustrated by Mikhail's refusal to tell him where he is from. Semyon presses him with other questions, asking how he came to be by the side of the church and whether some men harmed him. When Mikhail also refuses to answer these questions concretely, Semyon finally accepts the lack of knowledge, conceding that "anything can happen in this world" and inviting the stranger to come home with him. In fact, after Mikhail has

been living at the shoemaker's for six years, Semyon "th[inks] the world of his workman and no longer inquire[s] where he [is] from." Semyon's decision to love and care for Mikhail, then, seems to operate in tandem with his decision not to push him further on elements of his past, and instead to accept the man in spite of his mysteries.

For Matryona, too, loving Mikhail means accepting a lack of knowledge about him. After the angel refuses to answer her questions, she, like her husband, gives up and decides to love him despite his mysteries. Although Matryona, on the first night, voices a slight concern about Mikhail's mysterious identity, pointing out that he "seems to be a good man, only he doesn't tell us anything about himself," after this moment, the couple entirely stop pressing Mikhail on his past. The next day, in fact, Semyon gives Mikhail explicit permission not to reveal anything about himself, as long as he will work to earn his keep. Over the course of the next six years, as Mikhail becomes a full-fledged member of the family, Semyon and Matryona's attitude toward him becomes both more loving and more accepting of his mystery.

Beyond its lesson about accepting and loving mysterious *people*, the story also suggests that it is important to have faith in the world's mysterious processes. Things tend to work out in mysterious ways, and it is unproductive to try to predict or control the future. One example of this is Matryona's initial worry about feeding her family: after giving the last slice of **bread** to the stranger, Matryona worries aloud to Semyon about how she will get food the next day. Semyon does not provide a concrete answer but instead says vaguely that he is sure they'll get by and won't starve. This mysterious premonition of Semyon's comes true: not only does Matryona manage to borrow bread from the neighbor the next day, but Mikhail's help in the shoe business means that the family actually faces far less insecurity as time goes on. Later, the story presents another lesson in trusting life's mysterious processes. As Matryona watches Mikhail cut the leather for the gentleman's boots, she is mystified and concerned to see that he is cutting the leather for soft slippers rather than firm boots. However, she does not interfere, trusting Mikhail's expertise. A few minutes later, this mystery also resolves itself better than anyone could have guessed: the rich gentleman's servant returns to the shop to tell them that the man has died unexpectedly and will now need soft slippers instead of hard boots. In both cases, the family's inexplicable good fortune suggests that people should accept the world's (or God's) mysterious workings rather than worrying or trying to create a certain outcome.

Finally, Mikhail's lessons at the end of the story explicitly explain the importance of mystery and the unknown. Mikhail explains that the episode with the gentleman's shoes taught him the second of God's truths: "*what is not given to man*." Since all people are mortal, they face a fundamental mystery about when and how they will die—and for this reason, it is useless to try to predict what one will need a year from now. Mikhail also explains *why* God forces people to live in darkness about this fundamental part of life: if God showed each person exactly what they needed, people would not have to help one another. Instead, God forces people to lean on one another and face the mystery of mortality with each other's help. Mikhail's lessons suggest that what God *doesn't* allow people to know is actually more important than what He *does* allow them to know, because mystery forces people both to love more generously and to rely on one another. The story's commentary on mysterious people and mysterious processes likewise suggests that people who have faith even in the face of uncertainty will be rewarded.

RATIONALITY VS. GENEROSITY

In Tolstoy's "What Men Live By," characters frequently engage in rational thinking and cold calculation as a way of dealing with hardship. The shoemaker Semyon and his wife Matryona, for example, spend much of the story's first chapters engaging in elaborate mental calculations and justifications concerning their own poverty. They attempt to use reason and rational judgment both to determine how much they can "afford" to share with others and to defend their acts of selfishness. Marya and the angel Mikhail fall prey to this kind of logical reasoning in other ways, too—in Marya's case when determining which infant twin to feed, and in Mikhail's case when evaluating the dying mother's plea. For all four characters, however, true prosperity and happiness are ultimately reached by eschewing logical reasoning altogether. It is only when the characters act *irrationally*—from pure love instead of material calculation—that they can treat each other with true generosity. And, counterintuitively, acts of irrational generosity lead the characters to flourish materially as well as spiritually.

Semyon's mindset at the beginning of the story draws a strong correlation between rationality and selfishness. Rational calculation prevents real generosity: when Semyon first encounters a cold and naked Mikhail on the roadside, logical consideration of his own resources is what keeps him from stopping to help the stranger. Semyon has just spent much of the journey home working himself into a frenzy about his own poverty relative to his neighbors', so the thought of helping someone else feels burdensome, aggravating, and (he tells himself) physically impossible. He also convinces himself that it would be foolhardy to approach the stranger lest he should be mistaken for a bad actor and get into some kind of legal trouble. It is only when a prick of conscience quiets these rational arguments that Semyon turns back to help the stranger. In this case, then, rationality must be overcome before generosity can occur.

Likewise, at the beginning of the story, Matryona's selfishness is

tied to her obsessive calculation of resources—but denying her impulse to be selfish actually brings her family *more* resources. Matryona's fear for her family's material well-being is manifested in her nervous computations about how to make their small supply of **bread** last. This same rational fear is what keeps her from sharing food with the stranger, Mikhail, that her husband brings home. Indeed, even after Matryona has softened toward Mikhail and she has given him the last piece of bread, her old rational attitude remains tied up with greed and stinginess. As they are falling asleep, she asks Semyon how they are possibly going to get more bread for their family. And with this rational worry comes a return of bitterness, resentment, and greed: she asks Semyon why they are always helping other people and no one ever helps them. For both Matryona and Semyon, rational worries are centered on their impoverished family's well-being. And yet their irrational choice to take in Mikhail actually ends up alleviating their poverty: because of Mikhail's workmanship, Semyon's shoe business flourishes, and the family has more money than they did before. In this sense, the story suggests that letting go of rationality and embracing irrational generosity may actually solve the problems that rational thinking attempted (and failed) to resolve.

The story that Marya shares with the family has a similar message: that choosing irrational generosity over rational calculation can pay huge dividends. When Marya first started taking care of her adopted daughters (a pair of orphaned twins) rationality governed her behavior. She did not choose to take in the twins because of genuine compassion but instead because she was the only person in the village who could breastfeed (because she already had a breastfeeding infant). The men of the village asked her to look after the girls until another arrangement could be found. What's more, Marya recalls that she feared that she wouldn't have enough milk to feed both twins and her own son, and so—rationally reasoning that the crippled twin wouldn't live long anyway—she decided to feed only the healthy twin. But a twinge of irrational pity, similar to the one Semyon experienced on the roadside, caused Marya to change her course of action and begin feeding both twins. Not only did the specific problem she feared—that of not having enough milk—fail to occur (she recalls that God gave her "so much milk that it filled [her] breasts to overflowing"), but her generosity also paid off in ways that her rational calculation couldn't have predicted. Her own son died in infancy, and so the two adoptive daughters allowed Marya to still have the large and happy family that she wanted.

Mikhail's story about his banishment from heaven provides yet another argument against rational reasoning. Mikhail describes how, when he encountered the twins' mother on her death bed, he was convinced by her rational argument. She begged him not to take her soul, reasoning that since she had no family members and her husband had just died, her babies would die if she did. Mikhail agreed with the woman's assessment and told God he couldn't bear to take the woman's soul. As a punishment for disobeying Him, God sent Mikhail down to earth, and there, Mikhail saw that the woman's rational argument had been incorrect: the children survived, Mikhail eventually understood, because of the irrational generosity of strangers. In this way, Mikhail's story is a lesson about rationality: it was not "given" to the mother to know (or predict rationally) what her children needed to survive, and, Mikhail expands, it is not "given" to anyone to know rationally what they themselves will need in the future. In this way, the limits of rational, intentional planning are what require mortal men to depend on each other and on the irrational generosity of strangers.

SELFLESS LOVE

As its several biblical epigraphs foretell, Tolstoy's "What Men Live By" is fundamentally a parable about Christian love, as it strives to show that God is manifested in people's selfless compassion toward one another. This idea is advanced in part by the characters' fates: those who are greedy and selfish are punished, while those who love each other selflessly are rewarded. However, it is also supported by the protagonists' emotional experiences: at key moments throughout the story, various characters experience a sudden change of heart, deciding to act out of love and compassion rather than selfishness and fear. Whenever these inner changes occur, the characters are flooded with feelings of inexplicable joy and happiness. The three lessons elaborated by the angel Mikhail at the end of the story further contribute to the story's point about Christian love. Although each part of Mikhail's story illustrates a slightly different spiritual truth, the three components together drive home the general point that "what men live by" is not physical nourishment but divine love.

Throughout the story, bad outcomes await characters who are greedy. At the beginning of the story, Semyon and Matryona have a strict budget, but this doesn't get them anywhere: even after saving money for a year, they don't have enough to buy a winter **coat**. This begins to suggest that self-interest isn't rewarding, even if looking out for oneself rather than sharing with others seems like the most practical option. An even more extreme example of selfishness is the gentleman who visits Semyon's shop midway through the story. This gentleman represents the antithesis of selfless love: he is obsessed with his own financial interests, determined to pay only 10 rubles for a pair of boots that will last an entire year without showing any signs of wear. He is also cruel, snapping at Mikhail, yelling at his servant, and threatening to put Semyon in jail if his boots do not meet impossibly high standards. This rich gentleman is met with one of the worst fates in the story: an early and unexpected death. The man's stingy management of his own money yields nothing for him: he is unable to enjoy the expensive boots for even one day, much less a whole year.

By contrast, acting with selfless love is shown to be emotionally rewarding and even draws characters closer to God. For example, when Semyon and Matryona feed Mikhail their last slice of **bread**—acting lovingly, selflessly, and in fact against their own financial interests—they find prosperity. This simple act of kindness leads them to take Mikhail in, and Mikhail's knack for shoemaking ends up drawing unprecedented levels of business and financial security to the family over the next several years. Moreover, when Semyon first encounters Mikhail on the roadside, he feels bitter and angry. However, once he goes over to help the naked man, his "heart fill[s] with joy." Matryona experiences a similar flooding of good emotions when she decides to show compassion for Mikhail. Her feelings of anger and resentment vanish as soon as she decides to feed and care for Mikhail: her heart "melts," and she immediately resolves to "banish her spiteful feelings." For Marya, too, selfless love brings emotional fulfillment: the twins she adopted have become "the apples of her eye," and her love for them even moves her to tears. She realizes that she would have been much lonelier and more unhappy if she didn't have the twins to love and care for. Through these transformations, the story suggests that selfless love is what imbues life with happiness and meaning.

Finally, Mikhail's lessons at the end of the story point to selfless love as the most important divine truth. The first divine truth that Mikhail learned—"*what dwells in man*"—explicitly concerns selfless love. The angel describes how, when Matryona and Semyon were acting selfishly, their faces appeared terrifying to him because he could see death in their expressions. By contrast, once they started to behave selfishly and lovingly, he could see God and life in their faces. This showed Mikhail the answer to the first question, what dwells in man: the answer, he says, is love. The third and most important divine truth—"what men live by"—also concerns selfless love. Mikhail recalls that when he was abandoned by the side the chapel, he didn't survive through any actions or bravery of his own. Instead, it was a stranger's love that allowed him to survive. Likewise, he points out that baby twins were saved by a stranger's love—that of Marya, their birth mother's neighbor. Mikhail also connects this truth to the episode with the wealthy gentleman, who did not know his own future. Mikhail says that God wants people to help one another and love selflessly, which is why He does not show each person what they themselves needs, but instead what all people need. With this, the story suggests that selfless love is the essence of life itself, and that honoring God means extending unconditional love and generosity to other people.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BREAD

Bread, which characters share with one another throughout the story, symbolizes the reciprocal nature of generosity. Matryona spends the beginning of the story deliberating about whether to bake her family another loaf of bread or try to make the one they have last. So, when Semyon comes home with Mikhail and suggests that they feed him dinner, Matryona is incensed—she doesn't believe they can afford to part with any food given that they have so little. But when Semyon asks if there is "no love of God within [her]," Matryona softens and shares their last piece of bread with Mikhail. In the Bible, communally breaking bread is an act of fellowship and represents sharing in God's divine love, so Matryona's decision to break bread with Mikhail despite her family's hunger represents a symbolic shift within her from selfishness and spiritual corruption to selflessness and godliness.

Though Matryona frets about their family going hungry after this and resentfully wonders why people never help them in return, the next day, a neighbor shares some bread with them. The fact that Matryona's selfless gesture toward Mikhail is seemingly rewarded with another selfless gesture is an example of the old adage that "God helps those who help themselves"—or, in this case, God helps those who help other people. In other words, the sharing of bread represents the idea that those who extend love and generosity to others are emulating the "love of God," and that they will be rewarded in the long term for this, even if they go without in the short term.

COATS

Semyon and Matryona's coats represent the idea that while selfishness may seem necessary and prudent, it is also destructive for both the person who needs help and the person who refuses to help. At the beginning of the story, Semyon and his wife, Matryona, are so poor that they can only afford one winter coat between them. The two of them are single-mindedly focused on scraping together enough money for sheepskin to make a second coat—but Semyon's neighbors (who are similarly poor) refuse to pay the money they owe him or to allow him to buy the sheepskin on credit, which makes him resentful. Initially, then, the couple's fixation on a new coat represents their self-centered mindset, which seems logical and necessary to them as they struggle to survive the frigid Russian winter. But their inability to get the coat because of other people's stinginess shows how this same pragmatic selfishness can hurt other people.

Then, as Semyon is walking home wearing the couple's shared coat with one of Matryona's thin jackets layered on top, he finds Mikhail naked outside in the cold. After much internal debate, he decides to take off Matryona's jacket and give it to this stranger in need. When Semyon brings Mikhail home,

Matryona berates him for giving up her jacket and tries to rip it off of Mikhail—but she tears the sleeve in the process, rendering the garment useless. This outcome—in which Mikhail's only source of warmth is taken away from him, and Matryona's selfishness destroys the very thing that was important to her—again shows that selfishness (even when motivated by practical concerns) hurts both those who need help and those who refuse to give it.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *How Much Land Does a Man Need? and Other Stories* published in 1994.

Chapter 1 Quotes

"And if he doesn't throttle me I might get lumbered with looking after him. But how can I help a naked man? I couldn't let him have the last shirt off my back.

Related Characters: Semyon (speaker), Mikhail

Related Themes:

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Semyon has just passed a naked man (later revealed to be an angel named Mikhail) sitting outside the chapel and has decided not to help him. He is trying to convince himself that he made the right choice in abandoning the stranger, first by telling himself that the man might be violent or dangerous.

It is the second part of Semyon's justification, however, that reveals what he is *really* afraid of: being "lumbered with" caring for the man. When Semyon admits this part of his concern to himself, he immediately goes down another path of justification, reminding himself of his own poverty and telling himself that he does not have enough to share with someone else. Indeed, he phrases the idea of giving the man his shirt as though it's an impossibility rather than an inconvenience. Semyon's previous dealings with the villagers have already shown how people use professions of impossibility to justify selfishness: one of Semyon's debtors told him that he couldn't "possibly" get together more than 20 rubles. And here, Semyon himself uses the same justification, convincing himself that he literally *can't* help his neighbor when the truth is that he doesn't *want* to.

But, of course, Semyon *could* (and later *does*) help Mikhail. His reluctance here speaks to the idea that people—especially those who are struggling themselves—tend to rationalize their selfishness. But that fact that Semyon thinks of giving the stranger "the last shirt off [his] back" at all suggests that generosity is a natural impulse that people have to talk themselves out of, rather than an unnatural impulse that people have to talk themselves into.

"'Please God, help me!'

Related Characters: Semyon (speaker), Mikhail

Related Themes:

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

Semyon utters this plea as he passes the naked and freezing man (later revealed to be the angel Mikhail) on the roadside. He has just reasoned that he can't possibly be expected to help this man when he is already so hard-pressed to keep his own family alive. The plea draws attention to Semyon's self-interested view: although Semyon is a poor peasant who is undoubtedly struggling, he is not the one naked and freezing on the roadside. Yet he sees *himself* as the true victim of the situation (and the person in need of God's help).

In asking for divine intervention, Semyon clearly means an intervention that will allow him not to be burdened with caring for another person. This does not happen; in fact, as soon as Semyon asks God for help, he feels a twinge of conscience that sends him back to help the suffering man. Yet the rest of the story suggests that this change of heart *was* God helping Semyon. Not only does the naked man ultimately lift the family out of poverty, but he also shows Semyon and his wife how to live in a happier and more spiritually fulfilling way. In this way, the story suggests that people are rewarded when they act generously (even if doing so seems irrational) rather than clinging to rational selfishness.

Chapter 3 Quotes

"[Matryona's] heart seemed to melt and she felt that she wanted to banish all those spiteful feelings and to find out who that man really was.

Related Characters: Matryona, Mikhail, Semyon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

This moment occurs at the height of Matryona's angry outburst, after she has refused to feed the stranger (Mikhail) and even ripped her jacket off of Semyon's body. Just as Semyon had a sudden change of heart after he passed Mikhail on the road, in this moment, Matryona has a similar change of heart and decides to abandon her feelings both of anger and rationalized selfishness.

The passage demonstrates one of the story's key truths, which is that selfless love is beneficial not only to those who receive it but also to those who give it. People feel more joyful and closer to God when they love others selflessly. Even in this moment of transition, Matryona feels better when she acts with love than with spite, as she actively wants to banish the angry feelings. Moreover, compassion is associated with a pleasant sensation of warmth—her heart "melts" in contrast to the coldness associated with selfishness and fear.

This passage also connects to the idea of Mikhail's aura of mystery. Even though Semyon and Matryona ultimately must learn to love Mikhail in spite of what they don't know about him, Matryona's change of heart is marked by a new desire for information about the stranger. This suggests that a desire to know more about our mysterious neighbors can sometimes prompt greater generosity and love.

Chapter 4 Quotes

"We're always giving, but why does nobody ever give *us* anything?'

Related Characters: Matryona (speaker), Mikhail, Semyon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

Matryona asks Semyon this question as they are trying to fall asleep on the first night after they have taken in Mikhail. They have given the stranger their last piece of bread, and Matryona is worried about how they will manage to feed their children the next day. Although Matryona has moved past her initial fury and taken pity on the stranger, this quote shows that she still harbors some doubts about the choice.

The quote draws attention to a crucial difference between truly selfless and loving acts of generosity versus acts of generosity that are based on rational thought and expect some kind of reciprocity in the future. This second kind of generosity is proven throughout the story to be not only less divine (that is, further away from emulating God's love) than real selflessness, but also to be largely unhelpful. For example, Semyon's generosity in letting villagers buy shoes on credit did not lead to reciprocal generosity on their part. Indeed, earlier in the story, Semyon's commentary as he is walking back from his unsuccessful day in the village echoes the sentiment of Matryona's question here. "Well, what about me?" he asks, recalling his kindness to his neighbors and bemoaning the fact that it hasn't been returned.

The story comes down firmly on such self-interested calculation of generosity. It is only when characters entirely stop expecting to be repaid for their acts of kindness that God rewards them for these actions.

Chapter 6 Quotes

Mikhail kept staring until suddenly he smiled and his whole face lit up.

'What are you grinning at, idiot?' the gentleman asked. 'You'd better see to it that the boots are ready on time!'

Related Characters: The Gentleman (speaker), Mikhail, Semyon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs during the wealthy gentleman's visit to the Semyon's shoe shop. Mikhail's general aura of mystery—and his refusal to bow and scrape—is very upsetting to the gentleman, whose irritation reaches a peak when Mikhail smiles seemingly without reason.

The gentleman's angry and flustered reaction to this moment suggests that the gentleman feels threatened by Mikhail's smile. Although the gentleman exudes physical and financial power, in this moment, he seems to feel that Mikhail is in some way more powerful than he is. Indeed, at the end of the story, it's revealed that this is exactly the case. Mikhail is actually an angel on an earthly mission, so he

has access to a power of knowledge that is greater than the gentleman's physical and financial power.

Moreover, the gentleman's final command to Mikhail ironically foreshadows the man's death. Although the gentleman's injunction to have the boots ready on time is first and foremost an attempt to reassert his authority—to remind Mikhail of who is employing whom—it also predicts the dramatic twist of the gentleman suddenly dying later in the story. Mikhail will indeed have the gentleman's footwear prepared with eerie punctuality, as the shoes he makes for the gentleman will already be ready by the time the gentleman's servant arrives to announce that his employer has died. The man's presumptuousness and ignorance of his own death imparts one of the story's core lessons: that when and how people will die is a mystery to them, and that because of this reality, people shouldn't try to control or predict what will happen to them.

Chapter 7 Quotes

"Matryona went over to watch Mikhail working and was amazed to see what he was doing.

Related Characters: Matryona, Mikhail, The Gentleman, Semyon, Marya

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

This scene immediately follows the rude gentleman's visit to Semyon's shop. In spite of the gentleman's many warnings about what will happen if the shoes are not made to his liking, Matryona realizes that Mikhail seems to be making them entirely wrong—and ruining the gentleman's expensive leather. Matryona's amazement in this moment connects to many other passages in the story. Semyon and Matryona often feel "amazed" by Mikhail—whether it is by his refusal to divulge information about himself, his total lack of work experience, or his strange behavior toward Marya's daughters. That they feel so awed and baffled by him is part of what creates Mikhail's air of strangeness and mystery.

However, Matryona's decision not to say anything to Mikhail in this moment—in spite of the fact that she is quite sure he is making an error—demonstrates how her attitude toward Mikhail's mysteriousness has changed. Now, instead of feeling resentful toward what she doesn't know about him, Matryona trusts Mikhail's judgment more than her own. She is right to do so: the episode with the gentleman's slippers—in which Mikhail seems in possession of advanced knowledge of the man's death—is one of the first moments in the story that hint that Mikhail is a divine being rather than a mortal man. With this, the story suggests that mysteries (particularly those pertaining to God) are a natural part of life, and that people should trust and accept people and things they don't understand rather than trying to make sense of them or control them.

Chapter 9 Quotes

"I was young, strong and well-nourished and God gave me so much milk that it filled my breasts to overflowing. Sometimes I'd feed two at one time, with the third waiting, and when one had had its fill, I'd put the third to my breast. But it was God's will that I should nurse these little girls and bury my own child before he was two years old."

Related Characters: Marya (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

These lines occur in the middle of Marya's story about how she came to be the twins' adoptive mother. She has just explained that the men of the town asked her to nurse the orphaned twins temporarily since she was the only woman in the village who had a newborn of her own. However, Marya's feelings for the twins soon grew from mere pity and obligation to genuine love.

Marya's story highlights several of the story's most important central ideas. For one thing, the passage shows again that the world has mysterious processes (e.g., Marya's unbelievable abundance of breastmilk), and that good things will come to people who are generous and love each other selflessly. These mysterious developments can be read as an argument against rational reasoning; had Marya followed her logical intuition and assumed that she wouldn't have enough milk to feed three babies, she might have let the injured twin die.

Marya's attitude toward her own son's death is another significant aspect of the quote. She seems to approach this tragic mystery of her life with the same trust and peace that she showed toward the joyful mystery of the twins' arrival in her life. In fact, she refers to both of these mysteries in one breath, calling both her sons' death and the twins' survival elements of God's will.

Marya's relatively unbothered attitude toward her own son's death—she mentioned in the previous chapter that she never loved him as much as she now loves the twins—is a further endorsement of radical generosity and selfless love. Even the love of a mother for her biological child, this suggests, pales in comparison to the mysterious and divine joy that people experience when they behave selflessly toward those in need.

Chapter 10 Quotes

"'Children cannot live without a father or mother,' she pleaded. So I did not take that woman's soul."

Related Characters: Mikhail (speaker), Marya, The Gentleman

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Mikhail is telling the story of how he disobeyed God. When he was instructed to kill the birth mother of Marya's adopted twin daughters, the woman begged him not to take her soul, reasoning that her baby daughters would die without parents to care for them. Mikhail erred in trusting her reasoning: actually, as he learns once he lives on earth, parental love is *not* "what men live by."

Indeed, in several places throughout the story, there's a similar ambivalence toward parental love. While providing for one's children is perhaps not *quite* as selfish as providing for oneself alone (as, for example, the rich gentleman does), Mikhail still suggests that a concern for one's own family does not count as selfless love. Matryona's obsessive worrying about the last piece of bread, for example, seems to stem from parental instincts at least as much as from strictly selfish ones. However, such concerns still form part of her selfish mindset (before her transformation to selflessness), as this prevents her from extending help to people outside of her family unit. In the same vein, part of what makes Marya's love for the adoptive twin daughters so selfless and miraculous is that she claims to love them even *more* than she ever loved her biological son.

Chapter 11 Quotes

"And I could hear this man wondering how to protect his body from the winter cold and feed his wife and children. And I thought, 'I am perishing with cold and hunger, but here is someone whose only thought is how to find a warm coat for himself and his wife, and food for his family.'"

Related Characters: Mikhail (speaker), Semyon, Matryona, The Gentleman

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mikhail retells the story of his initial meeting with Semyon (which took place in Chapter 2) from his own perspective. Semyon was walking along the road ranting angrily about his greedy neighbors and his own hardships. Although in Semyon's mind, fear for his impoverished family and selfishness were not explicitly connected, Mikhail's memory of the moment draws a clear link between the two feelings. Worrying about one's own well-being, he shows, is one step away from refusing help to a neighbor in need (even if that worry also extends to one's family). In fact, Mikhail remembers despairing, as he was freezing and starving to death, that he could not expect help from someone so wrapped up in concerns about himself and his own family.

The passage also underscores the link that the story draws between rational reasoning and suffering or death. Whereas Mikhail remembers seeing life in Matryona and Semyon's faces when they treated him with selfless love, in their moments of rational calculation and anxiety about the future, their faces bore the "stamp of death." This thematic connection is also exhibited in the episode with the selfish gentleman. Not only does the gentleman meet an early and dramatic death—which Mikhail was able to see looming in advance—but he is also one of the story's most selfish characters, focusing great attention on his own future. So, this suggests that selfishness hurts the person denying help as much as (or even more than) the person who needs help. And, conversely, extending selflessness and generosity to others enriches both the person in need of help and the person offering the help.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ 'I came to understand that God does not wish men to live apart and that is why He does not reveal to each man what he needs for himself alone.'

Related Characters: Mikhail (speaker), The Gentleman

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs at the very end of the story, as Mikhail is expounding on the three lessons he learned on Earth. Two of the three lessons—"*what dwells in man*" and the titular "*what men live by*"—are essentially lessons about love. Love is "what dwells in man," meaning that people are fundamentally loving because they were created in God's image, and God is fundamentally loving. Love is also "what men live by," meaning that it is the guiding principle of human life and is what brings people happiness and purpose. The remaining lesson (the second chronologically) is about the uncertainty of mortality: it is "*not given to men*" to know when or how they—or their loved ones—will die.

However, it is not until this moment that Mikhail draws together these two larger ideas (love and mystery). Here, he explains that selfless love is connected to mystery because mystery requires people to rely on one another's help, and the mystery of mortality also joins all people in a common uncertainty. Anyone who thinks they can predict the future—such as the wealthy gentleman and the twins' mother in the story—will be proven wrong. All people can really know is their most fundamental need, which is selfless love and generosity from one another.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

A Russian peasant named Semyon lives with his wife and children in a tiny cottage on rented land: he has "neither house nor land of his own." Although Semyon uses all his earnings to support his family, they still live in poverty because food is expensive and his work as a shoemaker isn't lucrative. The family is so poor that Semyon and his wife have to share a winter **coat**, and even this coat is in bad shape; they have been saving for two whole years to buy sheepskins for a new one. At last, Semyon believes that he has enough money: he and his wife have saved three rubles, and various villagers owe him money adding up to five more. Semyon puts his wife's lightweight jacket on top of his own and heads for town to buy the sheepskins.

The story's opening description of Semyon and his wife's struggles characterize them as focused solely on rational, practical matters—namely, having enough to eat and staying warm. Semyon is not a member of the Russian landowning class. Instead, he is a peasant, meaning he belongs to the largely illiterate, uneducated, and impoverished class of serfs (essentially indentured servants working on borrowed land). Semyon's troubles begin to suggest that it's nearly impossible it is for this class of person to get by: he is neither lazy nor a reckless spender, but he still lives in poverty because of forces beyond his control.

When he reaches the village, Semyon tries to collect the money he is owed. The first of his debtors isn't home, but his wife promises Semyon that her husband will bring him the money by the end of the week. The second of his debtors says that he has hit hard times and can't possibly scrape together more than 20 kopeks now. Semyon takes his savings to the sheepskin dealer and asks if he can pay the rest of the sum later, once his debtors give him what they owe. But the dealer refuses to give Semyon the sheepskins until he can pay in full, saying that "We all know how hard it is to collect what's owing to us."

Semyon's dealings with the villagers show that many of Semyon's neighbors live in poverty similar to his own. It also shows that everyone is attempting to deal with their poverty rationally: through stingy spending, cool calculation, and narrow focus on self-interest. However, this calculating approach to poverty—which leads Semyon's second debtor to explain that he can't scrape together enough to pay what he owes—leaves Semyon in a financial impasse, since the sheepskin dealer refuses to let him *buy the skins on credit. Everyone in the village is poor, and yet in spite of this common state of deprivation, people act with very little compassion for one another. Each person is so wrapped up in his or her own rational calculations that generosity seems impossible.*

Depressed by his inability to procure the sheepskins, Semyon spends the 20 kopeks on vodka. As he walks home, he rambles drunkenly to himself. First he observes that the vodka has warmed him up so nicely that maybe he doesn't need a new **coat** after all. But then he thinks of his wife, realizing that she will be angry with him for failing to get the sheepskins (and for squandering money on vodka). Finally, he grumbles about the stinginess of his neighbors: they all say they can't pay because they're short on cash, but what about Semyon's *own* financial woes? Considering his various debtors' financial situations, he comes to the bitter conclusion that he is actually poorer than all of them.

Semyon drinks to numb his pain, which emphasizes how difficult his life is and how impossible a solution feels. Yet Semyon's idea that alcohol can substitute for a new coat is selfish—after a moment, he realizes that the vodka in his own body won't warm his wife.Thinking about his wife, however, leads Semyon to imagine her anger at his failure. Then he, in turn, feels angry toward his stingy neighbors, given that he's helped them in the past by allowing them to buy shoes on credit. This assessment leads Semyon to feel more embittered, and possibly even to regret his past generosity.

As Semyon is engaged in these resentful calculations, he passes a church on the side of the road. He sees a strange shape leaning against the wall. At first he thinks it is a stone or a cow, but then he realizes that it is a naked man. Semyon can't tell if this stranger is dead or alive, and he speculates that perhaps someone has murdered the man, taken off his clothing, and left his body behind the church. Immediately, Semyon begins to worry about what would happen to him if someone saw him here. He worries that he would somehow get involved in—or blamed for—the situation. He resolves to get away from the man quickly.

Semyon's reaction to the sight of a suffering person on the roadside is a continuation of his self-pity and self-absorption. His first thought, recognizing that this person may be dead or seriously injured, is not pity or compassion, but instead fear for himself lest he should get unfairly blamed. It seems that Semyon's struggles—and people's selfishness toward him—have emotionally hardened him and made him selfish in turn.

Looking over his shoulder one last time, however, Semyon notices that the stranger is moving. He wonders if he should go back and help, but he convinces himself that this would be a bad idea. For one thing, the man might be crazy or violent. And for another thing, even if he doesn't physically harm Semyon, he might ask him for food or clothing. Semyon has nothing to spare; surely he can't be expected to give this stranger the shirt off his own back. "Please God, help me!" Semyon says to himself, continuing to hasten away.

Semyon considers the suffering stranger with the same coldly calculating, rational mentality that his debtors and the sheepskin dealer exhibited toward him (when they said that it was "impossible" to pay him his debts or let him buy the skins on credit). Semyon himself also used this kind of mathematical calculation to tabulate his neighbors' fortunes compared to his own, even though it's clear that they're all struggling. Now he uses the same kind of reasoning to convince himself about why he both can't and shouldn't help the stranger. Yet Semyon's plea with God to help him is a sign that he feels guilty and unsure of his decision.

Just as the church is about to disappear from Semyon's view, his "conscience beg[ins] to prick him." He stops suddenly and reproaches himself for his callousness. Is he really going to leave this stranger to die alone? He asks himself sarcastically if he has become so rich that he is scared the man will rob him. Feeling suddenly ashamed of himself, he turns back toward the naked stranger.

Semyon undergoes a sudden and mysterious change of heart immediately after he asks God for help. Although he presumably meant for God to help him by getting him out of this difficult situation, God actually helps Semyon by sending him this prick of conscience and compelling him to love this person selflessly. The fact that Semyon has this revelation without God saying anything explicitly to him suggests that selfless love is a natural impulse, but that difficult circumstances (like those Semyon is facing) can bury this impulse beneath cold rationality and self-interest.

CHAPTER 2

Getting closer to the stranger, Semyon sees that he looks young, healthy, and uninjured. As Semyon approaches, the naked man seems to "wake as if from a trance." He looks at Semyon, and something about his gaze suddenly inspires Semyon to take off his **jacket** and give it to the man. Semyon helps the man to his feet and is surprised to find that he needs no help getting up. He actually seems perfectly strong and bears no visible wounds.

Semyon immediately notices something very odd and mysterious about the stranger. Not only does he seem perfectly healthy—which is unexpected in light of his vulnerable position—but something in his gaze affects Semyon almost magically, compelling him to act without thinking rationally.

Semyon reaches to take his hat off his head and give it to the stranger. But his head feels cold, and he reasons that the young man has a full head of hair, while Semyon himself is bald. He decides to give the stranger his boots instead of his hat. The man looks at Semyon tenderly but appears unable to speak. Walking down the road with the stranger, Semyon is once again surprised by the man's strength and speed.

Although Semyon has decided to help the stranger, his generosity still contains elements both of rational calculation and self-interest.He decides not to give the stranger his hat because he reasons that he himself needs it more. However, so that he can still feel that he is being generous, he gives the man his boots. In this way, even when Semyon is being generous, he is still motivated by selfishness. Meanwhile, as the men begin to walk together, Semyon is again mystified by the stranger's seemingly good health.

As they walk, Semyon asks the stranger where he is from. The man responds vaguely that he is "not from these parts." Then Semyon asks how he ended up behind the church, and the man replies that he cannot tell Semyon that. Next, Semyon asks if someone harmed the man, and the man responds that no one harmed him; it was God who punished him. Semyon asks if the man has somewhere to go, and the man says he doesn't. So, Semyon invites the man to come home with him.

The mystery of the man's wound-free body is made still stranger by Semyon's conversation with him: the man refuses to answer even very simple questions about himself. In fact, he claims that he is unable *to tell Semyon what happened to him. Rather than continuing to press the stranger, Semyon impulsively decides to help the man regardless of who he is or what happened to him. It seems that his compassion for the stranger has usurped his usual rational mode of thinking and his desire for answers.*

Continuing on the road with the stranger, Semyon begins to feel cold. He starts to think again about his unsuccessful expedition: not only did he fail to acquire materials for a new **coat**, but he is actually returning home wearing one jacket *fewer* than when he left (since the stranger is now wearing one). He recognizes that his wife will be angry with him, and he feels depressed by this thought. When he looks at the stranger beside him, however, he feels inexplicably joyful.

The physical sensation of coldness returns Semyon temporarily to his emotionally "cold" and calculating mindset. However, looking at the stranger makes Semyon's worries melt away. Thinking rationally is depressing, while irrational generosity is enlivening. For Semyon, the spiritual warmth of selfless love outweighs the physical discomfort of having one jacket fewer.

CHAPTER 3

While Semyon has been out of the house, his wife, Matryona, has spent the day completing various household chores. While she waits for her husband to return, she sits at the kitchen table trying to decide whether she should bake another loaf of **bread** or try to make the final slice of the old loaf last for a few more days. She carefully considers several factors and decides that it will be better for the family to economize and save their flour, which is running out.

In Matryona's daily routine consists of nervous rationalization brought to an extreme, as she seems to be constantly making tables of pros and cons in her head. Her frugality reinforces the idea that Matryona and Semyon's poverty is through no fault of their own; they are actually very careful spenders.

As Matryona mends one of Semyon's shirts, her thoughts turn to her husband. She worries that Semyon — whom she considers very gullible — will have been swindled by the sheepskin salesman. She remembers how difficult it was to endure the winter last year without a warm **coat** of her own. With resentment, she also observes that when Semyon left for the village that morning, he took her jacket in addition to his own, leaving her nothing to wear for the whole day. Finally, she wonders why Semyon still hasn't returned and hopes he hasn't gone drinking.

In some ways, Matryona seems greedy and resentful in this passage. She is extremely worried about getting scammed, for example, and she seems to expect that Semyon will let her down. However, Matryona is also portrayed as a sympathetic character given the way poverty shapes her daily life. In this way, while the story doesn't excuse Matryona's self-interest and bitterness, it suggests that this mindset is natural for someone in Matryona's position.

Just then, Semyon and the stranger arrive home. Matryona smells the alcohol on her husband's breath, and she immediately realizes that he has spent the money on vodka. She is also affronted by her husband's impudence in bringing this complete stranger to their house. Her anger grows still stronger when she sees that the stranger is wearing her husband's **coat** and is naked underneath it. Furthermore, she distrusts the stranger because of his silence and his habit of averting his eyes.

When Semyon arrives home with the naked stranger and no coat, Matryona is angry for all the reasons he expected. Moreover, Matryona's distrust of Mikhail because of his silence and perceived aloofness suggests that for people who are highly rational and calculating, mystery is very upsetting.

Semyon suggests that they all have dinner. He can tell by Matryona's body language that she is upset with him, but he believes that there is nothing he can do about this and pretends not to notice it. He offers food to the stranger and then turns to Matryona, asking her what they will be having for dinner. At this, Matryona loses her temper. She lambasts her husband for failing to buy the sheepskins, getting drunk, wasting their money, and bringing home a "tramp." She reminds him of similar episodes in the past, including when he sold all of her mother's linen to buy vodka.

Matryona expresses the itemized list of grievances that had been building internally. Semyon anticipated most of her complaints, but she also references an episode from before the events of the story, suggesting that Semyon's drinking has been a longstanding problem in their marriage. Matryona's bitterness toward her life's misfortune has made her selfish and closed off to the prospect of helping others.

Finally, at the height of her outburst, Matryona demands that Semyon return her **jacket**, which is her only one. She tries to pull it off of his body, but in the process, the sleeve rips. Matryona throws the jacket on the floor and starts to leave the house. However, she stops suddenly in the doorway, and her heart "seem[s] to melt." She decides that she wants to "banish all those spiteful feelings" and find out who the stranger is.

The violent ripping of the coat epitomizes Matryona's anger and her selfishness. Her refusal to share her jacket ultimately backfires: instead of having one jacket to herself—as she intended in pulling it from Semyon's body—she now has nothing to keep her warm. This symbolizes the idea that selfishness hurts both those who need help and those who refuse to give help. Moreover, although the stranger's mysteriousness initially angered Matryona, curiosity about him is ultimately what compels her to look at him with more compassion.

CHAPTER 4

Matryona asks her husband to explain how he met the stranger. Semyon tells her that the man was sitting naked by the chapel; he believes that God led him to this man, because if Semyon hadn't come along, the man likely would have died from cold or starvation. He urges Matryona not to be angry, because it is a sin to be angry, and when she dies she will have to repent for her sins. Semyon's explanation does not ease Matryona's anger. In fact, she is just about to continue berating him, when her eyes fall suddenly on the stranger. The stranger is sitting at the table with his hands folded on his knees, his head hung, his eyes closed, and a pained expression on his face. As Matryona looks at the man, Semyon asks her if there is no love of God within her.

Semyon's attitude toward the stranger has changed completely: a short while ago, he was bemoaning the impossibility of feeding another mouth and hurrying away from the stranger. But now, he not only believes that he is acting according to God's will but also lectures his wife about the sinfulness of her anger. Matryona's own feelings in the passage again prove the power of divine mystery over rational reasoning: while Semyon's arguments about the afterlife have no effect on Matryona, something in the stranger's expression mysteriously causes Matryona's heart to soften.

Suddenly Matryona pities the stranger, and she feels her anger leave her. She gets out dinner, kvass, and the last slice of **bread**. Then Matryona, Semyon, and the stranger divide the food between them and eat together at the table. Matryona gazes at the stranger, overwhelmed by her compassion for him; when the stranger looks up at her, the pained expression leaves his face, and he smiles at her.

The image of Matryona, Semyon, and the stranger breaking bread together at the table evokes a feeling of bounty and community. Sharing bread is portrayed as a symbolic act of divine love and fellowship in the Bible, so this gesture suggests that as Matryona and Semyon extend kindness to Mikhail, they are also growing closer to God. Moreover, the fact that Matryona's anger leaves her when she helps Mikhail suggests that there is a natural reciprocity in true generosity: that is, selfless love is beneficial for the person who bestows it as well as the person who receives it.

After dinner, Matryona begins to question the stranger, asking where he is from and how he came to be naked by the church. He answers the questions in the same cryptic way as when Semyon asked them, telling her only that he is "not from these parts" and that he cannot explain how he came to be by the church. He adds that God will reward Semyon and Matryona for taking pity on him and showing compassion toward him. Matryona gives the stranger trousers, as well as the shirt that she had been mending. Then all three go to bed.

Matryona's interrogation of the stranger matches Semyon's first conversation with him almost exactly. The stranger gives no more information than before, intensifying his aura of mystery. This time, however, he tells Semyon and Matryona that God will reward them for their generosity toward him, and this comment ends the questioning. This suggests that simply trusting in God—and in other people—is more fruitful than trying to find logical answers or gain control over a situation.

Lying beside her husband beneath their shared winter **coat**, Matryona cannot fall asleep. At first, she frets about the fact that she gave the stranger their last piece of **bread**, and now they won't have anything to feed their children the next day. But when she remembers the stranger's smile, she is overcome by a feeling of joy and peace.

In this moment, Matryona has a slight relapse into her old nervous and logical way of thinking. Yet although some of her worry is about feeding herself, this passage reveals that she is also selflessly concerned about feeding her children. Meanwhile, the stranger's grateful smile's mysterious ability to comfort Matryona again points to the idea that helping others is beneficial to both the receiver of help and the helper.

Matryona notices that Semyon is also awake; she shares her concern about getting food for their family the next day. Semyon doesn't offer a specific solution but tells her that he is sure something will work out. Matryona remarks that the stranger seems to be a good man even though he refuses to talk about himself. Then she asks why it is that they always give to others, but others never give back to them. Semyon doesn't answer the question, but instead suggests that they go to sleep and discuss it another time.

Semyon's spiritual transformation seems more complete than Matryona's, as he his confidence in the world and its mysteries is more assured. He also does not indulge—and in fact seems to look down on—Matryona's question about when they will be the recipient of other people's generosity, even though he himself was thinking along very similar lines as he walked home from the village.

CHAPTER 5

The next morning, while Matryona is borrowing **bread** from a neighbor, Semyon asks the stranger what kind of work he can do. The stranger says he doesn't know how to do any kind of work but will be happy to learn, since all men work for their livings. Semyon says that he will teach the stranger how to make shoes, and in exchange, the stranger can continue to live with them. Semyon asks the stranger his name, and the stranger replies that it is Mikhail. Semyon then says that if Mikhail doesn't want to tell them anything about himself, that's okay.

The fact that Matryona is able to borrow bread from a neighbor shows that Semyon was right in the previous night's conversation: the family isn't starving, and things do seem to be working out. Semyon's attitude toward the stranger also demonstrates a new acceptance of the many things he doesn't know about this man. Interestingly, however, it is also in this moment of acceptance of mystery that Semyon (and the reader) glean the first concrete piece of information about the stranger: his name, Mikhail.

Semyon teaches Mikhail how to twist and wax yarn. Mikhail proves to be a very quick study; within three days, he has become a remarkable shoemaker, mastering every task that Semyon shows him. He works industriously, eats very little, and is mostly quiet. He never jokes or smiles; in fact, Matryona and Semyon have never seen him smile since the first night when Matryona gave him dinner.

Mikhail's striking aptitude for everything Semyon teaches him intensifies the sense of magic and mystery that surrounds him. His austerity—his small appetite and solemn personality—also contributes to this impression. His smiles, meanwhile, seem to be associated with particularly profound moments of generosity and love, such as when Matryona welcomed and fed him.

CHAPTER 6

Time passes; Mikhail has now been living with Semyon and Matryona for a year. Mikhail's outstanding workmanship has made Semyon's shoemaking business famous in the region. One day, an expensive-looking carriage appears unexpectedly in front of their house, and a wealthy gentleman in a fur coat gets out of the carriage and enters their home. Semyon and Matryona are dumbfounded, both by the man's evident wealth and by his commanding figure. While Semyon, Matryona, and Mikhail are all quite thin, this man is heavyset and so tall that he barely fits through the door.

With his almost magical talent for shoemaking, Mikhail has more than earned his keep at Semyon's. In this sense, Semyon and Matryona's choice to be generous—even though they rationally believed that they couldn't afford to—has paid off and led to prosperity. Meanwhile, the gentleman's arrival highlights the social inequality between the landowning and peasant classes. This inequality is expressed in the characters' bodies: the gentleman is so excessively well-fed that he can barely even fit into the house of the poor peasants. He appears to have never been hungry, whereas Semyon and Matryona have endured a long struggle for their family's survival.

The gentleman asks if the master shoemaker is in. When Semyon introduces himself, the gentleman orders his servant to bring in the leather from the carriage. He shows the leather to Semyon and asks if Semyon understands what kind of leather it is. When Semyon responds that it appears to be expensive leather, the gentleman is unsatisfied. He belabors the point, informing Semyon that it is *extremely* expensive, worth 20 rubles and ordered from Germany. He offers Semyon 10 rubles to make him a pair of boots from the leather. However, he stipulates, the boots must be able to last a whole year without losing their shape or breaking — and if they fail to meet these conditions, he will have Semyon arrested.

Even though the gentleman is rich, he is entitled and greedy. Not only does he offer to pay Semyon only half the value of the leather, but he also has ridiculously high standards for the quality of the boots. The gentleman is also extremely rude. He seems to enjoy ridiculing Semyon and is intent on making it clear to these impoverished peasants just how wealthy he is. Given that Semyon and Matryona were rewarded (whether by luck or by God) for their generosity, it stands to reason that the gentleman may be punished for his selfishness.

Semyon is afraid of the gentleman and his high-stakes proposal. He looks to Mikhail to ask whether they should accept the job, and Mikhail nods. Then Semyon takes the gentleman's measurements, although the gentleman's calves are so meaty that Semyon's measuring tape cannot wrap all the way around them. While his calves are being measured, the gentleman notices Mikhail. Semyon explains that Mikhail is his master craftsman, and that he is the person who will make the boots. The gentleman seems to find something displeasing or offensive in Mikhail's attitude. He darkly warns Mikhail to make sure that the boots last a whole year.

The confidence with which Mikhail accepts the gentleman's job seems to indicate that he knows something about this man that Semyon doesn't. As his calves are being measured, the gentleman continues to treat Mikhail, Semyon, and his own servant very rudely, further intensifying a connection between greed and immorality. Moreover, the gentleman's visible dislike of Mikhail seems surprising and significant. He appears to find Mikhail's energy somehow disrespectful and unsettling, whereas Semyon and Matryona find Mikhail's presence comforting.

Semyon turns to look at Mikhail and sees that Mikhail is staring blankly into a corner. Suddenly and seemingly without cause, Mikhail begins to smile. The gentleman furiously berates Mikhail, asking what he is smiling about and repeating his ominous warning about the boots. Then he leaves with his servant, promising to be back soon. After the gentleman leaves, Semyon and Matryona marvel at his size, strength, and violent temper.

Mikhail smiles mysteriously for the second time. This smile—and Mikhail's general attitude—makes the gentleman very angry and slightly flustered, which seems to add to its mysterious power. Given that the only other time Mikhail smiled was when Matryona and Semyon learned a lesson about generosity, the fact that he smiles in this moment perhaps implies that there is a lesson to be learned from the gentleman's behavior.

CHAPTER 7

Semyon and Mikhail begin to make the gentleman's boots. They have decided that Mikhail will do the bulk of the work, since his eyes are sharper than Semyon's. Matryona watches as Mikhail begins to cut the leather for the boots and is startled to find that he is cutting the pieces far too small for boots. However, she stays silent, telling herself that Mikhail surely knows what he is doing. Then Mikhail begins to sew the leather together; Matryona is again astonished to see that he is using a single piece of thread—as if making slippers—instead of a doubled piece of thread, which is needed for boots. When Semyon sees what Mikhail has done to the leather, he is horrified and dismayed. He reprimands Mikhail for ruining the boots and despairs about the punishment that awaits him.

Matryona's reaction to Mikhail's strange behavior shows how much her character has changed since the beginning of the story, as well as how much she now trusts Mikhail. Even though Matryona was shown to be the more frugal and less generous spouse—in terms of both money and faith in the world's mysteries—in this case, Semyon has less trust in Mikhail than Matryona does.

Just then, someone knocks on the door, and they open it to find the boy servant who had been with the gentleman the day before. When asked why he has come, the boy explains that the gentleman will no longer need the boots, because he died in the carriage on the way home from Semyon's house yesterday. Instead, the expensive leather must be made into a pair of slippers for the gentleman to wear in his coffin. Mikhail exhibits no surprise on hearing this news; he calmly takes the slippers he has already made and hands them to the boy.

In this shocking turn of events, Mikhail's aura of mystery and knowledge reaches new heights. His distant smile during the gentleman's visit now seems to be some kind of divine premonition, suggesting that he is perhaps supernatural or connected to God in a way that the other characters aren't.

CHAPTER 8

Several more years pass, and Mikhail continues to be an invaluable addition to the family and business. He remains quiet and withdrawn. In fact, Matryona and Semyon have still only seen him smile twice—once on the night they first met him, and once when the gentleman came to commission the boots. One day, Mikhail and Semyon are working when one of Semyon's children tells them that a group of people is approaching the house: a woman with two little girls, one of whom appears to be limping. Hearing this news, Mikhail immediately looks out the window in a way that strikes Semyon as strange—Mikhail has never before looked out the window while working.

Mystery continues to be Mikhail's defining characteristic. It seems clear that he is, if not actually divine, a symbol for the divine, since he is miraculously wise and transcendent in the same way that God is portrayed in Christianity. Mikhail's uncharacteristic reaction to the woman and little girls arriving implies that there is something significant about these people that the other characters aren't aware of.

The woman and the girls enter the shop. The woman explains to Semyon that she wants to order shoes for the girls. The girl with the limp will need a special shoe for her lame foot, but otherwise the girls' measurements will be the same, since they are identical twins. As Semyon is discussing the job with the woman, he notices that Mikhail is still behaving strangely: he has stopped working and is staring at the two girls. Semyon acknowledges that the girls are very pretty, but he doesn't understand why Mikhail is looking at them so intently.

The overly attentive way that Mikhail looks at the girls recalls the way he looked at the gentleman several years before. In this case, however, he seems to be looking at the girls with affection rather than amusement (as was the case with the gentleman).

As Semyon measures the girls' feet, he asks what happened to the girl with the limp. The woman explains that she wasn't born with the disability but was crushed by her mother shortly after she was born. She also adds that she is not the girls' mother, nor is she related to them at all. However, she adopted them, breastfed them, and loves them even more than her own biological son, who died in childhood. Semyon asks the woman what happened to the girls' mother.

Whereas the gentleman attracted the other characters' attention because of his horribly rude behavior, this woman is interesting because of her generosity. Her statement that she loves her adopted daughters even more than her real son is yet another testament to the idea that generosity (in this case, the woman adopting and breastfeeding the infant twins) can benefit the person giving help as well as the people receiving help.

CHAPTER 9

The woman, Marya, relates the story of how she came to be the twins' caretaker. Six years ago, right around the time the twins were born, both of their parents died within a week of each other. Marya was living next door to the twins' parents at the time, and she saw the whole tragedy unfold. The girls' father, who was a woodcutter, was killed by a falling tree on Tuesday. Then, that Friday, their mother died giving birth to them; by the time Marya came in to check on her neighbor the next morning, she was already dead. Moreover, as the twins' mother died, she had rolled onto one of her babies, crushing the baby's leg.

Marya's story demonstrates convenience and proximity—rather than selfless love—were the initial reasons for her guardianship of the twins. The twins are prime candidates for selfless love: without living parents (and, in one twin's case, with a disability) it seems likely that the twins would have died without a stranger's generosity.

The babies were still alive, however, so Marya—whose own child was breastfeeding at that time—was charged with taking care of these newly orphaned girls, too. At first she had planned to feed only the healthy twin, assuming that the twin with the crushed leg would not survive. But then she took pity on the injured twin and began feeding her as well. She had worried that she wouldn't have enough milk to feed three babies, but she actually had more than enough. Although Marya's own son died before he turned two, she began to feel that these twins were her children, too. Marya discusses the death of her biological son with striking equanimity, explaining that it was "God's will" that he should die and the twins should live.

The woman recalls how her relationship with her adoptive daughters progressed from one governed by rational logic—she was the only woman in the village who could breastfeed them—to one of genuine love. There's a similar shift from rationalism to generosity when she recalls her decision to feed the injured twin as well as the healthy one. The fact that she had more than enough milk to feed all three babies seems to be another example of things working out mysteriously when people act selflessly. The serenity with which the woman talks about her dead son seems directly related to the selfless love she feels for her adoptive twin daughters, as though her selfless love for them gives her a sense of inner peace.

While telling the story—and expressing how much she loves her adopted daughters—Marya begins to cry. Matryona listens sympathetically and recalls a relevant proverb which states that "You can live without mother or father, but you can't live without God." Marya chats with Semyon and Matryona a little more, and then she leaves with the twins. After she leaves, Semyon and Matryona turn to Mikhail: they are surprised to find that his face has once again been overtaken by a strange and blissful smile.

The woman's tears are proof of her genuine love for her daughters. Her story again speaks to the idea that generosity and selfless love are at least as enriching for the giver as they are for the receiver. Matryona's recollection of a proverb about the flimsiness of parental love compared to divine love underscores the moral of Marya's story: her attachment to her adopted daughters actually seems stronger than her love for her biological son. It is as though the unconditional love and self-sacrifice she extends to the girls mimics God's love of humankind, and because of this, it is particularly meaningful and spiritually fulfilling to her. That Mikhail flashes one of his rare smiles here suggests that there is an important lesson to be learned from Marya's story.

CHAPTER 10

Semyon asks Mikhail what has made him smile this way. Mikhail stands up, bows, and says that God has forgiven him. He asks if Semyon and Matryona will forgive him, too. Suddenly Matryona and Semyon notice that Mikhail is glowing, and they realize that he is not a normal human being but an angel. Then Semyon asks Mikhail several questions: first he wants to know why Mikhail was so unhappy when he found him at the church. He also why Mikhail smiled those three times: first when Matryona gave him dinner, next when the wealthy gentleman ordered the leather boots, and finally when Marya and the twins came. Finally, he asks why Mikhail is suddenly glowing.

Semyon's question about Mikhail's smile is the first question either he or Matryona has asked of their guest since the first days after he arrived. This time, Mikhail seems open to answering—perhaps affirming the idea that before, he "could not" answer their questions and now he "can" (that is, he has divine permission to). The mystery surrounding Mikhail is suddenly explained by his identity as an angel. This one major explanation leads Matryona and Semyon to voice their suppressed questions about his strange behavior.

Mikhail explains that he is glowing because God has forgiven him; up until this moment, God had been punishing him. He says that each time he smiled, it was because he had learned one of the three truths that God sent him to earth to learn. Semyon asks Mikhail what he had done to deserve God's punishment, and what the three truths were that he learned.

Mikhail's explanation that God has forgiven him connects to his earlier remark (when Semyon first found him by the church) that God had punished him. His identity as an angel also sheds light on certain other strange comments, such as when he told Semyon that because men work for their livings, he would work also. (This construction implied subtly that he was not a man but a divine being.)

Mikhail says that God punished him for disobeying him. When Mikhail was an angel, God asked him to take a woman's soul up to heaven. However, Mikhail saw that the woman had just given birth to twins, and she begged him to let her live and take care of her children, saying that she had no living family and suggesting that her children would die if she did. Mikhail pitied the woman and her children, and so he disobeyed God and did not take her soul.

Mikhail's decision to let the woman live—which was motivated by pity for her and her children, as well as by the compelling argument she made—could be seen as selflessness and generosity. Notably, though, it is not what God intended, suggesting that Mikhail made his decision based on the woman's rational arguments rather than divine will.

However, when Mikhail returned to heaven and told God about what had happened, God told him that he must return and take the woman's soul. Then, God told him, he would live as a mortal until he learned the answers to three questions: "*what dwells in man*, *what is not given to men*, and *what men live by*." Only after Mikhail had learned these lessons could he return to heaven. Mikhail took the woman's soul, and as she died, he watched as she rolled over the leg of one of her babies. The next thing Mikhail knew, he awoke beside a church in the body of a naked mortal man.

Mikhail has often seemed mysterious and puzzling to the other characters in the story. It has seemed that he was in possession of divine knowledge that the story's mortal humans could not access. Now, however, it's revealed that Mikhail himself faced mystery and uncertainty on Earth: he was trying to understand God's three lessons for him.

CHAPTER 11

Hearing Mikhail's story, Semyon and Matryona begin to weep. The angel then recalls how he sat beside the church in the cold and in pain until he saw Semyon walking toward him on the road. It was the first time he had seen the face of a mortal man, and he recalls that the sight was terrifying for him. He also remembers that he could hear Semyon wondering out loud how to feed himself and his family, even as Mikhail was starving and freezing right before his eyes. Mikhail adds that when Semyon was worrying selfishly about how to feed his own family, his face became especially terrifying; Mikhail recalls that it "bore the stamp of death."

Mikhail's memory of Semyon coming down the road provides a new lens on an earlier passage. From Mikhail's perspective, Semyon's worries about his own well-being seemed not only selfish but actually terrifying and deathlike in Mikhail's eyes. This intensifies a connection between generosity and life on the one hand, and greed and death on the other, which also came up with the rich gentleman's death. These different outcomes suggest that generosity and love are rewarding and spiritually fulfilling, whereas selfishness and cruelty are damaging and spiritually corrupting for both the selfish person and the people around them.

Mikhail then remembers how Semyon turned back for him. Semyon's whole face seemed to have changed, and it no longer scared Mikhail; in fact, now he could see God in Semyon's face. Mikhail then remembers how he and Semyon returned to Semyon's house, recalling that Matryona's face terrified him even more than Semyon's had. He describes her breath as smelling "like death," and he says he could tell that she wanted to throw him out onto the street. But then she, too, seemed to suddenly transform, and he could see God in her as well. He smiled then, for the first time, because he realized he had learned the lesson to God's first question, "what dwells in man"—the answer was love.

Here, Mikhail makes the connection between his smiles and God's lessons explicit. Matryona's deathlike state further connects selfishness to spiritual corruption and decay, whereas her decision to be generous toward Mikhail seemed to breathe life back into her. In this way, Mikhail confirms that selfless love is transformative both for the person extending it and for the person receiving it. In fact, he goes so far as to say that he could see God in Matryona when she began to love Mikhail, suggesting that loving one another is humanity's natural and proper mode of being ("what dwells in man") because it emulates God's divine love.

Next, Mikhail recalls the episode with the wealthy man. He tells Matryona and Semyon that he could see the Angel of Death enter the house with the man, and that he immediately knew that the man would die before the end of the day. The wealthy man ordered boots to last him for a whole year, oblivious to the fact that he'd be dead by that evening. The irony of this moment taught Mikhail the answer to God's second question—"what is not given to man." The answer to this question, Mikhail realized, was knowledge of one's bodily needs (and, more specifically, knowledge of death). Recognizing the answer to the second question, Mikhail smiled for a second time.

Mikhail's analysis of the episode with the wealthy gentleman connects selfishness and cruelty—both of which the gentleman epitomized—with an attempt to control the future. In demanding boots that would last him a whole year, the wealthy gentleman behaved presumptuously and overconfidently; he assumed that, because of his wealth and power, he could control his own future. Little did he know, however, that that future was not guaranteed to him. Again, Mikhail's smile is symbolically tied to one of God's divine truths.

But, Mikhail continues, he did not learn the answer to the third question—"what men live by"—until today, when he again saw the twins whose mother he had pitied. Realizing that the twins are alive and well, and witnessing their adoptive mother's total devotion and love for them, Mikhail now understands his previous error—that is, he understands why God had to punish him. Mikhail had believed the twins' mother when she said that her babies could not live without father or mother. But, as he now sees, this claim was not true: what the twins needed to live was not biological parents but merely love.

The story of Mikhail's mistake brings together and reinforces all three lessons. Marya's love for her adoptive daughters shows, again, that what dwells in man *is love. The twins' mother's mistaken belief—that her twins would definitely die without her—demonstrates, again,* what is not given to mortal men: *knowledge of when or how people will die. And Mikhail's own error, he now understands, was a misunderstanding of* what men live by. *He believed the dying woman's assertion that her twins would die without her—that is, that what people live by is their parents' care. Now, having seen how the twins survived without mother or father, Mikhail understands that this is not true:* what men live by *is the love of other people in general, not necessarily their parents' love.*

CHAPTER 12

The moment Mikhail finishes telling his story, his body becomes so bright that Semyon and Matryona cannot look at it directly. Mikhail's voice becomes so loud that it seems to be coming from heaven, and he says, "I have learned that men live not by selfishness but by love." He adds that just as it was not given to the rich man to know whether he would live another day, it was not given to the twins' mother to know what her children needed to stay alive.

Mikhail's angelic identity becomes even more physical and obvious in this passage. He again drives home the two most important elements of his lessons: the overpowering importance of love (which pertains to the first and third lessons) and the inevitability of mystery in mortal people's lives (which pertains to the second lesson). What remains to be explained is the connection between these two elements—that is, between love and mystery.

Furthermore, he elaborates, men stay alive not through their own rational planning, but rather through the selfless love that others show them. Semyon and Matryona's selfless love saved Mikhail's life, just as the woman's selfless love saved the twins' life. Mikhail now understands that this is part of God's plan: God keeps men in the dark regarding their own needs so that they will have to rely on their neighbors' love. Finally, Mikhail reminds Semyon and Matryona that "he who dwells in love dwells in God," because God is love. At that, the house shakes with the sound of Mikhail's voice, and a pillar of fire appears, breaking through the roof. Then Mikhail rises into the sky and disappears. When Semyon's eyes open, the roof of his house is once again intact, and Mikhail is gone.

Before Mikhail returns to heaven, he spells out this final connection: God keeps people in the dark about certain mysteries so that they must rely on one another's selfless love. And since God and love are one and the same, imposing these limitations on people makes it so that they embody God in the way they treat one another. That Mikhail disappears (presumably returning to heaven) after delivering this final explanation suggests that his work on Earth is done, meaning this divine truth—that people's should accept life's mysteries and love others selflessly to be like God—is the ultimate life lesson.

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