

THE PRISONER KING



JOSHUA EGGERS

PREFACE

BEFORE WE BEGIN

I should probably tell you something before we start. I am not what most people picture when they hear the word philosophy. I'm a country boy. I run a concrete company. I like fast cars, nice watches, boots, guns, lifting weights, making money, talking shit, building things, breaking things, fixing things, figuring things out. I've got a mullet.

I'm competitive as hell. I've made good decisions. I've made some incredibly stupid ones. Sometimes those were the same decision. So if you picked up this book expecting some quiet motherfucker in a turtleneck sitting by a fire explaining the meaning of existence, you may have bought the wrong book.

I do read philosophy. A lot more than most people would probably guess. But I don't read it like a philosopher. I read it like a guy looking for something useful. And usually looking for the part that doesn't quite work. That's where I get interested.

* * *

I've noticed something about ideas I believe in. Eventually they start arguing with each other. One philosopher tells me desire causes suffering. Another tells me desire is what builds civilizations. One tells me to detach from outcomes. Another tells me nothing worthwhile gets built without commitment. One tells me ego is the problem. Another makes a pretty convincing case that ambition, pride, competition, and the need to prove something can drag a man farther than comfort ever will.

And the annoying part is that sometimes I believe both of them. That's usually where I start thinking. Not when an idea sounds right. When two ideas that both sound right collide. Because now somebody owes me an explanation.

Maybe both are partly right. Maybe one works under certain conditions and becomes dangerous under others. Maybe the contradiction is only there because I've been asking the wrong question. That's how a lot of what is in this book started. Not with answers. With things that pissed me off because they didn't fit together.

* * *

I like winning. That creates problems. Because I also like freedom. And the more I thought about those two things, the less convinced I became that they always travel together.

Sometimes winning gives you freedom. Sometimes winning gives you more to lose. Sometimes success creates options. Sometimes success creates a life you become terrified to question. Sometimes discipline makes you stronger. Sometimes the same discipline keeps you walking in a direction reality has been telling you to abandon for five years.

Sometimes loyalty is honorable. Sometimes loyalty is the word I use because admitting the truth would cost me too much. Sometimes not caring what anybody thinks is strength. Sometimes it's just another way of making sure nobody can correct me. That bothered me. Still does.

* * *

I started wondering whether a person could look completely free from the outside and still be governed from the inside. Money. Reputation. Status. Fear. Pride. Family. The need to be respected. The need to be right. The need to never look weak. The need to remain the person everybody thinks you are.

None of those things has to put a gun to your head. They just have to make certain choices expensive enough. And once the price gets high enough, something interesting can happen. You can still technically choose. You just stop seriously considering certain choices.

That's different.

* * *

That's where the title came from. The Prisoner King. A man can have money. Authority. Respect. A company. A beautiful house. Cars. Influence. People who answer when he calls. Every visible sign that he won.

And still be unable to say:
I was wrong.
Or:
I don't want this anymore.
Or:
This isn't working.
Or:
I need help.
Or:
I'm leaving.
Or:
I'm staying, even though my pride wants me to run.
What kind of freedom is that? That question got under my skin.

* * *

And I'm not writing this from the other side of the mountain. I haven't solved it. That might be important to know. I am extremely capable of seeing somebody else's bullshit. Mine is harder.

Writing a book about self-deception does not magically make me immune to self-deception. If anything, now I have better vocabulary for explaining why my bullshit is actually a highly sophisticated philosophical position. That seems dangerous.

So this book is not me standing above the problem. I'm in it. I'm probably going to stay in it. The goal is to see it faster.

* * *

I also don't want to write one of those books where every page tells you to stop caring. I care. A lot. I care about winning. I care about my family. I care about my business. I care about respect. I care about what I build. I care about being strong. I care about being right. I care about being the kind of person I can respect.

I don't want enlightenment badly enough to sit under a tree and become indifferent to everything. That sounds miserable. What I want to know is whether I can care deeply without becoming owned by what I care about. That seems harder. And more useful.

* * *

I'm also suspicious of anything that works too neatly. If I can use an idea to explain every outcome, it probably isn't explaining shit. If a philosophy tells me I'm right whether I stay or leave, win or lose, succeed or fail, then I need to know what could prove it wrong. Otherwise I don't have a philosophy. I have a hiding place.

So I'm going to push on these ideas. You should too. Especially the ones that sound good. Especially mine. A sentence doesn't become true because it sounds profound. And being written in plain language by a guy with a mullet doesn't make it more honest either.

Reality still gets a vote. That becomes important later.

* * *

While you read this, keep one thing in mind. Not ten. One. A business. A relationship. A decision. A belief. A version of yourself.

Something that matters enough that changing your mind about it would cost you something. Money. Pride. Time. Status. Comfort. Years. Whatever.

Keep that one thing close. Because this book is going to ask the same question from a bunch of different angles.

Can reality still get through?

Not eventually. Eventually reality can get through almost anything. The market collapses. The relationship ends. The money disappears. The body breaks. The lie becomes impossible to maintain. That's not the kind of correction I'm interested in.

I want to know whether reality can get through while I can still do something useful with it.

* * *

That's the whole problem, really. I want ambition without captivity. Commitment without blindness. Strength without becoming impossible to correct. Confidence without needing to protect an identity. Success without building a life I'm no longer free to question.

I don't know if those things fit together perfectly. Probably not. That's why I wrote the book. Because the contradictions are where it gets interesting. And because I started wondering whether the biggest prison a man can build is one that looks exactly like the life he always wanted.

That's where I want to start.