

12/30/20

Dear Leo Tolstoy,

When I first picked up your book, *Anna Karenina*, I didn't expect to find a story that would stay with me for the rest of my life. When I read your book, I was a freshman in high school. I had felt isolated and unable to connect with the people around me for most of my life. I felt like I was trapped in a world that I didn't want to live in, but I had no idea how to change it. And then I met Levin.

At first it doesn't seem likely that I would have anything in common with a Russian nobleman from over a hundred years ago, but the subjects written about in *Anna Karenina* are universal; it is about those who seek happiness. Levin is someone who always feels out of place among other people because of the reason he lives his life. He wants to gain happiness but has no idea where to start. The instant I met Levin, I realized that I had never known someone who thought as much as I did or viewed their life the same way. Reading one scene, early in the book, when Levin observes the peasants working in his field together, singing and laughing, and returns home to become overwhelmed with his own isolation and alienation from the world, I suddenly felt like I had been punched. That was *me*. I was always the outsider, I was always isolated from other people. I hadn't known that someone else shared that with me. I suddenly *needed* to know what happened to Levin, because maybe, just maybe, if Levin could figure out how to change his life, I could as well! Suddenly all the years I had spent thinking that nothing would change were gone. Things could be better.

However, Levin's life moves slowly, and he doesn't seem to come to some dramatic realization. Through page after page, Levin slowly learns a fundamental truth: that happiness is not an external cause made by other people, but an internal condition that you create and define yourself. By the end of the book, Levin seems more or less in the same position he began; he

has the same job, same house, same friends. His life hasn't changed in any obvious way. But what has changed is how Levin views his life. He realizes that through his own choices and abilities he can make a change for the better and reach happiness. I can't say that I have found Levin's complete happiness-yet, but it has led me to a better place. In the years after reading *Anna Karenina*, the external factors of my life look largely the same. However, as I know that *Anna Karenina* has changed me because I have begun to speak up more, make friends, and take risks. I now feel a more solid understanding of myself, that the choices I make *do* really matter. Levin allowed me to realize that life isn't lived in grand moments, by small choices one can change their life. Because of that, I can build the life that I want to live.

Each and every one of us possesses the innate abilities within ourselves to make our own happiness. You make your own life through your choices.

Because a life that's worth living is a life that is built slowly and with meaning. You have to find what it is within yourself to make your life meaningful.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jessica Baron". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of "Jessica" and "Baron" being capitalized and prominent.

Jessica Baron