

SAMPLE CHAPTER

---

# Felt and True

*Why Good People Aren't Always Good Partners,  
and Good Partners Aren't Always Good People*

**PICKETT MUNKOMBWE**

---

*An excerpt from the forthcoming book*

Lusaka • April 2026

## ABOUT THIS SAMPLE

---

*Felt and True is a short book for couples in the middle years of a partnership. It argues that a partnership has two axes, not one. Character, the person a partner actually is when the conditions get harder. Artistry, how that care reaches the other person in the daily texture of life together. A large gap between the two, in either direction, is not a trade-off to accept. It is a signal to read.*

*This sample contains Chapter 8, When the Substance Starves. It describes the second failure mode of the two-axis model: the partnership in which character is abundant and artistry is thin. The chapter addresses a kind of loneliness that is rarely written about honestly, because it has no drama attached to it. The good partner is present. The love is real. And it does not reach. The chapter is reproduced in full and without alteration. It runs approximately two thousand four hundred words.*

*A brief note on content. The chapter includes a passage on the sexual dimension of the second failure mode, handled with the same observational restraint as the rest of the book. The passage is placed in context rather than set apart, because the subject belongs to the broader pattern rather than standing alone.*

## When the Substance Starves

It is a Wednesday in the middle of the rainy season. The house is quiet. The children, if there are children, are settled. Dinner has been eaten and cleared. Your partner is reading, or scrolling, or doing the small unconsidered tasks that fill the last hour of an ordinary evening. You are sitting nearby. Nothing is wrong. The roof does not leak. The bills have been paid. The person across the room loves you and has loved you for years and will love you tomorrow. And there is an ache in your chest that you cannot locate, a sense of being slightly alone in a room that contains the person you most want to be with. You do not know what to call this feeling. You are not sure you have the right to feel it. You put it away.

This is what the second failure mode feels like from the inside. Not drama. Not conflict. Not a crisis you could point to and name. A quiet daily weather, low pressure, grey. You are loved by a good person. The love is real. The love does not reach you.

The first failure mode collapses. The second failure mode starves. Starvation is slower, quieter, and in its own way more corrosive, because nothing is happening that would justify the alarm you feel. You cannot call a friend and explain the problem. There is no event to describe. There is only the accumulating absence of something you are not sure has a name.

The something has a name. It is artistry. The specific, attentive, day-in-day-out reaching toward another person that makes the love visible in the places the receiver can feel it. The partner starving in the second failure mode is not being denied love in principle. They are being denied love in a form they can register as love. The care is being produced in a currency that does not spend in their wallet.

Reis and Gable's research on perceived partner responsiveness puts this more precisely than instinct can. The finding, across many studies, is that a partner caring about you is not enough to generate the psychological benefits of being cared for. The care has to be perceived. It has to arrive. The partner on the receiving end has to feel seen, heard, and valued, or the caring might

as well not be happening. Sue Johnson's clinical work makes the same point from a different angle. Emotional responsiveness, not moral reliability, is what builds attachment security. A partner who is utterly reliable but emotionally unreachable produces, in their partner, the same insecure attachment patterns as a partner who is unreliable. The mechanism is identical. What the nervous system registers is not is this person trustworthy. It is is this person reaching toward me.

This is why the starving partner cannot simply count the evidence of love and be consoled. The evidence is there. The school fees are paid. The illness is attended to. The vows are honoured. Loyalty is unambiguous. None of it reaches. Counting does not fix this. The love that is not felt behaves, in the body of the person not feeling it, like love that is not there. The partnership functions. The partner within it starves.

There is a particular loneliness inside this, and it is a loneliness the culture does not give much language for. The loneliness of being loved by someone whose love you cannot feel is worse, in certain hours, than the loneliness of not being loved at all. Not being loved at all is at least a clean signal. You know where you stand. You can mourn what is missing and move toward what you need. The starving partnership is more confusing. The person you would turn to for comfort about the absence of love is the person whose love you cannot feel. The grief and the cause are the same person. There is nowhere to take the feeling.

Most starving partners, in my observation, handle this by deciding it is their own problem. They decide they are needy. They decide they are asking too much. They decide that a mature adult should be satisfied with the love they are being given, and that the hunger for something more felt is immature, greedy, or culturally imported. Sometimes the partnership itself reinforces this reading. You have a good person who loves you. What more do you want? This question, rhetorical in most mouths, is the single sentence most likely to keep a starving partner starving. Because the answer is real and is hard to say: I want to be wanted, not just loved. I want to be reached toward, not just provided for. I want love I can feel.

The partnership has another dimension where the second failure mode plays out with particular clarity, and it is the dimension most couples find hardest to discuss honestly. Sex in the starving marriage is not usually absent. It is often available on request. The starving partner can have sex whenever they want it; the good partner is willing, patient, obliging. This looks, from

outside the marriage, like a solved problem. Inside the marriage it is the centre of the problem.

The starving partner is not asking for sexual access. They are asking to be wanted. These are not the same thing, and no increase in the first will produce the second. Consent is willingness; desire is reaching. When the good partner initiates, the initiation often carries the shape of a welfare check — are we all right, is there a problem I should attend to, is there anything I can do to keep the peace of the marriage — rather than the shape of wanting. Both are forms of care. Only one is artistry. The starving partner reads the difference without being able to articulate it, and often quietly declines the sex that is offered, not because desire is absent on their side but because accepting what is offered would confirm a pattern they are trying not to reinforce. The availability is not what is missing. What is missing is being moved toward.

This is, I think, the loneliest room in the starving marriage, and the room least easily brought into conversation. The culture does not have language for a partner who declines available sex because the wrong thing is being offered. The partner who declines becomes, in most scripts, the problem: difficult, ungrateful, unclear about what they want. They know exactly what they want. What they want is a form of being wanted that cannot be produced on request. Asking harder produces more attentive versions of the welfare-check initiation, which is not the thing. The thing arrives, when it arrives, from a ground the requesting partner cannot manufacture — the ground of the offering partner feeling safe enough, met enough, alive enough in the partnership to move toward the other from her own interior, not from a checklist.

I put this passage here because it is one of several textures of the second failure mode, not because it is the dominant one. But it deserves to be named plainly, because the silence around it produces a specific kind of private despair that many partners carry alone. If you are reading this and recognising the pattern, you are not needy, and you are not ungrateful. You are reading a real signal. The signal is not wrong.

This failure mode has its own pathologies, which follow from the nature of the starvation. The first is the drift of the partnership toward something that looks, in the fifth or tenth year, more like a civic arrangement than a partnership. The functions of a household are met. The responsibilities are shared. The companionship of two people inside a long project is real. And

something that should be at the centre of the project has quietly retreated to its edges. The couple becomes co-operators of a shared life rather than partners inside one. The lights stay on; the hearth goes out.

The second pathology is vulnerability to third-party artistry. This is the mechanism by which the starving partner is, statistically, at higher risk of forming an emotional attachment outside the partnership — often not to someone more beautiful, more successful, or more suitable than their partner, but to someone whose presence simply produces the felt experience of being reached toward. The new figure is not better than the partner. In nine cases out of ten they are substantially worse: less reliable, less honest, less suited to a long life. They are, however, present in the currency the starving partner is starving for. A single afternoon of feeling wanted, after years of not feeling wanted, is intoxicating in a way the partner's actual goodness cannot compete with. This is how good marriages end. Not because one partner stopped being good, but because the other partner finally received artistry somewhere and could no longer pretend they had not been hungry.

I am naming this not to frighten you but to take the stakes seriously. The starving partner's situation is often read by the wider world, and sometimes by the starving partner themselves, as a minor complaint. It is not a minor complaint. It is a structural condition with predictable consequences, and the consequences can be grave.

The third pathology is harder to see and more common than the first two. It is the mutual resentment that grows inside the partnership without either partner being able to name its source. The starving partner begins, after years, to read the good partner's actions with a small and unfair suspicion. The small act of care is not received as care. It is received as further evidence of care in the wrong currency. The good partner, in turn, senses that their care is not being received and begins to withdraw the effort, partly in hurt and partly in exhaustion. The warmth that was running low runs lower. The artistry that was thin becomes thinner. Neither partner understands what is happening. Both register only that the marriage feels harder than it used to, and harder than it should, and neither can point to anything that would explain why.

The people experiencing this, often, blame themselves. The starving partner decides they are the problem for being ungrateful. The good partner decides they are the problem for being, as they have been told, insufficiently

warm. The shared culture of the marriage comes to organise itself around a vague sense that something is wrong with at least one of the two of them, and probably both. This is usually untrue. What is wrong is not the partners. What is wrong is that the partnership is running thin on artistry, and the specific pathology of running thin on artistry is that it produces a drift that no one can locate.

The way out is not to love each other more. Both partners, in the starving marriage, usually love each other plenty. The way out is for artistry to be named as the thing that is missing, distinguished from character, which is not missing, and then for the work of building it to be understood as a project both partners can take on, with effort, without shame, and without pretending it was already being done.

This requires the starving partner to speak more clearly than they have so far, and it requires the good partner to hear the request without hearing it as an indictment of their character. Both are hard. But both are possible. The next chapter is about what can be built, and what cannot, along each axis. It matters that you read it without losing sight of this one. The chapter that follows is about effort. This chapter is about what the effort is for.

You are loved. The love is real. Something that should be reaching you is not reaching you. It is not wrong to notice. It is the beginning of what you can do about it.

## THANK YOU FOR READING

---

*If this chapter recognised something in you, the rest of the book is organised around the same pattern of naming without prescribing. The two-axis model is built in the first three chapters, applied in the middle, and extended into practical language in the late chapters for the conversations most couples skip. Three realist interludes, set in Lusaka, the Copperbelt, and Livingstone, show the failure modes and the repair mode in lived texture.*

*This chapter was one of the harder chapters to write honestly. It addresses a kind of loneliness that most readers in the second failure mode have been carrying privately for years, because the culture around long partnerships does not give them language for it. If the chapter has given you even a little of that language, it has done its primary work.*

*The author would welcome an honest review once the book is published, whether on Amazon, Goodreads, or in any publication where you write. Honest readings are more useful than kind ones, and both are welcome.*

**Pickett Munkombwe**

*Lusaka, Zambia*