

THE RIGHT TRACK
TAKES YOU TO
YOUR DESTINY

AAROHAN EXPRESS

A NOVEL OF
LOSS, RESILIENCE AND REDEMPTION

AAROH DEV



BlueRoseONE^{.com}
Stories Matter

New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

Copyright © Aaroh Dev 2026

All rights reserved by author. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. Although every precaution has been taken to verify the accuracy of the information contained herein, the publisher assumes no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for damages that may result from the use of information contained within.

BlueRose Publishers takes no responsibility for any damages, losses, or liabilities that may arise from the use or misuse of the information, products, or services provided in this publication.



BlueRoseONE^{com}
S t o r i e s M a t t e r
New Delhi • London

For permissions requests or inquiries regarding this publication,
please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

www.BlueRoseONE.com

info@bluerosepublishers.com

+91 8882 898 898

+4407342408967

ISBN: 978-81-6744-342-7

Cover Design: Ajay Dhyani

Typesetting: Sagar

First Edition: August 2026

Disclaimer

All characters, events, places, and incidents portrayed in this novel are purely fictional or used fictitiously.

Any resemblance to any person, living or deceased, or to actual events is purely coincidental and unintentional.

The views, thoughts, and emotions expressed by the characters belong solely to the fictional narrative and should not be interpreted as representations of real individuals.

Dedication

I dedicate this novel to my late brother,

The person I loved the most in my life.

His love, strength, and memories continue to guide me every single day.

Though he is no longer physically present, his presence lives forever in my heart.

My late mother who was the love of my life .

She always protected me and that care and emotion I will never be able to find again.

I also dedicate this work to my family—

My father, Bhaiya, Bhabhi, and my niece—

Who have loved me unconditionally and stood firmly by my side during the most difficult phases of my life.

Their support, patience, and faith in me gave me the strength to keep moving forward, even when life felt overwhelming.

This book is as much theirs as it is mine.

— Aaroh Dev

Introduction

Aarohan Express is not merely a story—it is a journey.

It is a journey through failure, longing, love, loss, memory, grief, and ultimately healing.

Raj, the protagonist of this novel, is not a perfect hero. He is flawed, emotional, vulnerable, often confused, and deeply sensitive. He carries the burden of expectations, lost opportunities, broken dreams, and relationships that never reached their destination. At various stages of life, he feels left behind by a world that seems to reward speed, success, youth, and external validation.

Yet this is not a story about defeat.

It is a story about survival.

Sometimes life does not break us in a single moment. Instead, it chips away at us slowly—through rejection, comparison, loneliness, regret, and silence. Raj experiences all of these. He loses people he loves, dreams he chased, and identities he once believed defined him.

But somewhere within the chaos, a quiet transformation begins.

Through teaching, painting, travel, family memories, friendships, and self-reflection, Raj slowly discovers something profound: success is not always what society defines it to be. Wealth, prestige, recognition, and validation may appear attractive, but they often fail to heal the wounds within.

Healing begins when one stops running from oneself.

The trains, stations, cities, rains, beaches, classrooms, paintings, and memories in this novel are not merely settings—they are emotional landscapes. They mirror Raj’s inner world as he moves from darkness toward light.

The title Aarohan Express symbolizes far more than a train journey. “Aarohan” signifies ascent—a gradual rise from lower notes to higher ones. It represents Raj’s slow but meaningful rise from despair toward acceptance, from external validation toward inner peace.

For anyone who has ever felt like a failure...

For anyone who has loved and lost...

For anyone who has questioned their worth because the world moved ahead...

This story is for you.

Sometimes the strongest people are not those who win early.

They are the ones who survive repeated storms and still find the courage to rise.

If this story touches even one heart, its purpose is fulfilled.

— Aaroh Dev

About The Author

Aaroh Dev is an amateur author with experience spanning diverse fields and interests.

A keen observer of human emotions, relationships, and life's complexities, he draws inspiration from personal experiences, memories, and the everyday struggles of ordinary people. His writing reflects themes of resilience, loss, introspection, healing, and the silent battles fought within the human mind.

Apart from writing, he has deep interests in teaching, painting, research, and creative exploration. His work often blends emotional depth with reflective storytelling, allowing readers to connect with the inner journeys of his characters.

Aarohan Express is his debut novel.

Contents

Chapter 1

Perennial Failure	1
-------------------------	---

Chapter 2

The Neem Tree	5
---------------------	---

Chapter 3

Mumbai Struggle	9
-----------------------	---

Chapter 4

Window Seat	13
-------------------	----

Chapter 5

Delhi Union	15
-------------------	----

Chapter 6

Wedding Shopping	19
------------------------	----

Chapter 7

The Perfect Setting	23
---------------------------	----

Chapter 8

Departure for Shingaar Garden	28
-------------------------------------	----

Chapter 9

No Eye Contact	31
----------------------	----

Chapter 10

The Great Escape	38
------------------------	----

Chapter 11	
The Final Blow.....	42
Chapter 12	
Window to the Past.....	46
Chapter 13	
A New Beginning.....	51
Chapter 14	
Homecoming	55
Chapter 15	
Join Me.....	59
Chapter 16	
On the Rocks	63
Chapter 17	
Fresher's Night	67
Chapter 18	
Paper Boats.....	73
Chapter 19	
Misplaced Aspirations.....	77
Chapter 20	
Unfinished Canvas	81
Chapter 21	
New Canvas.....	85
Chapter 22	
No Contact.....	90

Chapter 23

Hidden Battles	94
----------------------	----

Chapter 24

The Tsunami	98
-------------------	----

Chapter 25

Judgments.....	102
----------------	-----

Chapter 26

Desi Tom Cruise	106
-----------------------	-----

Chapter 27

Mission Biceps	111
----------------------	-----

Chapter 28

The Shift Within.....	116
-----------------------	-----

Chapter 29

The Old Photograph	121
--------------------------	-----

Chapter 30

Parallel Tracks	123
-----------------------	-----

Chapter 31

Homecoming to Amritsar	127
------------------------------	-----

Chapter 32

Roots	130
-------------	-----

Chapter 33

Ruins of Memory	134
-----------------------	-----

Chapter 34

Two Canvases	138
--------------------	-----

Chapter 35

Three Doors	142
-------------------	-----

Chapter 36

Choosing Life	146
---------------------	-----

Chapter 37

First Flight	150
--------------------	-----

Chapter 1

Perennial Failure

“Sorry, Mr. Raj. From what we’ve seen, you’re a candidate who lacks not only skills but also confidence.”

The words followed him out of the interview room and into the corridor.

“It was only on a friend’s recommendation that we called you,” the man in the middle had said, fingers still tapping on the laptop. “We’re busy with our project. Honestly, we shouldn’t even have scheduled this. Your credentials speak for themselves. In the last five years, you’ve managed two or three months of real work at a stretch, at best.”

Another panelist had leaned forward, his eyes flat.

“Poor in Excel. Poor with a laptop. And from my sources, the last time you worked on a project in the upper hills, you were almost marked as an absconder. It was only because some staff vouched for you that the tag was removed.”

“But sir, I had a genuine problem at home,” Raj had said. “A family emergency. I had to rush back. I tried to work sincerely and honestly.”

“That still doesn’t erase the blot your résumé carries,” the head of the panel replied, his voice cool. “After your post-graduation, nobody

employed you. In five years, you have a three-month stint, and this last job of one month—also because a friend recommended you.”

He folded his hands on the table, as if delivering a diagnosis.

“We have some serious advice for you, Mr. Raj. At fifty, do you really think a big corporate will offer you a job? Your Excel skills are far below what this role demands. Better to leave this dream.”

He even smiled then, as if offering kindness.

“These days there’s a lot of scope in the food business. A friend’s son was an absolute failure—couldn’t even complete graduation. His father opened a small food stall for him. Maybe you could also open a small stall and earn something. Who knows, maybe someday that stall might become a hit.”

He stood up.

“Thank you for your participation.”

Now, as Raj walked down the stairs, it wasn’t just disappointment pressing on his chest; it was a hard, familiar certainty.

He was a failure.

That idea, born in childhood and strengthened in youth, had finally set like concrete in his mind.

Around him, Gen Z and millennial employees moved briskly, eyes fixed on laptops, fingers flying across keyboards. Life had been tough on him for years, but sometimes circumstances didn’t just bruise you—they broke through your last defences.

His last job had ended in failure too, piling fresh humiliation onto old wounds. When he had accepted that posting in the beautiful hills of the North East, he had gone with hope and enthusiasm. Slowly, both had drained away under heavy workloads and the weight of a recent personal loss.

In the end, hope was the first thing he had to let go of.

Maybe he really should think of a food business. A small stall. Something simple he could handle.

The future looked bleak. Survival now felt like a day-to-day instinct, nothing more. Life had landed another heavy blow, leaving deep scars on his psyche.

By the time he reached the gate, it was afternoon. He had been on the move since morning, changing local trains to reach the office, running on an empty stomach.

Hunger gnawed at him now.

What better than a vada pav and a cutting chai to silence it?

Mumbai had embraced him over the years with such warmth that he had never felt like an outsider. He crossed to the familiar tea stall and sat on a rickety stool, the smell of oil and masala wrapping around him.

As he lifted the hot glass to his lips, a new Land Rover rolled to a smooth halt outside the office he had just left.

He froze.

Stepping out of the SUV was one of his batchmates from his post-graduate course.

Oh God.

In just five years, look how far he had risen.

Most of Raj's old colleagues had. They had climbed so high that, by comparison, his story already felt over.

Maybe he was not fit for any of it.

Maybe he really had zero potential.

It all added up to the same verdict.

At fifty, he still hadn't managed to chart a course for himself. Around him, young people had broken every limit, built names for themselves, and proven the world wrong. Their success stood before him like a mirror he could not bear to face.

By the time he reached home, twilight had settled over the city.

He was bone-tired from the day—travel, waiting rooms, the interview, the shame.

He fell flat on the bed, shoes still on, as scenes from his past flashed behind his eyes.

Life hadn't started badly.

But over time, it had twisted in ways he had never imagined.

Change after change. Blow after blow.

Until he felt crushed and squeezed to the very edge of himself.

Chapter 2

The Neem Tree

Memories started filtering back with raw emotion.

Half-asleep, Raj drifted through the events of the day—the exhausting journey, the roller-coaster interview, and how he had somehow navigated those crushing moments.

Life, in his case, had turned into a lawyer, a judge, and finally an executioner.

His mind drifted back to childhood.

He remembered grappling with serious health problems and undergoing numerous diagnostic tests. In the 1980s, it was the X-ray that carried the maximum weight in diagnosis.

He could still vividly remember the hospital room, a place that continued to evoke dread in him even now. The doctor drawing blood from a six-year-old child, the pain he endured, and the anguish his family went through—those moments had left a deep imprint.

The endless tests. The peculiar smell of the ward. Doctors in white aprons moving around with serious faces.

Everything had instilled fear in him.

He remembered being carried through hospital corridors for tests, then being prepared for surgery—only to be saved by what felt like a

miraculous intervention. Surgery had been planned and the doctors were adamant, even though the tests had come back clean.

Raj had been lucky in one way—he had the most wonderful family.

His loving mother, caring father, and protective brothers had been his rock through everything.

Those were memories that spoke more than words.

Pristine memories, still etched deep in his mind.

His thoughts shifted to the year 1982, when colour television was introduced in India.

His family had bought a Beltek colour TV, and the Asian Games had become a major event in the household.

And who could forget that hockey match between India and Pakistan?

It was supposed to be a perfect Sunday.

What could be more exciting than an India vs Pakistan hockey match?

At that time, the hockey rivalry felt even more electrifying than cricket. Both teams had their legends—Sameeullah and Hasan Sardar from Pakistan, and India's own mercurial forward Mohammad Shahid, defender M. P. Singh, and captain Zafar Iqbal.

Raj could still remember the final minutes vividly.

The whole family sat in the front room near the huge neem tree.

The atmosphere was electric.

Its intensity was heightened further by the presence of Rajiv Gandhi and Amitabh Bachchan in the stands.

When India scored the first goal, it felt like a dream.

But by halftime, the tables had turned.

The turn of events left Raj disturbed, and midway through the match his father switched off the TV and returned to reading the Sunday newspaper.

Festivals leave memories that never fade.

Holi. Dussehra. Deepawali.

Deepawali, in particular, remained special.

Though the exact year had faded, the memory remained sharp.

Raj was slowly growing up and beginning to understand life better.

Buying crackers— Annars ,chakras ,Phuljadis and rockets—was the highlight of the festival.

He still remembered his father taking him shopping and buying him an electric toy car.

Such toys felt luxurious in those days.

Then suddenly, on Deepawali night, rain threatened to ruin everything.

Raj looked out through the small wooden window and remembered every detail.

The huge ground in front of the house.

Rain falling on the tall trees.

His brothers bursting crackers indoors and getting scolded by their father.

Even the scolding had little effect on them.

All those memories remained a part of him.

“Mother, what will happen if the rain doesn’t stop? Will all the crackers remain unused?” he had asked anxiously.

Looking outside through the window, his mother smiled and replied, “No, son. Nothing will happen.”

His brothers agreed in unison.

And indeed, the rain stopped.

Soon they had a gala time.

Suddenly Raj was pulled back to the present by the thunderous noise of a plane passing overhead.

How cruelly things changed with time.

Unable to endure the flood of memories any longer, he took an anti-anxiety pill.

Within minutes, sleep took over.

Chapter 3

Mumbai Struggle

As he recovered from the effects of the medicine, the clock had already struck eight.

“Oh shit, I’m already late.”

It was close to eight, and he had to reach the coaching institute by ten.

When Raj had moved to Mumbai, he was already in his mid-forties, and at that age pursuing a postgraduate degree was not a safe bet.

Considering the Indian job market, it was either Gen Z or nobody. Especially for someone trying to change careers, it became a long shot.

So much so that during one interview, he had been forewarned about the consequences of such a decision.

Reflecting on the parabola of his career, it had been a mix of haughtiness, bad decisions, and to some extent, bad luck.

Education had never been difficult for him, yet certain decisions had changed the course of his life forever—decisions that would haunt him for years.

“Already close to eight. I might miss the next train.”

Reaching Vashi station in the morning was often a herculean task, but somehow one managed.

The station every morning resembled a busy marketplace, with commuters eagerly waiting for the train to arrive.

Mumbai was always awake. It merely slipped into brief silence, and once that silence broke, chaos returned in full force.

Raj waited anxiously for the local, hoping it wouldn't be too crowded and that the journey would remain manageable.

The train steadily approached the platform, but the crowd hanging from the coaches gave Raj goosebumps.

He had to let this one go.

"I'll wait for the next one," he thought.

That seemed wiser.

After another ten minutes, a second local arrived. To his relief, it was less crowded and had enough space for him to board.

The first thing he did was secure a spot near the door.

For influencers and social media enthusiasts, filming the scenery during the commute was often a ritual.

As the train crossed the creek, it offered one of Mumbai's finest views. If lucky, one could even spot ships near the Harbour.

Everything seemed manageable.

But at Kurla, everything changed.

A heavy influx of passengers stormed in, sandwiching him so tightly that breathing became difficult.

The rush in Mumbai locals was something Raj had grown accustomed to, but sometimes the crowd became unbearable.

At such moments, the compartment felt like a hot tandoor, especially during April and May.

As the train approached his station, the crowd thinned slightly, and fortunately he secured a seat.

Engrossed in thought, his mind rarely relaxed.

Maybe all these years, it had assumed a permanently hyperactive state.

His thoughts were interrupted by a sweet voice.

A ten-year-old boy was singing inside the compartment before moving from passenger to passenger asking for help.

Such a beautiful voice.

Touching to the soul.

Yet destiny decided everything.

If fortune favoured the boy, maybe one day his talent would meet opportunity.

The singing reminded Raj of talents he himself once possessed—talents that had grown rusty with time.

By the time he reached Wadala, the station was jam-packed with passengers from multiple incoming locals.

Making his way to the connecting platform was another herculean task, but he managed.

Fortunately, the connecting train was less crowded.

By the time he reached the coaching institute, he was already an hour late.

The students had been waiting.

He rushed into the classroom and began the lecture.

Two hours later, he finished.

After every lecture, he kept an hour for doubt-clearing sessions. That had become routine.

Teaching students was something he genuinely enjoyed.

Yet the degree he had earned and the years he had invested still left him dissatisfied.

Maybe it wasn't entirely his fault.

The impressive LinkedIn profiles of his batchmates constantly pulled his thoughts toward corporate life.

But at fifty, was anything left in him to contribute?

What he could not ignore was the decline in reflexes with age.

Competing with Gen Z felt nearly impossible.

A month had passed since that brutal interview, and life had settled back into routine.

Chapter 4

Window Seat

Due to a personal assignment, he had to visit Delhi. And what better than a railway journey? The train, with its amenities and comfort, offered the perfect escape.

Reclining against the side-window seat, the changing landscape reminded him of life's fragility. How life changed from one moment to another without remorse.

His thoughts drifted to childhood journeys.

Train travel had fascinated him deeply. If the journey involved a night halt, excitement doubled. A window seat felt like winning a prize.

The feelings were still the same, though life had subdued them.

Traveling from Amritsar to New Delhi had always thrilled the child in him.

Delhi felt magical.

Exploring the city in DTC buses felt like adventure.

Visiting Palika Bazar and seeing shops filled with imported goods—during an era when India was still largely a closed economy—was mesmerizing.

Pani puri, Snacks, Pepsi, Coke.

To a curious child, these felt like ultimate luxuries.

Even though India had its own icons like Thums Up, Campa Cola, and Gold Spot, the child in him remained fascinated by foreign brands.

Another beautiful memory surfaced.

Comics.

What began as curiosity at New Delhi Railway Station slowly turned into passion.

He vividly remembered his father noticing his interest and buying him the first comic of his life—a Diamond Comic featuring Chacha Bhatija.

Despite struggling with reading in those early years, he slowly finished that comic.

And with that, a lifelong passion began.

Even today, that love remained alive.

Somehow, wherever he went, he still searched for comics.

As the train moved steadily onward, snacks and dinner made the journey comfortable.

Early the next morning, the train reached New Delhi station.

His close friend was waiting to receive him.

Chapter 5

Delhi Union

As the train rolled into New Delhi, the first thing Raj noticed was the constant rumble of trains and the chatter on the platform.

New Delhi station never seemed to sleep—much like Mumbai.

Passengers were already crowding the doors before the train had fully stopped.

Raj muttered, “Saala, itni jaldi hai toh jahaz mien aa jaate.” (If were in hurry, maybe would have boarded a plane)

As people began alighting, some rushed ahead while others waited patiently for porters.

A group of coolies moved along the coaches, scanning for customers.

“Saheb, kidhar jaana hai?” they called out.

Older passengers hung back, visibly relieved when the porters reached them.

Raj had little luggage and carried it himself.

Although it was early morning, he could already feel the Delhi heat.

It felt very different from Mumbai’s humid weather.

Outside, another train arriving on Platform 1 added to the rush.

As Raj waited for his friend, auto and taxi drivers approached with offers.

“Saheb, kahan jaana hai? Aapko chhod dete hain. Jo theek lage, kiraya de dena.”

Then someone waved from the crowd.

Ajitesh.

Raj’s social circle had shrunk over the years, but a few friendships had remained untouched.

Ajitesh was one of them.

They had met during a vacation and connected almost immediately.

An alumnus of a reputed engineering college, Ajitesh had once seemed destined for a much bigger career.

Life, however, had other plans.

His father’s death had forced him to mature early.

Family responsibilities had replaced many of his ambitions.

Still, he had built a stable career as a faculty member at a respected coaching institute.

His sister, Sonali, was his exact opposite—vivacious, cheerful, and determined to enjoy life.

It was Sonali’s wedding, and for Raj, refusing Ajitesh’s invitation had never really been an option.

Where Raj’s life had repeatedly veered off course, Ajitesh had somehow found a quiet contentment.

The kind Raj still searched for.

“Kaisa hai, mere bhai?” Ajitesh asked.

“Main theek hoon. Tu bata, sab theek?”

“Haan bhai. Bas ab sab sahi ho jaaye,” Ajitesh said, opening the car door.

“Chal, baith ja. Car purani zaroor hai, par badiya hai.”

They pulled away from the station.

Escaping the traffic around New Delhi station itself took time.

Within fifteen or twenty minutes, they reached the broader lanes around Connaught Place.

As old bungalows slipped past the window, Raj’s mind returned to the familiar question of success.

A good job. A spacious house. A family. The ordinary markers of a settled life that had somehow eluded him.

The drive to Ashram took nearly an hour, longer in the morning traffic.

By the time they reached Ajitesh’s house, his friend had said very little.

That was Ajitesh—quiet, measured, almost the opposite of his sister.

Sonali was a gold medalist in Computer Science from IIT Delhi and worked with a reputed firm in Ireland.

There she had fallen in love with her team leader, a man from Andhra Pradesh who was eight years older than her.

The relationship had initially raised eyebrows—the inevitable 2 States comparisons followed—but both families eventually agreed.

The wedding was planned as a grand three-day affair, and Raj had arranged his trip accordingly.

The moment he entered the house, Sonali came to greet him.

“Bhaiya, kaise ho?” she asked. “Sab theek hai,” Raj replied.

“Aapne koi ladki dekhi shaadi ke liye, ya Ajitesh bhaiya ki tarah kunware hi rehna hai?” (any girl or planning to be like Ajitesh bhaiya only – lifelong bachelor)

“Aap dono abhi bhi itne handsome ho ki koi aunty toh mil hi jayegi,” (you are still handsome ,maybe might get some one still) she added with a laugh. Raj smiled; Ajitesh gave her a murderous look.

“Tu apni taiyaari kar,” Ajitesh replied. “Raj bhaiya ko andar le ja aur breakfast ka dekh liyo.”

Ajitesh’s mother came over and blessed Raj. After everything the family had endured, she looked genuinely happy.

“Bete, chai pehle le lena, phir breakfast,” she said, asking Sonali to take Raj inside.

With the greetings over, Raj went to his room. The next few days promised to be hectic.

Chapter 6

Wedding Shopping

Over the years, Delhi had lost much of the greenery that had fascinated Raj as a child.

He remembered those childhood days when he used to visit his Tayaji's residence in the Timarpur area. The lush greenery there had left an indelible mark on his young psyche.

The huge park in front of their quarters was where evening cricket matches became a delight to watch.

To young Raj, Delhi had always felt like paradise—Qutub Minar, Red Fort, Hauz Khas, and every visit to the capital had carried its own excitement.

How different Delhi had been in the 1980s.

Roads occupied mostly by Fiat and Ambassador cars.

Green DTC buses with yellow stripes.

Drivers stopping at bus stands for barely ten to twenty seconds.

His family rushing to board the buses.

Ashram still carried traces of that old ambience, connecting Raj to his childhood.

Ajitesh's house presented a vibrant atmosphere full of excitement.

It had been a long time since Raj had properly connected with his family, so the first thing he did was call home.

His father, brother, and Bhabhi were his emotional anchors.

His mother had passed away long ago, and that remained one of the biggest blows of his life.

As soon as Raj finished the call, bed tea and snacks arrived.

Sonali entered the room.

“Bhaiya, today you have to accompany us for shopping for my mehndi rasam tomorrow.”

Raj hesitated a little, but agreed.

His bachelorhood had always been a highly debatable topic among relatives and even outsiders.

At times, people had gone to the extent of questioning his gender or preferences.

“Kya soch rahe ho, Bhaiya? Aaj chalna hai, matlab chalna hai,” Sonali said in an assertive tone.

Her voice broke his thoughts.

“Ajitesh bhaiya ki choice toh aap jaante ho. He’s a pakka zombie when it comes to shopping,” she added teasingly.

“Okay, Sonali,” Raj replied.

It was already past afternoon by the time Ajitesh joined them for lunch.

All these years, Raj had known Ajitesh as someone quiet—neither too assertive nor too talkative.

He always preferred doing things at a slow pace, without drawing much attention to himself.

Raj had not always been like that, but the pounding of life over the last fifteen to twenty years had changed him.

The house presented a vibrant picture.

Relatives. Friends.

People constantly coming and going.

Sonali had to buy matching accessories for the mehndi ceremony.

Although Ashram and the markets in New Friends Colony could have sufficed, she preferred Connaught Place and the surrounding area.

The Tibetan market around CP was the place she had in mind.

Sonali's bargaining skills were next level, and the Tibetan market gave her plenty of opportunity to use them.

Sonali bought beautiful earrings, elegant armlets, and several other accessories.

All the bargaining left Ajitesh visibly rattled.

Once or twice he tried to stop her, but everything went over her head.

"Bhaiya, aap aur Raj bhaiya ne toh shaadi ki nahi hai. Ab mujhe toh apne armband poore karne do," (bhaiya you and Ajitesh bhaiya are not married but let me complete my dreams). She said in a hilarious tone.

Raj enjoyed the vibrancy of the shops—the colors, jewelry, braids, and endless accessories.

Next, Sonali entered a footwear shop that had one of the best sandal collections in the area.

After carefully inspecting each counter, she finally selected a beautiful sandal with straps.

“Bhaiya, iske kitne paise?” she asked the salesman.

“Madam, 1500,” he replied.

“Kya bhaiya, itne zyada? Main 1000 se zyada nahi dunggi.”

“Madam, 1200 de dijiye,” the shopkeeper replied.

“Nahi bhaiya. 1000 toh 1000.”

“Okay madam,” the shopkeeper finally replied in a defeated tone.

Raj smiled.

He had always imagined buying a beautiful pair of sandals for his wife someday.

Sadly, that moment had never come.

Those hidden desires had remained buried under years of distress.

Thankfully, for Sonali he was still “Bhaiya.”

For the outside world, however, “Uncle ji” had already been added to his introduction.

On the positive side, he had accepted it and moved on gracefully.

“Raj, chal ghar chalte hain. Shopping poori ho gayi hai. Shaam ke liye taiyaari bhi karni hai.” (Raj , lets go home , shopping is done will have to prepare for evening).

“Aaj mehndi hai, toh please enjoy kariyo and relax,” (Today is Mehndi ,so please relax and enjoy). Ajitesh said.

Maybe Ajitesh had sensed his inner turmoil and was trying to ease it.

The house radiated happiness.

Chapter 7

The Perfect Setting

The festivities had started gaining momentum.

The DJ arrived and set up all the important sound and electrical equipment.

Although the mehndi ceremony was officially scheduled for the next day—the day of the wedding—today’s gathering was more of a small ritual combined with ladies’ sangeet and celebration.

By the time the clock struck six, the atmosphere had slowly begun gravitating toward light banter and merry-making.

For the occasion, Sonali had chosen a beautiful peach-colored lehenga.

She looked gorgeous.

If Raj had a real sister, this would have been the kind of gift he would have loved to give her.

Raj had bought a necklace for the bride, but wanted to save it for the wedding night.

Ajitesh was ready too, though his reserved nature always held him back—much like Raj.

The caterer had been busy since morning, and the aroma of delicious snacks slowly filled the air, awakening insatiable hunger.

Sonali’s friends gradually started arriving.

Her boss, who happened to be Irish, also arrived with his wife.

For them, it was something of a cultural shock, attending such Indian festivities for the first time.

Keeping the importance of the occasion in mind, Raj had transformed himself from a barbarian into a reasonably presentable human being.

The evening effort of shaving and touching up his hair had paid off.

Wearing a blue shirt and black trousers, he looked good.

Almost like a transition from fifty to forty.

Still, he felt slightly shy.

As guests arrived, so did the energy.

As the DJ played Bhabhi Tera Devar Deewana, the atmosphere turned into full-on masti.

Everyone danced and enjoyed the music, especially Sonali and her friends.

Ajitesh, as usual, remained busy overseeing the arrangements.

But the satisfaction on his face—seeing his sister so happy—was on another level.

Raj helped himself to the snacks, while the papri chaat and gulgappa counter quickly became the main attraction.

The music gradually shifted toward contemporary songs Raj barely knew, though the old classics still connected with him instantly.

Suddenly Sonali came toward him.

“Bhaiya, please aap bhi dance kar sakte ho. (come join us bhaiya for dance) You know, some of my friends are quite curious about you.”

“Woh keh rahi hain—yeh cute uncle kaun hai?”(they are inquiring about cute Uncle)

She burst into laughter.

Cute was acceptable.

But the addition of uncle disrupted everything.

Cute had always been one compliment Raj received throughout his life, along with handsome.

But with time, even those compliments had become rare.

He could see some of Sonali's friends smiling and inviting him to dance.

But his hesitant nature became a barrier again.

Sonali even dragged her boss and his wife to the dance floor.

To everyone's surprise, it seemed as if they were made for it.

Raj could see the satisfaction on Ajitesh and Sonali's mother's faces.

How beautifully she had raised both children after their father's untimely death.

At that moment, every worry of Raj's seemed to disappear.

He wanted to dance.

Yet something still held him back.

Suddenly the DJ played Laila Main Laila.

That became the final temptation.

Raj found himself on the dance floor.

Though his dance style resembled classic Dharamji moves, it was surprisingly good.

Sonali's Gen Z friends enjoyed it thoroughly.

And it gave Raj confidence that something still remained alive within these ruins.

He had always wanted to perform on stage.

Life had never given him that chance.

The energy caught the Irish couple too.

Slowly, they began enjoying the celebration fully.

Then came the actual mehndi ritual.

Sonali's mother brought mehndi in a silver bowl and gently applied a little to Sonali's forehead.

At that moment, both mother and daughter became emotional.

They understood the gravity of the moment.

Although Sonali had been living in Ireland for the last two years, this felt different.

This was transition.

This was farewell.

Maybe these were the emotions of a mother who had lovingly raised both her children and watched them become self-sufficient.

As Raj continued enjoying the snacks, two of Sonali's batchmates—now high in the corporate hierarchy—approached him.

“You dance very well, sir.”

Thank God it ended at sir rather than going the other way, Raj thought.

Some aunties, meanwhile, remained fully focused on refilling their plates again and again.

The golgappa wala was having a hard time keeping up.

“Bhaiya, meetha paani... teekha paani...”

That was all that mattered to them.

Raj had finally grown tired.

Both he and Ajitesh stepped outside into the verandah and spent a few quiet moments reflecting on everything.

Raj noticed the deep satisfaction on Ajitesh's face; he had successfully navigated a difficult transition.

As night deepened, Raj felt something unfamiliar.

Peace.

After a long time, he felt relaxed and happy.

Moonlight filtered through the trees.

Its reflection through the leaves created a beautiful sight.

Chapter 8

Departure for Shingaar Garden

The ladies' sangeet had turned out to be a fun-filled occasion, temporarily washing away the pain Raj had carried for years.

For a few hours, Raj had allowed himself to enjoy the celebration without carrying the past.

By morning, the house was alive again over paranthas, curd, tea, and the usual wedding chatter.

Sonali's friends had started gathering since morning, and the compliments Raj had received the previous night had infused a little energy into his worn-out bones.

Though age had advanced, Raj still did not mind occasionally peeping through the door and catching a glimpse of them.

After all, in his youth he had been quite charming when it came to the opposite sex.

With a hectic evening ahead, Raj decided to catch up on sleep after breakfast.

Raj's room was adjacent to the main hall where the wedding celebrations were in full swing, so it was difficult to doze off.

Still, despite the commotion, he eventually fell asleep.

By the time he woke up, it was well past afternoon.

He too had to get ready for the occasion.

After a fresh cup of tea, Raj began transforming himself—from Veer Pratap Singh of Veer-Zaara into Raj of Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge.

Sonali had chosen a pink and dark blue lehenga for the evening.

With matching accessories, she looked stunning.

The haldi ceremony had been completed beautifully.

Raj too, in his grey suit, looked quite decent for a middle-aged man.

The ensemble suited him well.

Suddenly Sonali entered his room and teased him again.

“Bhaiya, aaj toh aap kaafi handsome lag rahe ho. Dekhna, kahin saari attention aap hi na le jaana.”(bhaiya ,looking very handsome today , I fear you might be the centre of attraction than me)

Raj placed his hand gently on Sonali’s head.

“Bless you, bacche. May God bless you.”

At that moment, he felt more like a fatherly figure than a brother.

By the time everyone was ready, all the relatives had gathered at the house, prepared for departure to Shingaar Garden, the wedding resort.

As departure time approached, Raj noticed something unusual.

For the first time, he saw Ajitesh smiling without tension.

Maybe Ajitesh was one of those rare people who never openly showed emotions and preferred to keep them hidden behind a curtain of rigidity.

Just before departure, Ajitesh came to Raj.

His voice was heavy.

“Raj... I have always loved Sonali the most.”

“I am unable to show my emotions, but I hope she gets everything in life.”

Raj silently nodded.

The drive to Shingaar Garden would take time in the evening traffic.

Sonali’s friends were cheerful.

A few of them teasingly glanced at Raj again, making him feel awkward—yet secretly happy.

After all the final preparations were complete, the bride’s family and friends finally left for the resort.

Chapter 9

No Eye Contact

Shingaar Garden was normally about an hour away, but Delhi's wedding traffic stretched the drive to nearly ninety minutes.

The auspicious muhurat meant several weddings were taking place at the same time, adding to the congestion.

The resort-cum-marriage palace justified the journey: spacious lawns, elegant seating, fountains, and lights gave the venue a festive glow.

Guests from the bride's side filtered in as snacks began circulating.

Raj made himself comfortable and observed the activities around him.

Sonali was busy with the final touches.

She looked beautiful.

Sonali's Irish boss and his wife were enjoying the snacks too.

The spices were a bit heavy for them, especially the pav bhaji, yet they seemed to enjoy everything.

Suddenly Raj felt uneasy.

Standing beside Sonali's Irish boss and his wife was someone who seemed strangely familiar.

A face time had almost erased from memory.

Sometimes life placed a person in impossible situations.

“Oh God... please woh na ho.”

As Raj tried to process what he was seeing, Ajitesh came toward him.

“Come, Raj. I’ll introduce you to Shekhar, Sonali’s immediate boss. He has come all the way from Ireland with his wife.”

“But I thought Mr. Xavier was her boss?”

“No, he is the overall head. Sonali’s direct boss is Shekhar Ravi. He’s originally from India, now settled in Ireland with his wife.”

As Raj began walking toward Shekhar and his wife, his heartbeat grew heavier.

It felt as if a metal chain had wrapped around his chest.

“Nahi... woh nahi ho sakti...” (no ...she can’t be)

Then came eye contact.

It was the moment Raj had avoided for years.

It was Malini.

The person who had once been his emotional refuge.

His confidante.

His closest companion.

She was busy interacting with Xavier and his wife.

And she had transformed completely.

The nightmare Raj had always feared had become reality.

Just as he was about to reach Shekhar, a voice interrupted.

“Ajitesh bhaiya, Sonali aapko aur Raj ji ko bula rahi hai.” (Ajitesh bhaiya ,Sonali is calling you and Raj)

It was the perfect intervention.

Immediately both turned and moved toward Sonali’s room.

Raj's mind entered a state of delirium.

He could barely process what was happening.

His thoughts spun wildly.

How could this happen?

How much more could life ask him to endure?

From a distance, Raj positioned himself carefully so Malini could not notice him, though he could see her clearly.

His heart skipped a beat.

Maybe more.

How much she had changed.

From a simple South Indian beauty, she had transformed into a refined NRI.

Straight hair.

Polished appearance.

Radiant confidence.

Everything about her felt different.

Sonali had mentioned that Shekhar had married two years ago and that his wife now worked alongside him as a consultant in one of Ireland's reputed companies.

The defining moment finally came when Ajitesh took Raj to meet Shekhar.

"Hello Mr. Shekhar, I hope everything is fine. Sonali speaks very highly of your leadership."

"I'm good," Shekhar replied warmly.

"Meet my wife, Malini. She wasn't keen on coming to India, but I insisted."

“Hello,” Malini said.

But when she saw Raj—
nothing.

Absolutely no emotion.

As if she had never known him.

As if he had never existed.

“Shekhs, I’m feeling a little suffocated out here. I’d like to go indoors.”

“Okay Mel,” replied Shekhar.

She walked away.

“She has become a little allergic to heat now. Living in a country like Ireland makes you sensitive to dust and pollution.”

It was as if none of it had ever mattered to her.

Soon the baraat arrived, and everyone, including Ajitesh, became busy.

The groom and his friends danced with full energy.

Ajitesh and the close family stood at the reception waiting for them.

Vikram entered after the ribbon ceremony.

The music grew louder.

Guests danced and celebrated.

Vikram looked dapper in his sherwani.

Soon it was time for the varmala ceremony before the pheras.

Both bride and groom looked beautiful.

Vikram garlanded Sonali first.

When Sonali's turn came, Vikram's friends mischievously lifted him upward.

"Raj bhaiya, please help karo na!"

Soon Ajitesh and Raj lifted Sonali, and the ceremony was completed amid laughter.

Later, Vikram came toward Raj and touched his feet, seeking blessings.

That moment made Raj unexpectedly happy.

The love Ajitesh's family had for him felt raw and genuine.

Meanwhile, Malini seemed more comfortable with the foreign guests than with the Indian ones.

It was clear she had changed.

She was married to a successful software engineer in Ireland.

She herself was thriving professionally.

What more could one ask for?

And here he was.

Standing at a crossroads once again.

Why was destiny so cruel?

Whenever he tried to feel happy, life struck like lightning.

Slowly the marriage rituals progressed.

Dinner was served.

Raj noticed something painful.

Not once had Malini made eye contact with him.

Not once.

Even her food choices had changed.

Selective.

Measured.

Different.

Yeh duniya, yeh mehfil mere kaam ki nahi—that was the song the DJ should have played instead of romantic numbers.

Slowly guests began leaving after dinner.

Only close relatives remained.

One final time Raj came near Malini when Shekhar approached to bless the couple.

Still— nothing.

No expression.

No acknowledgment.

As if Raj did not exist in her story.

The wedding rituals concluded beautifully.

But the most heartbreaking moment came during the bidai.

Sonali cried inconsolably.

The atmosphere filled with sorrow.

At that moment, Raj remembered his mother.

How often she had insisted he get married.

A wish he had never fulfilled.

He had made mistakes.

Many mistakes.

Life sometimes extracted a heavy price for them.

Finally, Vikram placed his arm around Sonali, and both moved toward the car.

Suddenly the sky turned dark.

Within moments, rain began pouring.

Slowly, the convoy of cars moved into the night.

Chapter 10

The Great Escape

Morning felt painfully heavy—for the family and for Raj.

“Why on earth does this keep happening to me? Why can God not even let me breathe freely for one minute?”

Tension had completely gripped him.

Raj decided to cancel his return to Mumbai and head instead to Chandigarh to be with his family.

His return ticket was already confirmed, and cancellation before the mandatory twenty-four-hour window did not cost him much.

He conveyed the same to Ajitesh.

The real reason, however, was something else.

He wanted to avoid any further contact with Sonali’s boss.

For the pagphere rasam, Sonali was returning home, and the family had planned a small get-together for the groom, his family, and Sonali’s office staff.

Obviously, Shekhar would be there.

And Malini too.

That would only deepen his humiliation.

He wanted to run—far enough to avoid another encounter. For one absurd second, he even imagined drowning in the Yamuna, though its pollution made even that fantasy ridiculous.

The best option was to catch the afternoon Jan Shatabdi Express and disappear.

Shekhar represented everything Raj had aspired to become.

Success.

Status.

Respect.

Influence.

His schedule was so demanding that even for Sonali's wedding he had to reschedule meetings with key partners.

It seemed Malini had made an intelligent choice.

Whether circumstances had shaped that choice or not was debatable.

But objectively, it seemed the right choice.

Malini herself had transitioned from consultant to a successful banker.

The previous night had drained him completely.

It felt as if every ounce of energy had been squeezed out of his body.

“Bhag ja bhai... yahan se.” (run ...from here)

“Warna teri bahut beizzati hogi.” (lots of humiliation in store)

“Waise bhi teri koi khaas izzat hai nahi.”(anyhow you don't have much respect)

“Par jo thodi bahut bachi hai, usko uthaa aur nikal yahan se.”(whatever pride you have just run)

Raj argued with himself.

The best plan was to leave immediately before another encounter with Malini and her husband.

He wasn't even in their league.

So the only option was escape.

Straight out of the legendary The Great Escape.

Like Steve McQueen racing toward freedom with one final objective—to cross the German border and reach Switzerland.

Unfortunately, even in that film, the bike failed him.

Ajitesh noticed something was wrong.

“Bro, all okay? Since last night you seem a little depressed.”

“Everything is okay, bro. It's just that I want some time off.”

“Kuch kha toh le. Train mein dhakke milenge, khaana nahi.”

Raj gave a faint smile.

Dhakke toh zindagi ne de hi diye hain, he thought.

Ajitesh's mother also insisted.

“Please stay tonight. You can go tomorrow.”

Though Raj felt like a trapped soldier, he had to give in.

His hunger had vanished.

Even eating a single chapati felt difficult.

Ironically, the food was delicious.

But distress often kills appetite faster than illness.

By evening, it was time for the pagphere ritual, and Sonali and Vikram arrived.

The moment Sonali entered the house, she hugged her mother and broke into tears.

It felt like a reunion after ages.

Along with tears came relief.

Love.

Belonging.

The fragrance of the house she had grown up in now felt different.

It was still home.

But no longer hers in the same way.

Raj watched quietly.

For the first time that day, his own pain momentarily stepped aside.

Some bonds, he realized, never truly break.

They simply change form.

Chapter 11

The Final Blow

Raj was at least relieved that Shekhar and Malini were not coming to Sonali's house.

Thank God.

At least the night would not kill him.

Sonali and Vikram were not staying overnight.

Vikram had to leave for Brussels early the next morning.

The ceremony had been kept simple—a small reunion followed by dinner.

Raj had joined them and was taking part in the conversation.

How two to three hours passed, nobody could tell.

Soon it was dinner time, and everyone was preparing to eat.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, two familiar faces appeared.

Shekhar.

And Malini.

It felt as if his worst nightmare had come true.

Her black dress complemented her stockings and stilettos perfectly.

The lipstick matched her nail color.

She looked stunning.

Beautiful.

After a brief glance, however, she returned to her phone.

Raj's presence was insignificant to her.

"Sorry Sonali, I have just come to wish you for your future," Shekhar said.

"Sir, please dinner toh kar lijiye," Sonali requested.

"No, Sonali. Mel has some shopping left before we fly back."

"Best of luck."

Within minutes, both hurried out.

They had barely stayed ten to fifteen minutes.

But for Malini, even those minutes meant nothing.

Raj felt intense pain.

Suddenly he stood up.

"Sonali... meri thodi tabiyat theek nahi hai. I wish you both everlasting happiness."

Then, glancing briefly toward Ajitesh and his mother, he headed straight into the room.

He locked the door.

And wept.

Wept bitterly.

His mother's death had once squeezed almost every emotion out of him.

But this night felt different.

The tears kept flowing.

And somewhere amidst that storm, he fell asleep.

Morning felt unbearably heavy.

He wanted to escape everything.

After morning tea and light snacks, he was ready.

“Ajitesh, main chalta hoon now. Aunty ko mat disturb kariyo.”

“Unhe rest karne do, please.”

“But bro, it’s too early,” Ajitesh replied.

“No issue. I’ll spend time at the platform. I’ll try getting an online ticket, otherwise I’ll get one from the station.”

“I’ve called an Uber. Main chalunga.”

Ajitesh hugged him tightly.

“Keep rising higher and higher in life, bro.”

An emotional Ajitesh replied softly.

“You too.”

By the time Raj reached the station, the sweltering heat had already become unbearable.

Fortunately, he got a confirmed ticket in the general compartment of Jan Shatabdi Express.

Four hours remained before departure.

And what better way to pass time than observing station life?

Passengers rushing.

Trains arriving.

Trains departing.

Half an hour before departure, he got up and headed toward Platform 10.

The coaches were slowly filling up.

Inside, it felt like a blazing tandoor.

Finally, the train departed.

Raj took a deep breath.

A sigh of relief escaped him.

He had successfully crossed the border—

Unlike The Great Escape.

Chapter 12

Window to the Past

Jan Shatabdi had barely gathered speed when, at Sabzi Mandi, it came to a screeching halt.

The heat was brutal, and Raj could not afford the AC class, which would have cost seven to eight hundred rupees.

Fortunately, he had a window seat without glass panes, and the rushing air offered some relief.

Maybe this analogy suited his life too.

Starting with a bang.

Then gradually slowing down.

As a child, his family had huge expectations from him.

Expectations he had never fulfilled.

Suddenly, with a loud siren, the electric locomotive pulled the train forward.

Slowly it gathered momentum.

With time, his childhood hero—the diesel engine—had been almost completely replaced by electric locomotives.

Another change.

Another loss.

For ordinary passengers it was routine progress.

For Raj, it felt personal.

He missed the roar of diesel engines.

Soon a vendor entered shouting—

“Chana dal! Karari chana dal!”

Raj had skipped lunch, and hunger had finally caught up.

He had three hundred rupees in his wallet. Two hundred had to be saved for the auto-rickshaw, leaving only one hundred.

A thirty-rupee plate of chana dal would still leave enough for his beloved Ambala chole kulchas.

“Saala, iss pyaar ke chapter mein kuch nahi khaya,” he thought. (this love of mine has kept me famished since morning)

The chana dal, mixed with onion, tomato, green chili, and masala, smelled irresistible. Raj ordered a plate and devoured it.

As the train sped forward, memories slowly returned.

Memories of Mumbai.

Memories of the institute.

Memories of Malini.

But it had not been love at first sight.

Love at first sight had happened only once in Raj’s life.

And that too had ended in disaster.

Mumbai.

The city where he had arrived to pursue post-graduation at the age of forty-five.

An age when he should ideally have been guiding his own children toward college admissions.

Yet here he was.

An “Uncle ji” who had cleared the entrance test and had come to Mumbai for the second time in life to attend the personal interview.

As soon as he entered the campus, the security guard had asked:

“Uncle, kidhar jaana hai?” (uncle ,where ?)

The words carried a mix of Hindi and Marathi.

Though it wasn’t his first encounter with “Uncle ji,” the phenomenon had begun much earlier.

And it irritated him immensely.

Whenever someone asked:

“Uncle, kya aap bata sakte ho yeh raasta kidhar jaata hai?”

His inner response was usually—

“Bhaad mein.”

Meaning: to hell.

The pain became worse when a beautiful girl asked the same question.

Though in that case, his internal response became slightly milder.

Soon he was seated before the interview panel.

The first question came.

“Raj, will you be able to handle the tough schedule of daily assignments and deadlines?”

“And where do you see yourself ten years from now?”

Frankly, he had no answer.

The half-hour interview went surprisingly well.

It felt as though a huge burden had lifted from his shoulders.

And seeing so many beautiful girls on campus, he thought maybe this was not a bad decision after all.

Planning a visit to Juhu Beach became the perfect getaway for the next day.

His train back was scheduled for evening, giving him the entire day free.

His first-ever brush with Mumbai locals—from Dadar to Andheri—felt terrifying.

The rush overwhelmed him.

Then came the auto ride to Juhu.

Walking barefoot on the hot sand.

Those memories still felt like yesterday.

The vast sea stretched before him.

It reminded him of the beach at Puri, a vacation his parents had once taken him on during happier days.

Sitting there and watching waves crash onto the shore while airplanes flew overhead gave him immense peace.

The beach was nearly empty.

Only a few youngsters were scattered around.

The famous Sun-n-Sand hotel overlooked the beach.

A place immortalized in countless iconic films.

Raj had wanted to sit by the pool and enjoy a coffee there.

But financial constraints stopped him.

The sea brings joy and peace.

But the same sea at night can feel terrifying to someone afraid of deep water.

No coffee that day, but the buttery pav bhaji from a beach stall almost compensated for the missed luxury.

Just as Raj was lost in these memories, the train slowed down.

Panipat station.

His thoughts were interrupted as the train finally came to a halt.

Chapter 13

A New Beginning

Slowly, the train approached Ambala station.

The station had always been one of the major transit points for trains.

The bookstall still stood there.

A place filled with fond memories.

Raj had bought many comics there during childhood while traveling either to Delhi or Amritsar.

Among them was a comic on Muhammad Ali that he still kept.

He remembered waiting at the station late at night with his family.

The waiting room.

The canteen.

Everything felt familiar.

Only time had changed.

The memories of Juhu Beach and the return journey to Delhi still felt incredible.

Although the tough academic schedule had frightened him, the dream of living in Mumbai kept pulling him forward.

Another secret dream also lived within him.

Maybe someday some producer would spot him.

And somehow he would enter the world of cinema.

His fantasy of becoming a hero had finally faded with age.

Now he imagined himself in character roles.

He deeply admired legendary character actors of the 1980s—Om Shivpuri, Pinchoo Kapoor, and his favourite, Kader Khan.

He had always wanted to play an iconic role like Shakaal from Shaan.

Though, to be honest, Inspector Shiv Kumar played by Sunil Dutt fascinated him even more.

That fantasy too had pulled him toward Mumbai.

Finally, he had made it to the institute.

Now came the hectic practical arrangements.

Those preparations reminded him of his boarding school days.

Mumbai was a city built on opportunities.

Yet finding suitable accommodation remained one of the biggest challenges.

Fortunately for Raj, that problem had been solved through his brother's friend, who helped him find a comfortable one-room set.

Perfect for a bachelor like Raj.

Adjusting to Navi Mumbai was not difficult.

In many ways, it reminded him of Chandigarh.

The greenery.

The roads.

The planned layout.

The first day at the institute felt heavy.

A middle-aged man in his mid-forties trying to find his place among a young crowd.

Many even assumed he was an anxious parent escorting a student.

Another thing troubled him.

Introductions.

How would his batchmates adjust with him?

Would the “Uncle” factor return?

Would that same discomfort begin again?

As he moved through the students, he noticed a few hands waving toward him.

Though introductions had already happened on social media, real interaction was still pending.

Suddenly he saw two girls walking toward him.

“Bhaiya, aap Raj ho na?”(Bhaiya ,you Raj)

“Haan,” Raj replied.

“Bhaiya, I’m Tripti, and she’s Ahaana. Both from your batch.”

“Come, everybody is waiting,” Tripti said.

“Bhaiya” from girls still felt soothing.

It felt like something inside the phoenix was still alive.

That he was not standing entirely in ruins.

The whole batch was waiting for him.

Most of them were nearly half his age.

Though he felt some discomfort, the transition from “Uncle” to “Bhaiya” felt far more comforting.

Ultimately, feeling relieved, they all walked inside the conference hall for the Orientation Ceremony.

The train stopped at Platform 7.

Raj could smell the familiar aroma of chole kulche in the air.

Slowly he stepped down.

Platform 1—the repository of countless memories—stood before him.

“Do plate dena, bhai.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the hundred-rupee note for the vendor.

Chapter 14

Homecoming

The platform was lined with food stalls, and the smell of hot chole kulche immediately awakened Raj 's Amritsari taste buds.

Fresh chole with kulchas had always felt heavenly to him, though that day even one plate was enough.

Ambala station had always been known for its long halts.

The sun was slowly setting, painting a beautiful picture.

The sunlight softened, and long shadows began engulfing the station.

When Barauni Express entered the platform, the calm vanished and passengers rushed toward the general coaches with luggage and families in tow.

Ambala, one of North India's major transit points, seemed to be operating at full capacity.

The train departed from Ambala and within half an hour reached Chandigarh.

Chandigarh still felt meticulously planned, though its railway station had changed completely.

The station had changed completely.

Massive steel girders now stretched across multiple platforms.

The once simple station had transformed into something resembling an airport terminal.

Raj stepped out and headed toward the auto-rickshaw stand.

“Saheb kidhar jaana hai? Aap baitho.”

Voices echoed from every direction.

After bargaining, he settled on two hundred rupees and headed home.

By the time he reached home, only twenty-five rupees remained in his wallet.

Facing a park and surrounded by huge trees, Raj’s residence offered the perfect weekend setting.

Yet despite living there for years, Raj had never developed the kind of emotional bond with Chandigarh that he had with Mumbai and Amritsar.

His mother’s death had weakened that bond even further.

His love for his family was intense.

The only problem was that he rarely expressed it openly.

As he entered the house, the photograph of his mother, adorned with a garland, reminded him of the bitter truth.

His father blessed him.

The rest of the family was happy to see him too.

The storm inside him had calmed—but not disappeared.

The tempest would return.

Mumbai’s pace had helped him heal his wounds.

The quiet atmosphere of home reopened them.

His father had always been a source of strength.

A retired government officer from a highly respected position, he had carried great expectations for Raj.

Raj often felt he had failed to live up to them.

That remained another wound.

His family had always been loving and supportive.

Perhaps his own sensitivity prevented him from feeling fully relaxed.

Suddenly, the Labrador came rushing toward him and pounced like a cheetah.

“Bas, bas! Abe chhod mujhe!”(leave me) Raj repeated.

The servant quickly came and pulled Zavi away.

“Kuch khaane ke liye bana dena,” (prepare something delicious) .
Raj said softly.

Home food was always special.

That taste could never truly be replicated.

His mother used to prepare delicious arhar dal and rajma.

He never experienced that exact taste again.

His father’s strong personality often made him feel like the supreme authority in the household.

His brother and bhabhi had gone to attend a function and were expected back late.

The best option now was to go upstairs, take a bath, and relax.

Maybe switch on the TV and watch whatever nonsense was playing.

But the memories of Malini had returned.

And they were intense.

Lying on the bed, his thoughts drifted back to their first meeting.

It was already eleven at night when he finally tried to push everything aside.

Memories kept spinning inside his head.

Old encounters.

Old wounds.

Dreams waiting to haunt his sleep.

The bed, with all its softness, became the perfect refuge for surrendering to sleep.

Chapter 15

Join Me

The orientation ceremony of such a prestigious institute made Raj uncomfortable for the first time.

Surrounded by youngsters half his age—the pure Gen Z crowd—he felt distinctly out of place.

The enthusiasm was clearly written on their faces.

As the ceremony progressed, Raj found himself physically present but mentally somewhere else.

He sincerely hoped for a break.

The lunch break gave him the perfect opportunity to escape from the heavy atmosphere.

Even during his graduation days, he had never experienced a proper mess system.

Standing in line after so many years, collecting a coupon, and then finally getting food felt like a unique experience.

Fortunately, within two hours he had already started bonding with his batchmates.

The transition from “Uncle ji” to “Bhaiya” remained his biggest relief.

He was searching for a quiet place.

Suddenly, a sharp voice from behind interrupted his thoughts.

“Join me.”

Raj turned.

“Hi, I am Malini. I guess you are from Health School? So am I,” she said.

“Par aap toh mere batch ki nahi ho?”

“Main dusre course se hoon,” (If am from other course). Malini replied in broken Hindi, clearly revealing her limitations with the language.

Malini belonged to another branch of the Health School.

She appeared simple, but the way she dressed reflected her personality.

A simple white salwar suit.

Typical South Indian slippers.

Small earrings.

Everything about her appearance radiated understated elegance.

Her eyes were highly expressive.

It felt as if they were constantly trying to say something.

The confidence in her tone and the intensity of those sharp eyes reflected a strong personality.

Though her Hindi was broken, it somehow sounded charming.

Their food habits also differed.

Raj, being North Indian, leaned more toward chapatis.

Malini preferred rice.

Raj had found his first real friend at the institute.

One could not call it love at first sight.

That episode had happened only once in his life—and, as usual, had ended badly.

This felt different.

More like a warm connection with someone intelligent and grounded.

“Aap abhi chalega kya second half ke liye?” she asked.(will you attend the second half).

Raj had already endured enough during those three hours.

Attending the remaining session would have been disastrous.

“Nahi... abhi mujhe kahin jaana hai.” (no have some other work)

Both got up and headed toward their respective destinations.

It had been a good experience after all these years.

Entering an institute again after so long felt refreshing.

The way the batch had accepted him felt genuinely sweet.

They had truly embraced Raj.

That memory remained etched in his mind.

Maybe something still remained alive within him.

Charm.

Presence.

Appeal.

Maybe he could still command attention.

Those thoughts made him feel younger.

Suddenly, noise from outside disturbed his thoughts and brought him back to the present.

“Raj, khaana kha le aa ke.”

His bhabhi was calling him.

The rajma, curd, and gobi looked delicious.

Food still connected him deeply to his past.

Dinner was quiet.

There was not much conversation.

Later, he went to his room.

After watching a late-night Hindi movie, he tried to sleep.

But sleep refused to come.

Malini’s face.

Her voice.

Her presence.

Everything kept rotating inside his head.

He could not brush it away.

Finally, he got up, took his medication, and lay back on the bed.

Chapter 16

On the Rocks

Morning felt heavy.

The thoughts of Malini still spun relentlessly inside Raj's head.

The ghost had finally risen.

No matter how hard he tried to suppress those feelings, they refused to disappear.

Strangely, he felt unusually hungry that morning.

Good food, at such times, felt like a necessity.

So he ordered a heavy breakfast—gobhi parantha, curd, and tea.

“Jaldi se bana de. Dhyan rahe zyada mirchi nahi. Aur mere kamre mein le aayio.” (prepare something quick ,not much spicy and bring it in my room).

At home, Raj still carried full swag.

No one challenged him.

It was the attitude of someone returning home after intense manual labor.

Breakfast was excellent.

Combined with television, it felt even better.

Munching food while watching high-octane television drama was strangely satisfying.

After such a heavy breakfast, sleep naturally followed.

And sleep came heavily.

By the time he woke up, it was nearly five in the evening.

The events of the past few days had exhausted him.

The best thing now was simply to chill.

His personal ATM had always been his father.

The one man who never refused him money.

At this stage of life, asking for money felt humiliating.

But Raj's skin had grown thick.

"Papa, 2000 dena. Market jaana hai."

"Raat ko late ho jayega."

Money in his pocket felt like the ultimate prize.

And to add to that glory—

the original Yamaha RX100.

It belonged to his elder brother, but Raj had full access to it.

The RX100 remained a beast.

On Chandigarh's clean roads, it felt magical.

That feeling was unmatched.

And if a beautiful partner happened to sit behind—

even better.

Though Raj was never a heavy drinker, sometimes he simply needed a change of atmosphere.

The easiest option was the local theka.

But with two thousand rupees, even a decent bar was possible.

Raj entered a posh bar.

Smoke and the strong smell of alcohol greeted him.

“Sir, what can I get for you?” the waiter asked.

“Two large. On the rocks.”

Money felt like treasure.

Like a genie capable of granting temporary wishes.

That moment insulated him from everything.

Just sit.

Drink.

Observe.

Singles.

Couples.

Broken men.

Happy men.

Bars revealed every human emotion.

Happiness and sadness both sat at different tables.

And strangely, drinks seemed to be the solution for both.

Raj had mostly given up drinking.

But sometimes he justified it.

Not as indulgence.

As medicine.

Healing through numbness.

Two drinks were done.

The temptation for a third emerged.
But another thought stopped him.
Would he still be able to ride back home safely?
That was the real question.
Finally, common sense prevailed.
He stood up, paid the bill, and headed out.
It had been a strangely relaxing evening.
Almost free of tension.
As he walked out of the bar, his gait was slightly unsteady.
Slowly he walked toward the bike.
He started it.
And rode away.
The cool breeze greeted him on the journey home.

Chapter 17

Fresher's Night

Riding back home, Raj's mind wandered again.

Maybe it was the smooth handover of the drinks.

The effect had begun.

Sweet memories came flooding back.

On the nearly deserted roads of Chandigarh, the Yamaha RX100 moved at a leisurely pace.

Institute life had begun, and slowly Raj had started adjusting to it.

The routine that once looked exhausting had now become manageable.

It was roughly two weeks into the course.

One evening, just as classes were about to end, the class representative came to him.

"Bhaiya, next week the seniors are giving us a fresher's party. Will you come?"

"Okay... I'll see," Raj replied.

The invitation excited him.

But his age-related hesitation made him uncertain.

How would he interact with seniors and other students?

That remained his biggest inhibition.

Still, after relentless persuasion from batchmates and others, he finally agreed.

For the entire week, he waited for that evening.

Finally, the day arrived.

The party promised to be a youthful affair.

Raj specially visited a mall and bought a flashy shirt for himself.

It was a paradox.

One side of him wanted to avoid the limelight.

The child inside still craved joy and attention.

The party began.

Slowly seniors and juniors started gathering.

The transformation was astonishing.

Everyone looked stunning.

Though Raj had developed a good bond with many, one person he especially waited for was Malini.

Most of her coursemates had arrived.

But she had not.

Though his comfort with her was still nothing beyond friendship... her absence felt noticeable.

Then Malini entered.

And Raj froze.

The transformation from the simple girl he knew to this elegant version was striking.

Her dress, those beautiful earrings, and the stilettos completed the look perfectly.

It felt like a complete 180-degree transformation.

Raj could not help glancing at her secretly.

She wore minimal makeup.

Yet she radiated.

She noticed him.

And smiled.

The party mood grew festive.

Introductions began.

Seniors introduced themselves and then called upon juniors.

Raj introduced himself too, though hesitantly.

Apart from Malini, others also genuinely appreciated him.

In fact, almost everyone Raj met during those two years appreciated one thing—

his honesty.

Slowly the atmosphere became lighter.

Seniors and juniors mingled.

Light music played in the background.

Raj helped himself to a drink.

Even while sitting alone, he enjoyed the vibe.

So many beautiful women around naturally boosted the “Venus” in his horoscope.

One game especially became fun.

The “Choose Your Dance Partner” game.

Everyone had to pick a slip from a jar.

Whoever's name appeared became the dance partner.

Raj hesitated.

But after everyone insisted, he joined.

Then came an unexpected compliment.

“Aap bahut cute ho.”

The words stunned him.

It was his dance partner speaking.

And somehow, in that moment, it felt wonderful.

The next ten to fifteen minutes felt heavenly.

Malini had been enjoying herself too.

Suddenly she came and sat beside Raj.

“Hi, how are you?” she asked.

“I am fine,” he replied.

“Aap dance kyun nahi kar raha?” she asked in broken Hindi.

“Agar iss Umar mein dance kiya, toh saari haddiyan toot jayengi.”

(If I dance at this age, all my bones will break.)

She smiled.

A soft, beautiful smile.

The slight misalignment of her teeth somehow made the smile even more endearing.

Another beautiful feature.

Slowly Raj was no longer a stranger at the party.

What began as casual conversation gradually became deeper.

Sometimes even reaching political discussions.

Raj had experienced that comfort level only once before.

It wasn't that others didn't appreciate him.

But his natural comfort was strongest with Malini.

Even his batchmates noticed the openness he shared with her.

Raj's dance partner, Vandana, was one of his seniors.

Her repeated smiles and attention toward Raj felt validating.

But whenever Vandana smiled at him, Raj noticed something unusual.

A slight discomfort on Malini's face.

Later, Vandana's boyfriend joined the party.

He gave Raj a few strange looks.

Those looks were enough to scare the hell out of the old man.

Soon the lights dimmed.

Everyone moved toward the dance floor.

Everyone except Raj.

It had been a memorable evening.

Those memories still stayed with him.

He remembered boarding the local train at midnight.

That itself was a first-time experience.

The local crossing the bridge at midnight...

The sea looked calm, yet mysterious.

Raj had always feared water.

A vast expanse of water at night was something he preferred to avoid.

Suddenly the traffic signal turned red.

Raj's bike stopped.

How much life had changed.

He took the right turn.

His house stood ahead.

Slowly he went inside and walked up to his room.

Chapter 18

Paper Boats

It had been a week since Raj had returned to Chandigarh.

He had been fed well all these days.

The scorching summer ensured that everyone mostly remained indoors.

Then one fine evening, the weather changed.

The sky filled with dark clouds.

A heavy breeze followed.

Then torrential rain.

The temperature dropped dramatically.

It became the perfect setting for a family gathering.

All his family members were reserved by nature.

Raj had always enjoyed spending time with his mother, and now sometimes with his father.

Pakodas and tea completed the mood—simple comfort food for a rainy evening with family.

Outside, darkness deepened.

Rain striking the glass, walls, and balcony created a beautiful rhythm.

Sitting in the balcony with family, enjoying snacks and tea, made for a perfect evening.

Though Chandigarh had never fully been a stress-buster for Raj, some days were exceptions.

“Ambarsar de oh din kinne wadiya si...”

(Those days in Amritsar were so beautiful.)

His father suddenly said this, as he often mixed Hindi and Punjabi.

Immediately Raj was transported back.

Those truly were beautiful days.

Perhaps the best days of his life.

The huge bungalow—a remnant of British architecture—served as his father’s official residence.

The large lawns would get flooded during rains.

Little Raj would happily ride his tricycle through them.

Sometimes schools closed because of heavy rain.

His childhood friends would come over.

They would make paper boats and sail them in streams of rainwater.

The tricycle rides after school.

The eternal bond he shared with his mother.

The streets and shops with that peculiar smell of wet earth and rain.

Even now, he could connect with that aroma.

Rain often brought nostalgia.

Sometimes painful.

Sometimes comforting.

His father enjoyed talking to him for long hours.

His brothers were more reserved.

Yet their love for him ran deeper than words.

His bhabhi often protected him from his father's stern side.

Though age had softened his father's temper, sometimes the government officer inside him still came alive.

Raj was usually at the receiving end.

And his bhabhi often became his shield.

Raj enjoyed talking to his father.

Topics ranged from old film actors to politics.

Though conversations sometimes began hesitantly, once they started flowing, they could continue for hours.

Sometimes loneliness revealed itself through his father's words.

Losing a life partner and adjusting afterward was never easy.

His father had handled it remarkably well.

Writing religious books had now become his favourite pastime.

Raj often saw him deeply absorbed in manuscripts.

It was a perfect day.

The weather acted like the perfect backdrop.

Conversation flowed naturally.

His father's favourite actors—Rajinikanth and Kader Khan—somehow became the final topic before the discussion slowed.

“Chai aur bana... khatam ho gayi. Aur le kar aa.”

His father ordered another round.

Though Raj had already had enough tea, the weather and family interaction made the moment unforgettable.

Slowly twilight approached.

After a long relaxed session, the family moved indoors.

Within half an hour, the entire area began flooding.

The small garden inside the house filled completely with rainwater.

And once again, paper boats came to Raj's mind.

Chapter 19

Misplaced Aspirations

Campus life was fun.

Despite the tight academic schedule, there was always room for enjoyment.

Raj's flirtatious nature desperately needed an escape route.

"Hai O Rabba... kinni soniyan kudiyan ne."

"Ain j lagda hai ke swarg vich aa gaya haan."

(Oh God, so many beautiful girls. Feels like I have entered heaven.)

Girls interacted freely with boys, often finding quiet corners to talk.

"Bhaiya, hum movie dekhne jaa rahe hain. Aap chaloge?" (bhaiya ,will you accompany us to movie)

"Nahi," Raj replied.

"Kahin aur jaana hai."(somewhere else ,I have to go)

Though he badly wanted to go, he forced himself to refuse.

He wanted to appear different.

Detached.

Apart from his own coursemates, there were plenty of opportunities for interaction.

Bina maare hi swarg vich aa gaya haan.

(Without dying, I have entered heaven.)

“Kaash main 20 saal pehle aa gaya hunda...”

“Pher maza aana si.”

(If only I had come here 20 years earlier... then life would have been fun.)

Lunch breaks often became the best time for interaction.

Malini was the one person with whom he shared a special comfort.

A bond that slowly kept expanding.

She had become his go-to person.

Whenever Raj felt low, Malini somehow became the emotional cushion.

One day, as Raj sat outside the classroom, Malini approached him.

“Hey... kya hua? Tum bahar kyun baithe ho?” (what happened, why sitting outside)

She asked in her broken Hindi.

The concern felt good.

Especially after a long time.

“Nothing, Malini,” Raj replied.

“You have lecture?” he asked.

“Yes... but after class, coffee due on me.”

“South Indian filter coffee.”

Unfortunately, the coffee never materialized because Malini suddenly had an extra class.

There were others too.

Some seniors showed him unusual warmth and affection.

Yet seeing younger couples enjoying life sometimes irritated him.

“Saala... Uncle ji se toh bahar nikal aaya.”

“Par Bhaiya se bahar kab niklunga?”

(At least I escaped Uncle ji... but when will I escape Bhaiya?)

“If I had become an actor, kitni ladkiyan marti mujhpe.” (If only ,I had become an actor , girls would be after me)

“But kya hi kiya jaa sakta hai.”

The studio near his institute always fascinated him.

Maybe someday, he thought, his own film premiere would happen there.

Maybe posters of him would be spread all across Mumbai.

Then another thought hit him.

“But character artists never get full limelight.”

“Ab hero banne toh reh gaya.”

(That dream of becoming a hero is gone.)

“Kaash pehle hi Paschim Express pakad li hoti.”

(If only I had boarded Paschim Express earlier.)

“NSD mein dakhila le leta.”

(If only I had joined National School of Drama.)

Sometimes even inside campus he felt restless.

The beauty.

The energy.

The vivaciousness of youth.

It all stirred something inside him.

Malini sometimes sensed this restlessness.

But she was deeply focused on her studies.
Her ambition mattered most.
And so it did for everyone else.
It wasn't that Raj lacked ability.
The problem was something else.
He was—
The right person at the wrong place,
With misplaced aspirations.
Sometimes the inner urge became overwhelming.
What if someone noticed him?
What if someone offered him a role?
Life, however, slowly settled into routine.
The schedule became manageable.
The routine became acceptable.
But not to the extent he had once dreamed.

Chapter 20

Unfinished Canvas

Months had passed since Raj had returned from Mumbai.

Memories lingered.

The present waited.

Painting—his greatest passion—had taken a severe beating over the years.

Sometimes emotions expressed themselves best on canvas.

It was a talent he had been born with.

One thing Raj genuinely felt proud of, despite all his failures, was his ability to translate emotions into art.

Sadly, his mother's death had almost killed that part of him.

It had been twelve years since he had locked that room.

In all those years, no one had entered it.

That was his painting room.

The one place where he could freely pour out his emotions.

Neither his father nor anyone else had pressured him to reopen it.

Though occasionally his bhabhi encouraged him to resume painting.

Slowly, after all these years, Raj opened the room.

During her later years, his mother had often stayed in the room next to it.

The painting room stood adjacent to hers.

All these years, no one had entered.

Everyone respected Raj's privacy.

The room was dingy and covered in spider webs.

Dust had settled everywhere.

Paintings lay scattered across the floor.

Yet the smell of paints and colors still lingered.

Some paint tubes remained open, dried halfway.

Several completed canvases had been pushed into a corner.

And then—

that unfinished canvas.

The one he had started on the day his mother died.

Everything inside the room told one story:

the intense emotional bond between a son and his mother.

Ironically, drawing had once been his biggest weakness in school.

He had even scored a big zero in boarding school.

Yet somehow, that inner instinct had blossomed later.

He had become surprisingly good at painting nature.

And his life experiences had slowly begun reflecting through his art.

Raj started cleaning the room.

Organizing everything.

One by one.

Some paintings still looked beautiful.
One in particular captured twilight falling across a mountain village.
He had once tried organizing an exhibition of his paintings.
But somehow, every attempt had stalled.
Then his eyes stopped.
On her.
The unfinished portrait of his mother.
Even incomplete, her radiance seemed alive.
Tears rolled down his cheeks.
Slowly, he picked up the brush.
For the next two to three hours, he worked with complete focus.
Brushstroke after brushstroke.
Emotion after emotion.
Finally—
the portrait was complete.
An intense sense of satisfaction filled him.
A thought emerged.
“Why should others be the benchmark of my life?”
“Yes, I lost.”
“And I lost heavily.”
“But should I keep carrying this feeling forever?”
“I need to work for myself, not for others.”
Life had charted a different course for him.
Sometimes life reserved its hardest battles for the most resilient souls.

His idea of happiness had not unfolded the way he once imagined.

The success he chased had not come.

Perhaps it never would.

At least not in the form he had once dreamed of.

Better to prepare for the next journey.

The portrait of his mother stood before him like a reflection of his struggle.

A reminder.

A blessing.

A wound.

And a source of strength.

As Raj stepped out of the room, the sun was setting.

Twilight had begun to spread across the sky.

Chapter 21

New Canvas

Monsoons had arrived, and Mumbai presented an altogether different perspective.

Heavy rains.

Strong winds.

Waterlogged roads.

It felt as if Mumbai was welcoming him back in its own dramatic way.

Overcast clouds covered the sky as Raj stepped out of the station.

The weather was pleasant.

Instead of rushing home immediately, he stopped at a tea stall.

He had Nagori tea with biscuits.

It felt more like breakfast.

After that, he took a taxi.

An hour later, he reached home.

The warmth was there.

But so was loneliness.

He had brought some canvases back with him.

Including the completed portrait of his mother.

Coaching classes had resumed as usual.

But the Malini wound had reopened—erupting and oozing like an old infection.

The earlier fervor had taken a back seat.

Though external validation should never define one's worth, the mind often drifted back.

How much Malini had changed.

How much everyone had changed.

Many of his contemporaries had moved on.

Some ignored him.

Some no longer replied to his emails.

But perhaps that too was part of life.

Raj once again stood at a crossroads.

Routine had resumed.

Job applications.

Waiting for interviews.

Coaching gave him ample free time for the next one or two months.

Then a thought came.

“Why not join a painting institute?”

“At least I can hone my skills.”

Skills he already possessed.

Skills that simply needed refinement.

There was a painting institute in Chembur.

The timing suited him perfectly.

His free time could be used well.

So one evening, he decided to visit.
Chembur was home to some excellent Punjabi food joints.
Many were popular among food vloggers.
As he reached Chembur, the evening traffic lights created an
enchanted view.
The glow from vehicles.
The huge shopping malls.
A perfect place for both shopping and window shopping.
Chembur at night carried a vibrancy of its own.
Right beside those beautiful buildings stood the institute.
It wasn't huge.
But it was beautiful.
Minimal decoration.
Maximum impact.
Large chandeliers added elegance.
The positivity inside felt extraordinary.
"Ma'am, can I meet Akshita ma'am, the owner?"
"Sir, she is in the hall," replied a young girl.
Raj walked past the front room and entered the main hall.
It was filled with canvases.
Aspiring painters worked quietly on their art.
Guiding them was a woman in her mid-thirties, perhaps late thirties.
There was something striking about the way she carried herself.
A presence.

A quiet authority.

She looked younger than her age.

The dungarees paired with a white top suited her beautifully.

Normally Raj would have repeated his classic dialogue—

“Hai O Rabba...”

But something stopped him.

“Yes, what can I do for you?” the woman asked.

Her tone was confident.

Raj himself had an assertive voice.

Yet for the first time, he felt slightly intimidated.

The way she carried herself...

Guiding students.

Observing details.

Engaging in conversation.

Everything felt next level.

“Ma’am, I am a painter... though only as a hobby.”

“I want to hone my skills.”

“Okay... so you are a painter?” she asked, casually moving her hair aside.

“Can you show me some of your work?”

“I’ll judge from that.”

“Akshita ma’am, this is one painting I brought.”

As Akshita looked at the painting, Raj noticed appreciation in her eyes.

“It’s good.”

“Raj, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Okay, Raj. You are quite good.”

“But you still need professional-level refinement.”

“You can join classes from tomorrow.”

“Three months from now we are having an international exhibition.”

“Start learning. Start painting.”

“If something good happens, we’ll see.”

As Raj stepped out of the academy, a quiet satisfaction filled him.

For the first time in days, something felt hopeful.

He boarded the local train at night.

The stillness of the sea outside reminded him of his own life.

Calm on the surface.

Restless underneath.

Chapter 22

No Contact

Raj's emotional depth often became visible in his paintings.

The journey over the years had completely drained him of confidence.

It had been a long period of inner turmoil.

The “No Contact” moment.

That message still echoed in his mind.

“Hey, sorry. I am busy these days due to certain personal commitments. I won't be able to reply back.”

That message had snuffed the vitality out of Raj.

Then began the waiting.

Patiently waiting for messages that never came.

Checking the meaning of “personal commitment” on Google.

Feeling lost.

The replies became shorter.

Minimal.

Cold.

Raj kept waiting for that New Year wish.

It never came.

He could feel the sand slipping through his fingers, yet some hope remained.

Then came the moment that changed everything.

The no-contact message.

Then the blocking.

The pain he felt—

he never shared with anyone.

Raj had lost the battle.

And, as usual, the story had taken the same turn.

For years he had hoped for a miracle.

But the miracle never came.

Society values winners.

There is no room for lovers.

“Jo Jeeta Wohi Sikandar.”

As he entered the painting class, Akshita ma’am looked visibly upset.

“Guys, what the hell?”

“It’s been two months and still nothing significant has come up.”

“We are running close to the deadline, and all of you still look primitive.”

“At this pace, nothing relevant will come out.”

Raj could feel the tension in the air.

“Good evening, ma’am.”

“Oh, Dr. Raj.”

“You can start with whatever you wish to paint.”

“Your paintings have the emotional depth needed to connect with an audience.”

“However, polishing and sharpening are still required.”

“Okay, ma’am.”

“Raj, just trust your instinct and paint whatever feels natural.”

“Ma’am, if you don’t mind... can I ask something?”

“Yes.”

“Ma’am, what exactly is this exhibition about?”

“Raj, first make yourself comfortable with the class.”

“Once you settle in, I’ll explain.”

Outside, the weather had suddenly turned hostile.

Rain.

Wind.

Typical unpredictable Mumbai monsoon.

The pleasant weather he had experienced during the local ride had vanished.

One hour into painting, Raj created something remarkable.

Sohni Mahiwal emerged on the canvas.

The eternal lovers crossing the raging river.

The clay pot.

The tragedy.

The devotion.

It carried the essence of fine art.

A boy who had once failed drawing in class 8 had come a long way.

When Akshita saw the painting, she smiled.

“It’s good.”

“But you can still refine it.”

As the local reached Vashi, the night no longer felt frightening.

The fear was slowly fading.

He stepped out of the station and entered a nearby restaurant.

The special thali had always tempted him.

Today he finally ordered it.

A Maharashtrian thali.

A regional classic.

It was delicious.

The bhaji especially brought childhood memories rushing back.

By the time he reached home, it was past ten.

The thoughts of Malini were slowly reducing.

Time was doing its work.

That night, sleep came easier.

For the first time in a long while—

without anti-anxiety medication.

Chapter 23

Hidden Battles

Akshita carried herself with dignity and grace.

A week passed.

One day, while Raj was at the academy, Akshita received a phone call.

Raj could clearly see the anger on her face.

“You know the case is still going on.”

“At this moment, I cannot fully commit,” she said.

Slowly, Raj began learning more about Akshita.

Akshita had been born and brought up in Mumbai.

She studied at Mithi Bai College and later pursued post-graduation in Fine Arts from Delhi University.

After graduation, she started assisting her father at the academy.

Raj had noticed a framed photograph in her cabin earlier.

But he had never paid much attention.

It was a picture of her husband and children.

Divorce proceedings had been initiated in the United States.

Both had settled there, but eventually problems emerged.

Job pressure.

Cultural adjustment.

Emotional distance.

Things became difficult.

Eventually, Akshita's husband remained in the US and filed for divorce.

The court granted a one-year cooling-off period before proceedings moved forward.

Litigation in the US was expensive, so courts encouraged reconciliation whenever possible.

But even after the cooling period, things did not improve.

Finally, the lawsuit continued.

Akshita returned to India to care for her ailing mother.

Her father had already passed away.

Being the only child, the responsibility of caring for her mother fell entirely on her.

She stayed back and focused on the academy.

The academy had been started by her father in the late 1980s, long before painting institutes became popular.

Akshita herself had become a renowned painter.

Her exhibitions had been held at both national and international levels.

Even after moving to the US, the academy continued running.

But she missed her children deeply.

Two years had passed since her return.

The lawsuit had serious financial implications.

Raj's routine had also tightened.

Coaching now demanded more hours.
The entrance examinations were approaching.
After regular classes, a lot of time went into doubt-clearing sessions.
Interview calls had stopped too.
Meanwhile, Sonali had flown back to Ireland and rejoined work.
She regularly posted pictures on social media.
Some included her boss and his wife.
Malini was active too.
Posting pictures of every achievement.
Raj had always avoided social media.
Sonali had often insisted that both Ajitesh and Raj become more socially active.
Raj never liked it.
Long ago, he had Instagram and Facebook accounts.
He deleted them.
He still had a LinkedIn account.
He would have deleted WhatsApp too, if circumstances allowed.
Life was difficult for 99.9 percent of people.
Some complained.
Some moved on.
Social media merely reflected the polished version of happiness.
Suddenly, the local halted at Vashi station.
Slowly Raj stepped out.
The heavy rush of passengers, combined with rain, made movement difficult.

Somehow he found an auto and headed home.

Suddenly his phone rang.

It was his father.

“Bete, sab theek? Kuch chahida te nahi?”

(Son, is everything alright? Do you need anything?)

“Nahi, kuch nahi,” Raj replied.

Soon after, his brothers video-called him.

Maybe God had compensated him in some way.

Though Raj was usually skilled at hiding emotions, suddenly tears appeared in his eyes.

Chapter 24

The Tsunami

Society should never be the benchmark of success.

Unfortunately, in Raj's case, it always had been.

He had always craved validation.

His friend Ajitesh was far more deserving in many ways, yet he carried a deep sense of contentment.

Luck had been cruel to him too.

Months had passed since Raj had spoken to Ajitesh.

One evening, while thinking about him, Raj's WhatsApp suddenly started downloading photos.

To his horror, the pictures were from Ireland.

Ajitesh had gone to meet Sonali.

They seemed to be having a wonderful time.

Sonali looked happy in her married life.

Then came the most painful part.

The pictures with Malini.

If Delhi had been a storm—

this was a tsunami.

The transformation that had once seemed dramatic now felt absolute.

The simple girl he had once known seemed completely different.

The dresses.

The long boots.

The stockings.

Everything reflected change.

She looked far more comfortable in her new world.

The air of superiority—whether real or imagined—seemed visible in every picture.

There she was, sitting with friends, enjoying the Irish sunset.

Raj remembered college days.

Back then, Malini had been known for her simplicity.

Even when she wore modern clothes, that simplicity remained.

That was what had attracted him.

If beauty were the only criterion, his first love had been truly exceptional.

If falling in love at first sight ever happened in his life—
it had happened there.

Those light brown eyes.

Fair complexion.

Brown hair.

That chapter had closed years ago due to circumstances.

Maybe Malini had changed.

Or maybe it was only Raj's perception.

Judgment can sometimes be cruel.

One must be careful.

After all, perhaps Raj had never truly existed in her emotional world.

The hope that had still survived somewhere inside him finally died.

In almost every picture, Raj imagined revulsion on her face.

It felt as if her Indian identity had completely faded.

Sonali, however, still retained the simplicity Raj admired.

To him, Sonali still felt grounded.

Malini felt distant.

For the first time in his life, Raj felt something close to hatred toward Malini.

Toward the very person he had once loved.

Outside, thunder had been roaring since evening.

Now rain had begun.

Though drinking had been under control, tonight he wanted numbness.

There were several local bars in Vashi he had never visited.

Tonight he went to one.

He ordered Bagpiper whisky.

Though he had moved on from Bagpiper to Teacher's, tonight Bagpiper felt symbolic.

A drink from painful days.

The waiter served whisky with snacks.

"Sir, aur kuch laaun?" the waiter asked.

"Nahi... bas abhi ke liye itna hi." (nothing for now)

With every peg, Raj swallowed a memory.
Painful memories often needed alcohol to slide down the throat.
Three to four pegs later, the memories had blurred.
Drinking was never his solution.
In fact, through most difficult years, it had never been.
But strangely, the recent episodes had pushed him toward it.
Memories kept dancing inside his head as he returned home.
Strangely, electricity had gone.
Society's lights had disappeared.
Darkness everywhere.
As he entered home, he searched for a candle and matchbox.
He walked into the kitchen.
When the candle finally lit the room, he felt a strange sense of relief.

Chapter 25

Judgments

The worst feeling is seeing someone you once loved change over time.

People change.

Empires fall.

But some changes feel more striking than others.

Raj had become a good mentor, guiding students with sincerity.

Sometimes he even overextended himself.

The profession he had chosen was respectable and meaningful.

Yet what buried him was social comparison.

Huge LinkedIn profiles.

Self-glorification.

External validation.

Life had been difficult.

Unfulfilled expectations.

Disappointments.

Sometimes it had simply been bad timing.

Setbacks had arrived at every stage of life.

And yet, through everything, Raj had survived.
He had endured the toughest periods.
His mother lying on her deathbed in a hospital while he was preparing for competitive exams felt like a cruel joke played by fate.
He lost his mother.
He lost a job opportunity due to corruption.
Layer by layer, life had battered and bruised him.
Then came love at first sight.
Dreams of a beautiful life together.
Only to watch everything shatter.
Things others seemed to receive easily—
he had to struggle for.
At one point, he had even started avoiding relatives' weddings.
“Beta, teri shaadi kyun nahi ho rahi?”
“Kya tum mein koi kami hai?”
(Son, why are you not getting married? Is something wrong with you?)
Society could be heartless in passing judgment.
It wasn't as if Raj had never tried to marry.
He had.
There had been newspaper advertisements.
Family meetings.
The usual Indian process.
Meeting the girl and her parents.
He still remembered one proposal.

She was beautiful.

And taller than him.

The small exchanged glances.

The shy approval.

Her curly hair.

Those large earrings.

It felt like a good match.

The families had even agreed to a ring ceremony.

Raj still remembered eating sweets from the hands of his would-be saali.

But things did not go as planned.

Life took another turn.

Suddenly Raj was pulled out of his thoughts.

“Sir, this question is a little difficult.”

It was Shreya, one of his students.

“Okay, bacche, let’s see.”

His thought process broke again as he immersed himself in solving the problem.

Many students had doubts.

Raj got fully involved.

By evening, he was finally done.

Twilight had started settling.

He had to rush to painting class.

As he entered, Akshita ma’am was addressing everyone.

“I’ll be going to the US for two weeks.”

“And the deadline is approaching fast.”

“When I return, I’ll select three paintings from each of you for shortlisting.”

“After initial scrutiny, we will send five or six final paintings.”

“If any painting gets a strong response, it could open great opportunities for both the academy and the artist.”

Then she turned toward Raj.

“Your Sohni Mahiwal is a good one.”

“Make it sharper.”

“And create some more paintings.”

She paused.

Then said—

“I think you can deliver justice.”

As Raj boarded the local, the train crossed the bridge.

The silence of the sea created the perfect backdrop for his emotions.

As he stepped out of the station—

a thunderous downpour began.

Chapter 26

Desi Tom Cruise

The morning felt much better.

It was Sunday.

And Sunday meant fun day.

So why not have some fun?

And the best way to do that was to watch a movie.

Though Raj's life had been heavy lately, and though he had once been a complete movie buff, he had gradually stopped going to cinemas.

It had been nearly ten to fifteen years since he had actually watched a movie in a theatre.

Though honestly, more than the movie, it was the actress who had motivated him to watch it.

Life had been cruel, but his love for horror films and Tom Cruise movies had survived.

The Ramsay Brothers were his all-time favourite's.

Whenever Veerana, Purana Mandir, or Tahkhana came on TV, it became celebration time.

Even late-night shows at 1 a.m. never stopped him.

He watched them fully.

The smoky atmosphere.

The corpse rising.

The vampire.

The thrill was unforgettable.

He must have watched them 400–500 times.

Top Gun: Maverick had released, and Sunday felt perfect.

A movie followed by dinner.

Perfect plan.

Raj still had that childlike intensity and flirtatious nature, though life had buried both under years of hardship.

The shave and hair color cost him around 500 rupees and one full hour of patience.

Printed shirt.

Jeans.

Aviators.

It was as if desi Tom Cruise was on a mission.

The only difference—

instead of an F-15 fighter jet, he had an auto.

And that too only till Vashi.

The local train wasn't exactly fighter-pilot luxury.

The train was moderately crowded.

Suddenly, at Chembur, a stunning girl entered the compartment.

She smiled at him.

Then gave him a cute glance.

Suddenly Raj's flirtatious side woke up.

“Beta... aaj toh tujhe koi dekh raha hai.”

(Son... today someone is noticing you.)

Immediately his imagination took off.

Exotic foreign locations.

Songs.

Dance sequences.

Not with one girl—

with many.

This flirtatious side rarely surfaced.

Only on special occasions.

Raj looked back at her and smiled.

To his delight—

she smiled again.

Maybe desi Tom Cruise had worked.

Before Maverick had even started, Mission Success seemed near.

Maybe this signaled the beginning of something good.

This had always been Raj’s nature.

He must have imagined at least a thousand relationships in his lifetime.

Still—

positivity was there.

Be positive.

Not his blood group.

The shave and aviators had clearly worked.

Though the glasses were fake and had cost only 400 rupees.

The local kept moving.

Raj's destination was Wadala.

He silently hoped she would start a conversation.

Maybe this journey would become the beginning of something beautiful.

As the train approached Wadala, the smiling increased.

Suddenly—

the girl got up and walked toward Raj.

His heart began pounding rapidly.

Fortunately, he had already taken his anti-anxiety medication.

She came closer.

Very close.

Then asked—

“Yeh train Wadala se aage jayegi kya... Uncle?” (train will go beyond Wadala ...uncle ?)

Uncle.

Brutal.

The dream shattered instantly.

But strangely, it didn't hurt as much.

“Ji, bacche,” Raj replied calmly.

The train slowed and halted at Wadala station.

As he got down, the song—

“Yeh duniya yeh mehfil mere kaam ki nahi...”

slowly played in his mind.

But instead of feeling depressed—

he smiled.

This was one episode he had genuinely enjoyed.

Desi Tom Cruise then hired an auto and headed to the multiplex.

When he came out after the movie, he felt victorious.

As if he had successfully completed his mission.

Movie watched.

No interval munching.

Mission discipline successful.

After a heavy dinner, the local finally stopped at Vashi station.

Slowly and steadily, Raj walked toward the auto stand.

Chapter 27

Mission Biceps

The hangover of the movie remained intense.

Though the “Uncle ji” episode had happened, Raj actually felt relaxed.

“Baaki sab toh theek hai... bas 4-5 kilo kam ho jaaye,” he thought. (if only I reduce 4 -5 kgs ,things will be set)

“Phir desi TC (Tom Cruise) banne se mujhe koi nahi rok sakta.” (nobody can stop me from becoming desi Tom cruise)

Maybe he should join a gym.

“If I work out and reduce this pouch, maybe even at 50 I might land a role.”

Then came the fantasy.

Fan following.

Girls.

Autographs.

“Saali, saari life hi set ho jayegi.” (life will be set)

He touched his hair and sighed.

“Itne achhe baal the... ab side se jhandbe lag gaye.”(such beautiful hair , I had now hairline is also receding)

He had made several trips to Delhi to buy hair-growth tonics and had spent nearly 4-5 thousand rupees.

After all that effort, maybe only one extra hair had grown.

His ambition had gradually evolved.

From hero...

to villain...

to character actor.

Maybe one day he might get an iconic role like Prem Nath in Dharmatma.

Then maybe not young girls—

even aunties might go crazy for him.

Despite years of rejection and setbacks, that inner child still exploded at times.

It helped him temporarily forget the pain.

His interest in theatre had declined, but the movie buff inside him still lived.

The coming week was relatively free.

Joining a gym felt like the best option.

Lose weight.

Get fit.

Maybe catch the eye of some producer or director.

He had joined a gym in his youth.

But this time felt different.

As Raj entered the gym, he saw a mix of Gen Z youngsters and people closer to his age.

The instructor was helping everyone.

A man in his mid-thirties.

Physique to kill for.

Personality to match.

He walked toward Raj politely.

“Yes sir?”

“I want to enroll here,” Raj replied.

“What are the charges?”

“5000 per month, sir.”

Raj stared.

“Abbe... isse toh filmon mein hona chahiye.” (he should be in movies)

“Yeh uthak-baithak karwa raha hai.” (here he is in a gym)

Inside his head:

“Yeh toh mere liye serious competition hai.” (he’s serious competition for me)

But then he reassured himself.

“Nahi... main different roles ke liye fit hoon.”

“So competition nahi ho sakta.”

The trainer explained:

“Start with basic machines and light weights.”

“We’ll gradually increase.”

“Begin with treadmill and warm-up exercises.”

Raj shook his head.

“Weights se shuru karta hoon.” (will start with weights)

“Biceps bhi toh banane hain.”(have to develop my biceps also)

The weight corner had dumbbells ranging from 5 kg to 20 kg.

Raj knew his potential.

Or at least he thought he did.

He picked up the 5 kg dumbbell.

First repetition.

Fine.

Second repetition—

CRACK.

A sharp sound from his wrist.

“Abe maar gaya!”

“Bachao! Bahut dard ho raha hai!”(please help its paining)

The trainer came running.

“What happened, sir? Any problem?”

“Meri wrist mein achanak bahut pain shuru ho gaya!” (suddenly pain started in my wrists)

The trainer examined it carefully.

Then said—

“Uncle ji... shayad minor fracture ho gaya hai.”(uncle maybe be a minor fracture)

“Aap abhi ghar jaakar aaram kijiye.” (go home and take rest)

“Please have lots of milk and calcium.”

“Phir ek mahine baad aaiye.”(come after 1 month)

Uncle ji.

Again.

This word simply refused to leave him.

The desi Tom Cruise didn't even take the local this time.

He returned straight home.

Mission Biceps:

Failed.

Chapter 28

The Shift Within

The exams had concluded, and now everyone waited patiently for the results.

Raj had put tremendous effort into preparing the students.

Apart from Biology, he had also taken responsibility for Inorganic Chemistry.

At the last moment, the chemistry teacher had left due to unforeseen issues.

The burden of problem-solving doubled.

Time became shorter.

A full week had passed since Raj had attended painting classes.

Though things had seemed normal externally, internally something felt different this year.

Earlier, the success of his students had never affected him deeply.

But this time it felt different.

Maybe something had shifted over the past year.

The validation he had desperately chased for so many years suddenly felt less important.

Material success was ethereal in nature.

Raj's psyche, which had long been trapped in inferiority, was slowly changing.

External benchmarks should never define life.

Life was a marathon, not a 100-meter race.

Some peak early.

Some bloom late.

Some return to society in ways they never imagined.

Success alone could never be the final definition of a meaningful life.

For six years, Raj had been a mentor and guide to numerous students.

Many of them now had beautiful paths ahead.

Their blessings were with him.

Suddenly his WhatsApp began buzzing.

Message after message arrived.

Thank-you messages from parents.

Messages from students who had placed their faith in him.

For the first time in a long while—

Raj did not feel fragile.

He felt powerful.

Something had shifted within.

At the felicitation ceremony held by the institute, Raj could feel pride.

Then something unexpected happened.

A differently abled couple came toward him and bent to touch his feet.

“Kya kar rahe hain aap? Please... main is kabil nahi hoon.”

(Are you doing? Please... I am not worthy of this.)

“Aap apni kabliyat nahi jaante, sir.”

(Sir, you do not know your own worth.)

“Aaj Rajahmundry se meri beti NEET mein 669 marks la saki hai.” (it's only because of you that my daughter qualified from Rajamundry)

“Aap ke kaaran usne Jeev Vigyan mein full marks liye hain.” (only because of you ,she scored full in zoology)

“If you were not there, none of this would have happened.”

Those words felt heavenly.

As if God Himself had spoken through them.

The darkness that had haunted him for years had felt endless.

Finally—

there was light at the end of the tunnel.

For years he had doubted himself.

He had ignored his real gifts while chasing something bigger.

As he reached painting class, Akshita had already returned from the US.

The stress on her face had eased slightly.

“Raj,” she said, “your Sohni Mahiwal painting will be one of the paintings going for exhibition.”

It felt like wonderful news after such a long time.

“Ma’am... is it true?” he asked.

“Yes, Raj.”

“You painted it with emotion, and that emotion is visible on the canvas.”

“Keep painting.”

“I need two or three more from you.”

“Take your time and let your emotions flow,” Akshita said.

“Since the day you joined, your raw talent has impressed me.”

“Thank you, Ma’am,” Raj replied.

Encouraged by her words and by his growing confidence, he began painting again.

Years of pain flowed through the brush.

The canvas became an expression of melancholy.

A mother on a ventilator.

Loved ones standing nearby.

Pain frozen into art.

Akshita looked at the painting and went silent.

“Oh my God...”

“This is real pain.”

“This is a realm even many accomplished painters hesitate to enter.”

“Even I could not have done justice to this.”

She looked at Raj.

“Raj... your talent, with persistence, can turn into genius.”

Life had suddenly started becoming a little gentler for Raj.

Chembur station felt relatively empty.

The local train was not overcrowded.

For the first time in his life—

the sea did not feel haunting.

As the local stopped at Vashi, Raj stepped out slowly, but with confidence.

The torrential rain had stopped.

Chapter 29

The Old Photograph

Life continued moving along its trajectory.

Raj remained busy with his daily routine.

One fine day, while dusting his room, he came across an old photograph.

It was a family photograph.

The moment he saw it, memories came rushing back.

It reminded him of those beautiful days in Amritsar.

Days filled with warmth, laughter, and togetherness.

The family.

The joy.

The happiness they had shared.

Those vacations to hill stations like Nainital and Mussoorie.

The comics he had collected from railway stations during those journeys.

How anxiously he used to wait for the next comic sequel.

How every railway station felt like treasure.

The excitement of spotting comic stalls during train halts.

The love his parents and brothers showered on him.

They had always made him feel special.
All these years, Raj had missed Amritsar deeply.
As he remained lost in thought, his phone rang.
It was his father.
As always, his father blessed him and wished him success.
The conversation brought back even stronger memories of Amritsar.
The urge to visit grew powerful.
Coincidentally, there was a week ahead with fewer professional commitments.
Raj also had enough finances to support the trip.
Paschim Express felt like the perfect choice.
Direct from Mumbai to Amritsar.
Getting a confirmed ticket wasn't difficult either.
As Raj shared the plan with Akshita ma'am, she encouraged him.
"Raj, yes... you must go to Amritsar."
"The memories there will enrich your experience."
"That will reflect on your canvas."
"Okay, Akshita ma'am," Raj replied.
"I'll go."
And just like that, the trip was planned.
On the day of the journey, Raj completed all preparations and headed toward the station.

Chapter 30

Parallel Tracks

After a long time, a journey truly excited him.

The heaviness that had burdened Raj for years was finally receding.

Nothing dramatic had happened over the past few months.

Only subtle shifts.

Yet those subtle shifts had changed something deep within him.

Early in the morning, he left home.

Reaching Bandra Terminus nearly two hours early, he could feel that familiar vibe.

The fragrance of childhood journeys.

Something he had missed for years.

Earlier, journeys had always felt heavy.

Even when he wanted to feel happy, he somehow never could.

But today felt different.

The commotion.

The rush.

Passengers checking coach numbers.

Anxiously waiting to board, as if the train would leave without them.

Some people checking whether the electric locomotive had been attached.

Rush at food stalls.

People stuffing bags with snacks and water bottles.

Raj bought himself a coffee and quietly enjoyed the scene.

He waited patiently outside his 2nd AC compartment.

Suddenly the doors opened.

Everyone rushed in.

His side-lower berth felt like a blessing from heaven.

Railway compartments had changed significantly over the years.

Especially the large windows.

They offered a beautiful view outside.

Raj had realized something.

Unless you are internally at peace, you cannot enjoy the outside world.

That peace, after so many losses, had slowly started returning.

Sometimes Malini still disturbed his thoughts.

At one time, she had been the closest person in his life.

For years he had held on to faint hope.

Living inside a mirage.

Now everything was over.

It felt as if Malini had never truly cared.

He had loved twice.

And both times, he had failed.

Even the dream of arranged marriage had collapsed.

Perhaps his flirtatious nature had helped him survive the pain.
That strange cockroach instinct inside him had kept him alive.
Suddenly the train started moving.
Raj watched the scenery outside.
Scenes that vanished within seconds.
Just like life.
The railway tracks ran parallel—
close, yet never meeting.
In Raj's case, those tracks had been violently uprooted.
Holding on to permanence was rarely possible.
Memories were best created with loved ones.
Outside, the view was beautiful.
Mountains.
Rivers.
Villages.
Passing habitations.
Everything looked cinematic.
Suddenly the TT arrived.
"Ticket please."
Raj took out the printed ticket and showed it.
Everything was settled.
Soon a tea vendor entered.
"Chai... coffee... masala chai..."
"Ek chai dena," Raj said.

Holding the tea in his hand, Raj continued watching the journey outside.

The train was now running at full speed, crossing small stations and junctions.

Chapter 31

Homecoming to Amritsar

At around 3:30 p.m., Raj woke up.

The sweltering heat could still be felt even inside the 2nd AC compartment, though the approaching evening had started cooling the air.

Slowly, the landscape began changing.

Large concrete structures started emerging.

The train was probably approaching Surat.

Though Raj had eaten only a light breakfast, he now felt ravenously hungry.

The stoppage at Surat was only five minutes.

Raj quickly got down.

A local vendor was selling pakodas with sweet kadhi.

Raj bought two plates and hurried back to his berth.

After drawing the curtains, it was time to attack the snacks.

“Itna tasty combination toh maine zindagi mein kabhi nahi khaya,” he said to himself.(never had something as tasty like this)

The sweet kadhi and crispy pakodas were simply amazing.

India truly was home to endless delicacies.

Passengers remained busy in their own worlds.

Families opened homemade food.

Vendors kept moving through the coaches with refreshments.

Evening tea.

Outside scenery.

The rivulets, forests, and lush vegetation stood as testimony to nature's abundance.

Human greed had not yet scarred all of it.

Slowly twilight descended.

Raj immersed himself in an old Ramsay Brothers horror film on his laptop.

The pantry food was horrible, to say the least.

Dinner was nowhere worth the price charged.

By the time the train touched Ratlam, the aroma of samosas and rabri filled the air.

Raj couldn't resist.

That became dinner for the day.

Early next morning, sunlight slowly burst through the clouds.

The fragrance of Amritsar already seemed alive within him.

It had never vanished.

Those priceless childhood years could never return.

The train reached Mathura Junction.

“Jisne Mathura ke pede nahi khaaye, usne kya khaya?” (If someone has not eaten Mathura's pede then his life is worthless)

And then—

Mathura peda.

Mathura chole bhature.

An unforgettable breakfast.

Slowly the temperature began rising, and the cool compartment provided welcome relief.

The heavy breakfast made him sleepy.

By the time he woke again, the train was nearing New Delhi.

The chole bhature had left little space for more food.

The half-hour stoppage tempted many passengers to step out.

Some rushed toward nearby food stalls.

Others packed lunch from outside vendors.

Raj wasn't hungry, so temptation didn't win.

The journey itself had become the joy.

Every station carried a story.

Finally, at around 8:00 p.m., Paschim Express arrived at Amritsar—the holy city.

Raj's heart skipped a beat.

A natural excitement surged through him.

"The place where I spent my most beautiful years..."

"I am finally back."

Thoughts flooded his mind.

After a gap of twenty-five years—

Raj finally stepped out of Amritsar station.

Chapter 32

Roots

Amritsar—the holy city.

Every year, lakhs of pilgrims visit Amritsar to pay their obeisance at the Golden Temple.

But for Raj, Amritsar was far more than a city.

It was memory.

It was identity.

It was emotion flowing through his veins.

As night had already fallen, Raj took an auto from the station and checked into a nearby hotel.

The journey had been tiring, and proper rest was necessary.

Morning felt peaceful.

Relaxed.

Fresh.

The visit to the Golden Temple was first on his checklist.

Amritsar had changed.

Walking through the Heritage Street felt like a completely new experience.

The transformation of the stretch from Town Hall to Sri Harmandir Sahib had been remarkable.

Neatly tiled pathways.

Beautiful architecture.

The majestic statue of Maharaja Ranjit Singh adorning the road.

Everything looked grand.

Yet the peace inside remained unchanged.

The serenity of the Golden Temple felt unreal.

The shabads playing in the background.

The stillness.

The sacred calm.

He paid obeisance at the temple—Swarn Mandir, as it was fondly called.

The entire area was crowded.

Tourists from across India and abroad filled the premises.

After visiting the Golden Temple, Raj headed to Durgiana Temple.

Though over the years his instincts had drifted toward atheism, a part of faith still remained alive.

Memories came flooding back.

His mother bringing him to the temple.

Rickshaw rides.

Childhood visits.

The large parikrama had expanded greatly.

Structures that were once incomplete now stood fully developed.

Since he had not visited his old college in years, this felt like the perfect opportunity.

As he entered the campus, everything had changed.

His professors had retired.

A new generation had taken over.

“Excuse me, is Prabhakar sir, who taught Physics, still here?” he asked a student.

“Sir, Prabhakar sir retired last month,” the student replied.

Of all his teachers, only Prabhakar sir could still have been in service.

The food stalls around the college remained familiar, though new faces had taken over.

The lassi and peda still tasted heavenly.

College memories came rushing back.

Those were the days when life revolved around studies.

Classes.

Coaching institutes.

Dreams.

Nothing much had changed.

Only roles had changed.

He, once a student, had now become a mentor.

It felt blissful.

By the time he finished, it was afternoon.

Walking through narrow gullies, the aroma of Nutri Kulcha, Tandoori Kulcha, and Bhiga Kulcha filled the air.

The fragrance was irresistible.

How deeply he had missed all this.
Life had taken him in completely different directions.
In the evening, he went to Lawrence Road.
There he enjoyed Satpura with sweet potato chutney and gajar pickle.
It was out of this world.
The fruit cream that followed simply melted in his mouth.
He remembered how his family had once enjoyed all these little moments together.
The emotional weight became heavy.
Every street.
Every corner.
Every lane of Amritsar resonated with his inner self.
The validation he had chased all his life now felt like an excuse.
Life could perhaps have been lived with more acceptance.
More love.
Yet sometimes the paths we walk are predestined.
Pain and sorrow are often life's way of testing resilience.
Raj had survived.
Like a cockroach, as he jokingly called himself.
Life had thrown challenge after challenge at him.
And somehow, he had endured.
Finally, he called an Uber and returned to his hotel.

Chapter 33

Ruins of Memory

The memories had returned strongly.

Every lane of Amritsar carried a story.

Every corner echoed with golden moments from his childhood.

Rickshaw rides with his mother and, at times, his nani.

Those had been among the most beautiful moments of his life.

The next morning would be his last in Amritsar before bidding goodbye.

One final day remained to reconcile with the memories.

Early in the morning, Raj left for a famous eatery.

The place was famous not just in Amritsar but across India.

Its poori-chole was legendary.

Coupled with gud ka halwa, the breakfast was simply out of this world.

Nothing beats Amritsar when it comes to food.

The proof was everywhere.

Next, he planned to visit his school and the bungalow.

Both places held a special place in his heart.

The roads he once crossed on his bicycle had changed.

Trees that had once been part of his memories were gone.
Though the physical scenery had changed, the fragrance of memory remained.
His school stood like a memory bank.
Walking through the corridors and seeing the classrooms brought everything back.
How eagerly they waited for mid-recess.
Samosa for one rupee.
Candies for fifty paisa.
Life had changed.
Preferences had changed.
But memories had not.
The huge ground still stood there.
It had once been the battlefield for intense cricket matches between sections.
New cricket bats were once flaunted there with pride.
Apart from cricket, lawn tennis and hockey were favourite activities.
The large pond near the church still stood.
Stories of it being haunted had once sent chills down their spines.
The church had been everyone's refuge before exams.
The peace one felt while praying there was unmatched.
Life had changed.
Memories had remained.
The bungalow—his greatest repository of happiness—was his next destination.

As he reached the place, shock hit him.
The imposing bungalow was gone.
In its place stood a dilapidated structure.
The walls had been encroached upon.
Illegal settlements had spread into the area.
The house was in shambles.
The huge garden—
the garden that had once been the repository of joy—
had turned into a wild jungle.
The sight was unimaginable.
Large pavement shops had come up.
Even the main entrance had been blocked.
And then—
he saw it.
The neem tree.
Still standing.
A silent witness to beautiful times.
But even it had entered its final phase.
Decay had set in.
The sight brought tears to Raj's eyes.
Life changes.
But some memories remain eternal.
Had he stayed there longer, he might have collapsed.
With trembling legs, he stepped back and returned to his hotel.

It had been a heavy day.

Emotionally exhausting.

His strength felt drained.

For his final farewell to the city, he chose dinner at the famous Kesar Da Dhaba.

Dal Makhani.

Shahi Paneer.

Palak Paneer.

Laccha Parantha.

It felt like the ultimate farewell meal to the city he had loved the most.

The next morning, his train back to Mumbai awaited.

Chapter 34

Two Canvases

As the train reached Mumbai Central station, Raj felt deeply relieved.

The weight on his shoulders had lightened.

Everything looked beautiful.

The journey back home felt liberating.

Though a complete transformation had not occurred, something had shifted.

Subtly.

But meaningfully.

The coaching institute was closed for holidays.

Raj reached home and decided to take complete rest.

The emotional and physical engagement of the past few days had taken a toll.

Sometimes, rest truly is the best medicine.

His cousin's teasing words suddenly came back to him:

“Raj, for you—rest is best.”

The memory brought a smile to his face.

Sometimes the smallest things elevate the mood.

Raj had not checked his emails for the last ten to fifteen days.

He had attended some interviews earlier, but with everything happening, emails had stopped mattering.

The shift from checking emails daily to ignoring them for fifteen days had happened slowly.

As he opened his inbox, most mails were promotional.

But one email caught his attention.

It was from a company that had recently entered the education sector.

Raj had interviewed there a month ago.

“Congratulations, Mr. Raj. We are glad to offer you the position of Consultant.”

It was a dream offer.

The kind of offer that promised everything society labels as success.

The very success he had desperately chased for years.

Strangely—

there was no explosion of happiness.

No euphoria.

No overwhelming excitement.

Only silence.

He still had time to respond.

At that moment, his focus wasn't on the offer.

He made himself a cup of hot coffee and sat down quietly.

Then he took out an empty canvas.

And began to paint.

His mood flowed freely.
Between brush strokes, he sipped coffee.
Within two hours, he had consumed four cups.
When the painting was complete, he felt satisfied.
Children playing around a huge banyan tree.
Birds chirping in sunlight.
It may not have been his finest work.
But it brought peace.
It was already close to midnight.
The next few days would be important.
The exhibition was approaching fast.
For the first time in years—
Raj did not need anti-anxiety medication.
As he lay on the bed, sweet dreams engulfed his subconscious.
Life is strange.
What it gives.
What it takes.
Survival is instinct's way of defeating nature.
Sometimes the best fail.
Sometimes the ordinary rise.
Suddenly he got up again.
He pulled out another canvas.
And started painting.
This one was raw.

Yet powerful.

A lone boat sailing through a violent tempest.

It was nearly 3 a.m. when he finally returned to bed.

The night had become very dark.

But fear was nowhere within Raj.

Chapter 35

Three Doors

Morning greeted Raj with heavy rain that had been falling since the previous night.

He decided to wait for the weather to ease.

Suddenly his WhatsApp buzzed.

It was a message from Akshita.

“Raj, I want to meet you immediately.”

“Can you make it today?”

“Okay, ma’am,” Raj replied. “I’ll be there.”

The rain intensified through the day, disrupting local trains and flooding low-lying areas.

Raj made himself breakfast and rested until evening.

By then, the rain had eased and train services were slowly returning to normal.

Chembur looked freshly washed when Raj reached the academy.

As Raj entered the academy, Akshita was busy interacting with students.

Some new admissions had taken place.

She was explaining the finer nuances of painting.

As soon as she saw Raj, she said—

“Raj, wait for me inside my chamber. I’ll meet you there.”

Raj went in and waited.

After a few minutes, Akshita entered.

“Raj, I have something important to discuss.”

“There’s good news for you.”

“Your painting, Mother on Ventilator, has been selected for exhibition at The Hague Academy.”

“You have been invited there.”

The impact of the news was overwhelming.

Raj could not speak.

He fell back into the chair.

Tears rolled down his cheeks.

“Hey, it’s good news. Why tears?” Akshita asked.

“Ma’am... just a natural reaction,” he replied.

Akshita smiled.

“There’s another piece of news.”

“Please don’t get a heart attack,” she said jokingly.

“What is it, ma’am?”

“I have reconciled with my husband.”

“We are withdrawing the case.”

“Our kids need both of us.”

Raj smiled.

That alone felt like wonderful news.

Akshita continued.

“So... because of this, I’ll be moving permanently to the US.”

“After some time, my mother will also join me.”

She paused.

Then looked directly at Raj.

“You had talent hidden inside you.”

“I saw it.”

“Now that I’m leaving the country permanently...”

“I want you to take over this academy.”

The words struck like lightning.

Raj sat frozen.

He was happy for Akshita.

But the responsibility felt enormous.

“Ma’am, I’m very happy that both of you reconciled.”

“You helped me when my life stood at a crossroads,” Raj said.

Akshita shook her head.

“I did nothing, Raj.”

“The talent was already there.”

“I only polished it.”

“But ma’am... I don’t have the money or resources to buy this academy.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I’ll continue handling the expenses.”

“You just run this academy.”

“Teach.”

“Nurture talent.”

“Spread art.”

Raj stayed silent.

“Okay, ma’am...”

“Please give me some time to think.”

Night had engulfed the city.

The local train was crowded.

At Vashi most passengers got down.

Rain started again.

By the time Raj reached the auto stand, he was completely drenched.

But he didn’t take an auto.

Instead—

he started walking.

He walked without caring where he was going.

A rare smile appeared on his face as he walked past the roads and huge malls of Vashi.

Chapter 36

Choosing Life

Three to four days had passed since Akshita made her offer.

It felt as if life had shifted into fast-forward mode.

So much had happened in just a few days.

Sonali had been promoted, and the pictures she posted were proof of her happiness.

Ajitesh had shifted into a bigger setup, and his business volume had increased.

Sonali's husband had joined a leading tech company as a consultant with a hefty pay package.

Malini and her husband had moved into a bigger house.

They were planning to add more material comforts to their life.

Strangely, for the first time in his life, none of this disturbed Raj.

Maybe the need for external validation had finally weakened.

Even the news of his painting being accepted had not brought wild excitement.

Instead, it had brought worry.

“Saala, kabhi zindagi mein jahaz mein nahi chadha.”(never been on a plane in my whole life)

“Kahin jahaz ke upar jaate hi heart attack na ho jaaye.”(If might not get a heartattack during take off)

These thoughts amused and worried him at the same time.

One evening, he headed toward the beach.

Despite living in Mumbai for years, he had rarely visited it.

He sat there watching the waves.

The waves crashing endlessly against the shore felt like resilience itself.

At one point in life, he had desperately wanted Malini's love.

He never got it.

He had wanted a prestigious job.

That too had eluded him for years.

Though he now had an offer in hand, he felt no excitement.

Life had turned slightly positive.

But what he felt was satisfaction—

not elation.

He stood at a crossroads.

Job.

Coaching.

Academy.

The job could propel him into a socially respected league.

Society would finally accept him among the successful.

Maybe someone beautiful might even enter his life.

The future remained open.

Yet—

his coaching students needed him.
And the painting academy would collapse in Akshita's absence.
The struggle was real.
But somewhere deep inside, the decision had already formed.
Life was not an executioner.
It was a teacher.
A strict teacher.
And it had taught Raj some important lessons.
There was a time when validation meant everything.
But the past few days had mellowed something inside him.
He watched the waves through the night.
It was 4 a.m.
Local trains had resumed operations.
Raj boarded one and headed home.
By the time he reached home, it was close to 7 a.m.
He made himself a cup of tea.
Then he opened the email.
And replied to the job offer.
"Sorry Sir, due to some personal commitments, I won't be able to join. Thank you for considering me."
As he clicked send, a strange sense of relief washed over him.
Sunlight slowly began entering the room.
Darkness was being dispelled.
He thought of his family.

Tears rolled down his face.

Morning settled gently around him.

Maybe, for the first time in life—

Raj was choosing life—

instead of life choosing him.

Chapter 37

First Flight

A new session had started.

Students were enrolling at the coaching centre.

Raj had resumed teaching.

Akshita had already flown to the US.

Her reconciliation had brought peace.

She had told Raj that she would meet him at the painting ceremony in The Hague.

Initially, Raj felt hesitant.

All these years, he had never desired limelight.

The real battle had always been within.

External validation had always been a mirage.

It promised much.

But rarely delivered.

A month remained before the ceremony.

Raj had to prepare for the trip.

Clothes.

Shoes.

Accessories.

Everything had to be planned.

“Agar kala suit pehnu ceremony mein, toh kya pata koi gori mem hi impress ho jaaye.” (this black suit might make some foreign beauty fall for me)

His flirtatious side was still alive, still hoping for miracles.

Though he had a passport, he had never travelled abroad.

Long ago, he had once planned a trip to Sri Lanka.

That too never materialized.

His family respected his decision.

Though there had been slight disappointment regarding his rejection of the job, his painting being selected had made them proud.

Finally, the day arrived.

The flight awaited.

There was excitement.

But also calmness.

Morning began with a cup of tea.

He prepared his special Toor Dal and rice.

By evening, his father called.

Their conversation lasted over an hour.

One line from his father stayed with him.

“Bete, teri maa jithe vi hai, khush hai.”

(Son, wherever your mother is, she is happy.)

It felt as if old wounds had healed.

Later Ajitesh called.

Then Sonali.

Both were genuinely happy and wished him luck.

Ajitesh, as always, expressed himself in his quiet way.

The ride to Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport felt thrilling.

The crowds.

The overbridges.

The city lights.

Suddenly it began raining.

The airport looked chaotic.

Heavy rain could not stop passengers.

Raj too became slightly drenched.

He had reached nearly two hours early.

After security checks, he reached the terminal.

It was 3 a.m.

Even at that hour, the airport was buzzing.

International flights were arriving and departing.

His flight was scheduled for 5 a.m.

Suddenly he felt hungry.

The day had been hectic.

Packing and preparations had made him skip dinner.

He bought himself a veg burger and a Coke.

Soon the boarding announcement came.

His KLM flight was ready for boarding.

Passengers—Indian and foreign alike—lined up.
Fifteen minutes later, Raj was inside the aircraft.
Beautiful air hostesses welcomed passengers.
The ticket and entire journey had already been arranged.
Announcements began.
Safety instructions followed.
Then came the seatbelt instructions.
The aircraft engines started.
The runway lights stretched ahead.
Slowly the aircraft moved.
Then faster.
Faster.
Then—
a powerful thrust.
And the plane lifted into the air.
Raj was airborne for the first time in his life.
Darkness was fading.
Dawn was emerging.
He reclined into his seat.
And simply enjoyed the moment.
For the first time in his life—
Raj was not waiting for life to happen to him.
He was finally flying towards it.