

An Orphan on An Odyssey

**By
Sasiprabha Manik Rao**



BlueRoseONE.com
S t o r i e s M a t t e r

New Delhi • London

BLUERose PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

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ISBN: 978-93-7310-152-1

First Edition: April 2026

DEDICATION

To the children
whose lives were lost or scarred
by war and the brute power of the world;

And

To the living hope of humanity—
that humanness will forever
Endure,
Triumph,
and Shine.

Foreword

I must congratulate **Sasiprabha Manik Rao**, author of the deeply moving literary novel ‘An Orphan on an Odyssey’, for giving us a work that lingers long after the final page is turned. At its heart is Vishnu, an eleven-year-old orphan rescued from child labour—his childhood already scarred by loss, deprivation, and the daily grind of survival.

The novel follows his uncertain path as he journeys through shifting social landscapes—first as a dropout from school, then as a child labourer and later as an adolescent shaped by the harshest of circumstances and the unexpected kindness of strangers.

Set in the late 1990s, in Hyderabad, where old-model neighbourhoods are fading into memory, the narrative illuminates lives lived in the shadows: children who disappear without a trace, the invisible labour of the poor, and the silent battles of those denied an education. Rao writes with an unflinching gaze, portraying the gulf between those whose lives are cushioned by privilege and those for whom every day is a negotiation for dignity.

Through Vishnu, a boy who becomes both the focus of compassion and the voice of defiance, the novel explores the limits of even the most well-intentioned interventions.

A benefactor offers him shelter, education, and an abundance of love, yet cannot give him the one thing he longs for: the comfort of belonging.

In the end, Vishnu returns to his own world, choosing familiarity over comfort, poverty over protection. It is a choice that unsettles the readers, forcing them to confront questions with no easy answers.

What does it mean to act in “the best interest of the child”? Can we ever truly know what is best without listening, really listening to a child’s own voice? And when that voice calls for a return to the very conditions we seek to protect him from, do we honour the choice or challenge it?

These are not just questions for social workers or policymakers; they are questions that touch the core of our humanity.

Threaded through the story is a truth the poor know instinctively: education has the power to transform lives. Yet the novel refuses to romanticise this belief.

It shows how schools, in their rigidity and blind spots, often fail to embrace children like Vishnu, pushing them towards dropout and disillusionment. It asks whether alternative models of education can offer a genuine path forward for those shut out of the formal system, or whether such alternatives risk becoming second-best solutions for children who deserve the very best.

Modest in length but vast in scope, ‘An Orphan on an Odyssey’ is remarkable for its emotional restraint and ethical depth. Rao resists the urge to simplify human motives or to divide the world into saviours and victims.

Instead, she offers us a tapestry of moral complexity, woven in language that is literary yet lucid, with moments of quiet philosophy embedded in a narrative as stark and unadorned as the lives it depicts.

Prof. Shantha Sinha

(Former Chairperson of National
Commission for Protection of Child Rights,
Ramon Magsaysay Awardee and Padmashri
Awardee.)



In praise of the book

Rajdeep Sardesai

“Intimate and fine storytelling make this a journey that must be read with interest and reflection.”

Kaki Madhava Rao

Former Chief Secretary – Andhra Pradesh

The debut Novel, *An Orphan on an Odyssey*, by Sasiprabha Manik Rao, is intense and touching. It deals with the endemic suffering and misery of the orphan children. The author embarks on this Odyssey out of her compassion for orphans, with the aim of sensitising readers. And she does it with words that speak and thoughts that burn. The fact that this is her first novel took me by surprise. The poetic and musical style of Sasiprabha Rao reminds me of the work of Arundhati Roy and Abdulrazak Gurnah, author of *Paradise*.

The pounding message of this book is that even the poor orphan prefers freedom to do what his heart dictates over the comfort proffered by the Samaritans and that the Samaritans who want to help them should tread delicately.

I felt elated to read this book and recommend it.

Kinnera Murthy

Former Dean, ASCI

This book can be read for two important reasons - one, for the sheer resilience and dogged determination of an 87-year-old lady who brought out her debut book, and two, for the clarity with which the author brings out the elitist attitude of supposed altruism, charity and 'doing good' attitude of 'social uplifters'. Reinforces the right of the poor to make their own choices.

The characters in the story come alive as the author painstakingly etches them out. Empathy and respect are virtues that are not easy to cultivate, and the faultlines become visible in many ways as to how each character responds.

A good read.

Prologue

One afternoon, on a quiet roadside, I halted on my way to meet an old friend. The cool sun was indifferent, the traffic moderate. And there stood a boy of slender frame, his clothes worn thin, his candid eyes holding a question too old for his years. With hesitant dignity, he whispered that he was an orphan and asked if I knew of any work. A children's programme where he had been engaged was shutting down, and he was searching for what might come next. His looks and smile, strikingly honest and warm, lingered in my mind for a long time.

An Orphan on an Odyssey arrived not with footsteps, but with echoes, images, and intimations—some already there, some newly acquired—all entirely transformed.

Set in bustling pre-millennial Hyderabad, an eleven-year-old boy named Vishnu—an orphan and child labourer, yet buoyant with curiosity and innocence—embarks on a journey shimmering with promise. What begins as an easy-going voyage soon deepens into something far more enduring. Through Vishnu's unusual journey, the story traces the contours of childhood shaped by labour, longing, and the fragile architecture of hope.

Beneath the surface, quieter themes emerge: the incidence of disappearing children, dignity reclaimed in silence, and the invisible cost of endurance for kids without entitlement. These are not just Vishnu's truths, but pictures of many lives, folded gently into the margins of history.

Most children facing Vishnu's challenges would have surrendered to an uncertain fate. But Vishnu, with his congenial strength and unbreakable spirit, is committed to transforming tragedy into triumph, embarking on an Odyssey of hard work and quiet endurance. His days are particular, his struggles, singular.

I am profoundly grateful that now, at the age of eighty-seven, I can offer these intimate reflections to the world. Writing so late in life is not a defiance of the years, but a quiet celebration of a life lived with intensity. All my life, I knew I carried within me the flame of a desire for storytelling, but I chose to honour the priorities life threw my way. Writing this book now has been a reinforcement of Love within me, a deeply gratifying experience, an elevation of spirit, and a return to something innate. It mirrors one of my most heartfelt concerns: the silent challenges still faced by children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

This journey would not have reached its shore without the quiet strength and generous spirit of those who walked beside me. I offer my deepest thanks to Ms. Elizabeth Kurian (Mona), the celebrated multilingual poetess and author from Hyderabad, with more than 22 published books to her credit.

Mona's unwavering belief in my manuscript rekindled my own. I am profoundly grateful to her for the appreciation and encouragement.

Another invaluable gift was Prof. Shanta Sinha's genuine appreciation, who graciously wrote the Foreword for ***An Orphan on an Odyssey***. A Magsaysay Awardee, former Chairperson of the National Commission for Child Rights in India for two terms, and one of the most celebrated grassroots contributors in the field, Shanta Sinha's presence spreads a halo of compassion on my pages. I am deeply honoured by her support.

I also extend heartfelt thanks to my young friend, the accomplished writer and historian, Daneesh Majid, whose steady guidance and practical help made an early publication possible.

To Nancharaiah, Sai Charan, Pradeep, and Vyomakesh for their technical assistance, and to Priya Mukherjee and Noorjahan, who have long urged me to write, my gratitude is quiet but enduring. And to Blue Rose, for bringing this book into the world, I offer my sincere appreciation.



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1. Quiet Descends a Dawn

Ashok Gupta, a successful bureaucrat, attributed much of his success to self-discipline. A man of meticulous habits, he woke every morning at the first sound of Ramu's coffee-making ritual downstairs. At quarter past five, he would settle in his armchair, facing the well-designed mahogany cabinet. Its upper tier held trophies and trinkets—his children's achievements mingling with Shalini's antiques. Books lined the middle and bottom tiers, a testament to his love of learning.

On a crisp, predawn Monday in July, Ashok savoured his customary hot coffee, relishing its rich aroma. He leaned back in the chair, eyes closed, not in meditation but in blissful surrender to the peace of the quiet hour. He drained the second cup as a cool breeze drifted into the room, carrying with it the scent of damp earth and the last whispers of the monsoon rain.

He wouldn't let anything intrude on this cherished time. No news, no files, no phone calls—only the evolving symphony of thinning darkness, the emerald garden waking to the joyous chorus of birds. He watched the prevailing peacefulness lighten as dawn crept in, painting the room in shades of soft gold.

A smile played on his lips as he waited for Shalini. His gaze drifted to the family photo perched on the cabinet.

Why hasn't she replaced it? The twelve-year-old image before him enfolded countless memories from his days as a young District Collector. Aaditya, barely taller than his hip then, was now a strapping six-footer. Athidhi, a year older, was at college pursuing her passion for Fashion Technology. He saw Shalini in that photograph, slender, vibrant, and beautiful—the District Collector's wife, known for her grace, dignity, and dedication to charity. Shalini was still lovely, he thought, but Time had added a generous layer to her figure. He chuckled, recalling her persistent but inadequate efforts to keep herself trim. Yet with infectious dynamism, she managed a small Printing Press, kept the house immaculate, supported him at events, and raised her children well, all while maintaining a remarkable energy level.

The clock struck six, its chimes shattering the prevailing stillness. Anticipating Shalini's arrival, Ashok stepped onto the porch.

In Hyderabad, the Guptas resided in Shanti Nagar. Once a haven for politicians, bureaucrats, and wealthy Businessmen, Shanti Nagar had some of its charm chipped away by time. Younger officers now yearned for the glitz of the newer neighbourhoods in Banjara Hills and Jubilee Hills. Still, the colony retained its prominence as an abode of peace with elegant Bungalows, well-tended gardens, and wide, tarred roads.

However, the concept of “Development”—a euphemism for replacing well-built houses and bungalows with multi-story apartments—did not reach Shanti Nagar until the late

nineties. In Hyderabad, this transformation began with the rise of Information Technology and rapid urbanisation, which swiftly altered the city's landscape. Now, the house next door, aptly called the "White House" for its majestic facade and old-world charm, was under siege. Gigantic blue curtains shielded the demolition from view, while an excavator waited silently beside piles of sand and bricks.

Ashok strolled to the gate, memories of the White House's former occupants flooding back. They had left just a couple of months ago. He saw the skeletal remains of the garden, the Bougainvillea cascades stretching across the compound wall like a final farewell. Just then, Shalini approached, her eyes casually apologetic, and they set off for their morning walk, the spectre of the White House fading behind them.



2. Destiny Beckons

Upon their return from the morning walk, Ashok and Shalini found the roadside next to their gate transformed into a hub of animated activity. The familiar hum of their street was replaced by the cacophony of demolition—the White House, once their proud neighbour, now being reduced to rubble.

A swarm of small women, clad in saris of clashing colours and soiled head scarves, had begun their day's toil. Glittering ornaments—a poor imitation of gold—scantly adorned their thin frames, even while they reeled under the burdens of hard labour. Marriage symbols like mangal sutras and silver toe rings, meant to signify security and protection, seemed to mock their subjugation in that concrete jungle. Some lugged the waste from the White House, while others hauled sand for the men constructing a makeshift workplace.

Close to the gate of the Guptas, where the commotion had ebbed, stood a boy of a fragile frame, his back turned to the bustle behind him. An empty grey plastic bucket with broken edges dangled loosely from his down-stretched hands, brushing his knees. Emaciation had etched itself into his young body, concealed behind loose pants and a frayed T-shirt. With an orange scarf tied tightly to his forehead, he looked like a child actor in a school play.

The child-labourer was clearly playing truant, seeking diversion from his work, watching the respectable couple

turning and walking towards their gate. The empty bucket slid further down his hand. He stood there, his blooming smile genuine and unburdened, and his liquid eyes half closed, as the rising sun beat down on his uplifted face.

As they drew nearer, and he caught their passing glance, he raised his right hand to his forehead in the style of the National Cadet Corps and saluted them, still smiling. However, Ashok, with his bureaucratic indifference, seemed oblivious.

Shalini, however, could not ignore the boy's silent plea. A flicker of sympathy lit her eyes, but she swept past him into their haven with a dismissive nod.



3. Surging Philanthropy

Forenoon hours were Shalini's busiest. Yet the image of the little boy lingered in her mind like a plaintive melody amidst the din of the day's routine. She hoped to see him again—perhaps on her way to the Printing Press after eleven O'clock, or on her return.

As she drove her air-conditioned car slowly down the dusty road where the labourers toiled, she strained to catch a glimpse of the boy's face through her closed windows.

Disappointment gnawed at her when she couldn't find him, a strange sense of fear following—a fear of never seeing that winsome grin again. However, upon her return from the Printing Press, she found him, this time, in a different guise, more pitiable. Gone were the flamboyant scarf and the shirt, and the dramatic flair; he now looked spent and drained, his craggy, threadbare *banian* exposing his small, bony chest, a stark contrast to his earlier bravado. The Supervisor had set him to filling buckets with broken bricks and the weight of the labour showed. Still, when he caught sight of Shalini's car slowing down, a tired smile flickered across his face, and he offered her a subdued version of his morning salute, which was met with a curious admonition from his older co-workers. This time, too, Shalini drove past, but now, she found it impossible to ignore the transformation that hard work had wrought in the child.

Later that evening, Shalini sent her cook, Ramu, to find the subject of her curiosity and compassion. Ramu was an old hand in the Gupta household, and he sensed that her concern ran deeper than simple curiosity. He went to meet the boy and, after a brief chat, decided it would be better to present him to his boss rather than confront him with too many questions. To overcome the boy's natural reluctance, Ramu suggested to him that he could get a great job at Ma'am *Saheb's* Printing Press if he made a good impression on her.

When Ramu announced the boy's arrival, Shalini decided to meet him outside, not wishing to embarrass him by calling him indoors. She found him lounging against her car, sunlight harsh on his dust-streaked skin. He had now donned his old shirt, which lay haphazardly over his loose pants. Visibly tired, his small stature seemed to shrink further under her scrutiny. The plight of this child labourer and the embarrassment on his visage pierced Shalini's heart. Her voice, however, remained studiously casual.

"What's your name, little one?"

"Vishnu, Ma'am". He replied in the manner one would address a Class Teacher, his formal tone a stark contrast to his ragged appearance.

"Aren't you supposed to be in school?"

His silence hung in the air for a short while.

"I had to stop going to school after my mother's death last year."

“So, you have lost two years of school. Last year and this year too?” Shalini asked, deliberately ignoring his status as an orphan. But her casualness couldn’t mask his growing unease.

“Where’s your father?”

“He died in our village, my father’s village. He died of snakebite, Ma’am. After that, we moved to her mother, my grandmother’s village, not far off”.

Vishnu’s voice, though quiet, was lucid and oddly remote.

“Is your grandmother doing well in her village?”

Vishnu took some time to answer.

“My grandmother was ailing with many complaints,” he said at last. “She had no house of her own and was living with her eldest son’s family. After a few months of stay with my her, my mother came to the city to find some work.”

“Does your grandmother know of your mother’s death?”

“I have no idea, Ma’am! Probably my mother’s friend working in the city might have informed her. I haven’t gone there for many years.”

“Why didn’t you go there?”

Vishnu did not answer. Shalini asked again.

“Yes, Ma’am.” He mumbled, his voice barely a whisper now. “My mother took me to her village only once, and I think that was when I was very young. We couldn’t live there because my uncle had a large family.”

“Are you the only child of your mother?” Shalini asked.

A thin shadow crossed his eyes.

“Yes, Ma’am,” he muttered, then stiffened. “No... There’s my younger brother,” he said. His voice faltered, but his posture didn’t.

“Where is the other child? Is he also working?”

Vishnu exhaled – a long, slow breath that bordered on contempt. Still, he answered her questions politely.

“When he fell ill after our mother’s passing, they took him to a hospital. A nurse took him away from there. I haven’t seen him since.” At this, he looked away, spent.

The tremor in his voice did not escape Shalini. Her gaze lingered on Vishnu. The air seemed to crackle with the burden of unasked questions. Shalini knew that she had to put him at ease now.

Shalini switched tracks.

“All right, Vishnu! Who is taking care of you now?”

“I have been working with Bhaskar Mestri, our supervisor, for the last few months. He continues to give me work and deducts my wages to cover food and lodging while I stay in his house. As I am lodging with his family, I also help them in the house”, he said.

Shalini guessed he was being paid by the hour, which accounted for his dilly-dallying at work, which she had

witnessed in the morning. Even so, now at the end of the day, he looked spent, hollowed, and famished.

Biting back further questions, she asked Ramu to take the boy under his wing and offer him some food from the kitchen.

Later, when Vishnu returned, washed and fed, but still faintly aloof, there was a perceptible transformation in him. He was wearing the same dress, but there was a newfound brightness about him, a stark contrast to his exhausted look after the drudgery of his work.

Shalini's beautiful face glowed with a subdued radiance at the prospect of getting a chance to be this little boy's patron and mentor. Now, as Vishnu waited for permission to leave, Shalini allowed herself to revel in the thought that she was going to be the one to shape this orphan into something greater. In her mind, she was already having visions of Vishnu's transformation as the poor boy turned into a prodigy, sculpted by her benevolence.

"Come again tomorrow, Vishnu," she said, her voice a touch too kind, heavy with expectation.

"Before you go—wait a second! Would you like to return to school? You won't have to work. We'll take care of everything."

It was no small surprise for Shalini that Vishnu didn't leap at the offer. He merely stood silent, his eyes not meeting hers.

But Shalini, hiding her despair, still waited for some reply, or at least an assenting nod from Vishnu. Her promise of a

bright future for him hung heavy in the air, while Vishnu, downcast and weary, seemed impatient for permission to leave. Stealing a look at her, he saw that the radiance that had lit up her face a little while ago had vanished. But she did not give up. She was still waiting for his answer to her proposal.

Overcoming his hesitation, Vishnu said with a hint of nervousness, “Ma’am, Ramu Bhaiyya told me that many people are working in your Printing Press. If you could give me a small job there....” he broke off.

Shalini's philanthropic bubble burst at this unexpected defiance, this bold request from an eleven-year-old. Her desire to "rescue" him and to shape him according to her vision collided with the reality of his aspirations.

Hiding her shock and regaining her dignity, Shalini merely said, "It's too early for that!" However, for Shalini, the boy's rejection served as an initial reminder of the hurdles she might face in her endeavour to bring Vishnu back to school.

A shadow fell across Vishnu's face as Athidhi entered the scene, her keen eyes instantly grasping the situation.

She scanned Vishnu, a potential lodger in their back-quarters, with a mix of curiosity and quiet judgment. Even as Athidhi watched, Vishnu took a step forward, offering a smile that hoped to bridge the vast gulf between their two different worlds.

But Athidhi, her smile gone, met his greeting with a gentle nod and walked back into the house, disappearing from the scene.

Vishnu turned to his mentor, a mumbled “Good night, Ma’am” escaping his lips before he hurried away, his small frame swallowed by the gathering dusk.



4. Philanthropy Wins

Shalini's enthusiasm was slightly dampened by the boy's defiant words and his reluctance to go back to school, so she didn't want to bring his story to the family just yet.

But Athidhi, unaware of their conversation, saw it as an interesting and somewhat funny story typical of her mother. Later that night at dinner she burst out, "Mom, three rescue missions in three years! Two failures and one partial success! Maybe this one will be your lucky number."

Her light-hearted voice rang out loudly in the prevailing quiet.

In the Gupta household, Shalin's domination was rarely challenged, and what followed was a silent but withering look that Athidhi received from her mother, which instantly made her fall silent.

Seeing Athidhi weighed down by remorse, struggling to undo her thoughtless misstep, her father, Ashok, stepped in gently. He leaned back slightly, fingers tapping absently against the rim of his cup, letting his words take shape.

"Compassion and empathy are the finest of human attributes," he began, his voice steady. "As a family, we value them, and your mother's generosity is truly appreciated."

He paused, eyes settling on Athidhi, as if measuring how much comfort his words could offer her before continuing, his tone turning more introspective.

“There are many ways to help those less privileged. Charity is among the simplest—if you have the means, it’s easy to give. Even a small act of kindness carries its own weight; the milk of human goodness people speak of. However, there exists a deeper kind of benevolence—one that doesn’t merely offer aid but empowers, helping a person to stand on their own.”

Athidi was squirming by now, but her father continued, swirling his tea absentmindedly.

“And that is infinitely harder. Human nature is complex and unpredictable. Luck, or destiny, plays its part, shaping outcomes in ways we can neither foresee nor control.”

He let the thought linger before adding, “All acts of charity are not alike. It is nobler to try and fail than to turn away in indifference. Yet caution is wise—our simple solutions often clash with unseen scars, with struggles that run deeper than we can imagine.”

He sighed lightly, then, with a knowing smile, softened the weight of his words. “That doesn’t mean we stop. We do our best to help, with open eyes and open hearts. And if we fail—well, we take it in stride.”

A quiet relief unfurled within Athidhi. Something about his words anchored her, steadied her. She straightened slightly, the

uncertainty in her posture melting away. "I saw the boy, Mom," she murmured, quiet but confident.

"He's bright—sparky, even. If he chooses us, I'd be happy to have him around."

The Gupta family, their bond strengthened by shared compassion and newfound humility, seemed determined to accept things with equanimity. Only Shalini knew she had yet to turn the tide at Vishnu's end and come out on top.



5. New Home, New Melodies

On Thursday evening, three days after he had offered his cheerful greetings and salute to the Guptas, Vishnu once again walked into their home, clutching a small bundle against his chest. It wasn't much larger than a melon, wrapped tightly in a worn-out cloth, his entire worldly possessions neatly contained within.

First, Vishnu's present employer and guardian, Bhaskar *Mestri*, had to be prevailed upon to relieve the boy. Then it had taken the *Mestri*, Ramu the cook, and Chandranna the driver to convince Vishnu to take up the Gupta's offer of a better future.

This time, Shalini met him in the back veranda, a spacious hall with two parts: one housed a table tennis for the family's use, while the other had a cosy swing and a few comfortable chairs.

Sitting in the swing, with her daughter Athidhi in a nearby chair, Shalini was all smiles as she received Vishnu. His acceptance meant he would stay in her house and pick up schooling again, and perhaps, that would lead him to a better future.

On his part, Vishnu looked exhausted. Nodding at a visibly happy Shalini, he plopped onto the floor, still clutching his bundle. When Shalini made no comment at all, he stole a curious look at his future boss and mumbled a request. "Ma'am,

I've been working all day. May I use Ramu *Bhaiya*'s bathroom and have a bath?"

"Of course, dear," Shalini replied, noticing his weariness and evident hunger. "Afterwards, you can head straight to the kitchen, and Ramu will give you some dinner."

Vishnu began to unfold his bundle. It contained two sets of clothes—one a crumpled, soiled, brick-coloured combination of shorts and shirt, the other an oversized, shabby white set of pants and a faded shirt.

A small plastic ball rolled aimlessly to the far end of the veranda, gently stopped by the wall. Then, from beneath the white clothes, something fell out that caught everyone's attention. A sleek, shining, sky-blue mobile phone!

Athidhi, startled, darted a look at her mother. Surprise and suspicion flickered in everyone's eyes for a moment. Such a sophisticated gadget in an orphan's bundle? Mobile phones were far from being accessible to the poor working class in India, even at the end of the nineties.

Only Shalini's expression reflected confidence that Vishnu would explain, sooner rather than later, how he came to possess it.

Reading their shock, Vishnu smiled with an adult-like wisdom. He held out the phone to Shalini. "Ma'am, it's just a toy phone I found in the White House's rubbish pile."

With a self-deprecating smile, he turned to Ramu, indicating that his explanations weren't meant for just Shalini's ears. In a

whisper, loud enough for all to hear, he declared his "speaking phone" just needed a battery to speak.

Intrigued, Athidhi took the phone and examined its exterior. Its glitter was indeed deceptive—its brightly coloured blue and silver paint was worn out in many patches. She opened the battery lid, checked the battery size, and brought the right one from her room.

Thrilled, Vishnu rushed to her and helped insert it. He pressed the enter button, and to everyone's delight, three subdued rings echoed, mimicking a home phone. Then a crisp female voice, in the style of a British airline receptionist, announced, "Good morning, may I help you?"

Laughter erupted all around. Vishnu beamed, proud of his little feat, basking in the joy it brought everyone, including Athidhi and his "Ma'am." He played it a few more times before generously handing it over to Shalini.

Turning it over in her hand, Shalini studied the gleaming blue instrument. She pressed the button once, her gaze distant. The familiar trill, the helpful prompt. Then the shuddering silence. A vague, ominous unease settled in her mind, lingering beneath the surface of her kind expression.

Ashok entered the veranda just then and, seeing his wife with the boy, went towards them. Vishnu, recognising him instantly, sprang to his feet and offered a respectful "Namaste, Sir!" instead of his earlier playful salute.

Ashok acknowledged it with a slight nod. But before Vishnu could say anything else, Ramu called from the kitchen with

unusual sternness, reflecting the household's discipline when the master of the house was in.

Ashok seemed content as he walked back to the dining table with Shalini. He, too, had sensed something about the boy—vulnerability, a need for solace, and quiet intelligence. These undefinable qualities made him feel comfortable with Vishnu's presence as their new lodger.



6. Portents of a Grey Morning

After a couple of days' deliberations, the family decided that the best option for young Vishnu was to return to his old school, even if it meant going down two grades.

Admissions to government schools for the academic year had closed more than a month ago, but Shalini Gupta, wife of Ashok Gupta, Secretary, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, wasn't one to be daunted by bureaucratic hurdles.

Bypassing the delay in Vishnu's admission was made easy by a pragmatic solution, cloaked in the aura of charity. No one would question the 'noble cause' of educating an orphan, even if it meant bending the rules a little. Shalini had sought the help of a junior officer, Mr. J.K. Varma, one of Ashok's personal staff, to ensure Vishnu's admission to Class III at the earliest.

The grey, frowning morning of the first Monday of August mirrored the uncertainties that still lingered in Shalini's mind about her ward's future. She waited for Varma's arrival in the anteroom where she usually met junior officers and unimportant guests, while Vishnu, small for his age, hung about at the main gate chatting with the watchman.

At about 9.30 a.m., a sturdy black motorbike halted at the gate. The formidable-looking J.K. Varma disembarked and was on his feet negotiating the parking of his vehicle. Vishnu was a

little unnerved by the stiff demeanour and pursed lips of the visitor.

Still, as Verma walked towards the entrance, Vishnu tried to bridge the gap between them with a polite, if rather subdued, “Good Morning, Sir,” only to be met with a scornful stare.

In the anteroom, Shalini, graceful and dignified in her peach-coloured sari, casually acknowledged Varma’s greeting and gestured for him to take the chair opposite her. Vishnu rushed in and stood beside her, hair neatly combed, and dressed in simple but well-laundered clothes. His outward calm betrayed his secret apprehensions, the most disconcerting one — having to share a classroom with kids two years his junior.

He remembered his Mem Saab’s words, “You must not mind that the other children are younger, my dear; you are going to concentrate on your job, that is, studies.”

Sitting across Shalini and the boy, Varma exuded an air of impatience. His crisp clothes and general aloofness spoke of a man accustomed to order and efficiency, a stark contrast to the emotional undercurrents in the room at that time. He tapped his pen against the admission form, the rhythmic clicks a jarring counterpoint to the silence that punctuated Vishnu’s hesitant replies.

"Full name, precisely as entered in your school register," Mr. Varma directed, his voice sharp, his gaze flitting to Shalini when Vishnu hesitated.

"Ma'am," Vishnu began, his voice barely a whisper, "Vishnu is my home name...my mother called me that."

He paused, his gaze dropping to the floor. "My 'school name', my real name, is Amar. D. Amar Singh."

The name hung in the air. Shalini remembered his missing brother.

"And your brother?" She asked softly, her voice a gentle caress in the sterile room. "Tej, wasn't it?"

"D. Tej Singh," Vishnu confirmed, his voice flat, devoid of emotion. He recounted his brother's disappearance with a chilling detachment, his words painting a picture of loss and helplessness.

"This city is very big, Ma'am," he explained, his eyes fixed on some distant point beyond the walls. "Children disappear in its bigness...how could I find a small boy in it, myself being a small boy too?"

His words—so mature, so accepting of loss—startled Shalini. Was this the innocence of childhood or the chilling consequence of facing too much too soon in life?

Mr. Varma's impatience brought her back to the present.

"Mr. Varma," she instructed, her tone dismissive and firm, "the school has all the old records. The boy left the school two years ago. Fill fresh applications, listing me as his guardian." She paused, her gaze locking with Varma's. And, with a meaningful gesture of caution, she added, "I want you to try and gather information about past performance *and* his background, ...he's our ward now."

As Mr. Varma ushered Vishnu out of the room, Shalini sank back into her chair, the weight of Vishnu's past and the uncertainties of his future pressing down on her.

Athidhi's words, Ashok's cautious counsel, and now this boy, with his unsettling maturity and his lost brother, all intertwined to form a complex tapestry of challenges. The road to helping Vishnu, she realised, would be fraught with difficulties. It would be a journey into the heart of vulnerability and hopefully, resilience.



7. A Little Knight at Arms

Nearly a week later, Vishnu's emergence from Ramu's domain on Wednesday morning was an event in itself. Chandranna, the seasoned driver beamed like a proud grandfather as he straightened Vishnu's new tie, while Ramu, the kindly cook, buffed his shoes with a reverence reserved for family heirlooms.

Vishnu was dressed in a light blue and grey uniform, well-fitting shorts, a shirt, a red tie, and black shoes. Shoes were not a compulsory part of the school uniform in government schools, where kids could even be barefoot. He carried a stylish school bag on his back secured by a bandolier, and his left shoulder bore a strapped water bottle. He looked clean and well-groomed. His black hair was neatly oiled and spruced, defining handsome features on his small, round face. Chandranna couldn't stop showering him with compliments.

"Where were you till yesterday, Vishnu Babu? And how do you look today? You are a student, Vishnu Babu, not a labourer on the street!"

Sunlight glinted off the polished leaves of the manicured hedges surrounding them, and the scent of jasmine hung lightly in the air.

A small, nervous smile played on Vishnu's lips. His eyes darted around, taking in the faces of the household staff gathered in

the courtyard: the part-time sweeper, the maid of all work, the gardener, and the gatekeeper. They greeted him with a mix of amusement and admiration. Vishnu had not yet become familiar with all of them. Yet, he entertained all with his shy smile as he was ushered into the Main Block to be presented to his mentors.

They proceeded through the imposing oak doors of the main block. Inside, the cool marble interior offered a stark contrast to the warmth of the morning sun outside. Vishnu's steps faltered slightly as he entered the grand living area; his eyes grew wide.

With a mixture of awe and apprehension, he clutched the strap of his new school bag, his fingers fidgeting with the buckle.

Shalini and Athidhi were both delighted to see the little hero in his neat school uniform. Radiant in a lime-yellow sari and matching sleeveless blouse, Shalini walked joyfully towards Vishnu. For her, it was a dream come true.

"Vishnu, you look so handsome!" she exclaimed, pulling him into a warm hug. He stiffened slightly at her touch but then relaxed, a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes. She placed her palm on his forehead, a silent blessing.

"Well done, Vishnu! Very good! You are indeed a good boy. Study well. You will have a great future."

When Vishnu was out of sight, Athidhi observed in a whisper, "Mom, he may feel uneasy about sitting in the class with the rest of the kids two years his junior and looking too big. He

might have also gone more out of touch with his lessons than we can imagine."

Shalini saw the truth in her daughter's observations, which made her apprehensive about the difficulties Vishnu might face at school.

"Let's hope for the best. We have arranged for a tutor, an experienced retired teacher, to give him daily tuition until he reaches the expected standard in all his subjects. Let's hope for the best."

The impatience in Shalini's tone was more like a command and caution to her daughter to stop harping on a negative approach.

Shalini's smile wavered. "He'll have the tutor," she said, her voice a touch too bright. "He'll catch up in time."

But Athidhi saw the doubt lingering in her mother's eyes, a shadow against her forced optimism.



8. Fun, Frolic and Music

Soon, Vishnu quickly became a cherished member of the Gupta household. He blossomed from a scruffy, thin street urchin into a well-mannered schoolboy, much to everyone's delight, especially Shalini's. He was under the watchful eye of Ramu, the family cook, who shared his living quarters and became a father figure to him.

As days passed, Vishnu's helpful nature shone through in his everyday actions. He was always there to lend a hand, fetching things for others before they even realised that they needed them. His attentiveness impressed even the stoic Ashok.

Beyond his duties, Vishnu entertained those around him with stories and insightful observations gleaned from years spent observing diverse households alongside his mother. He had a knack for mimicking others, adding a playful touch to his service that set him apart from the rest of the staff. Even as a child, Vishnu was an entertainer, with a naturally happy disposition, good looks, and inborn talents. Music came naturally to him, and it proved an invaluable learning experience in his early childhood. He had learned many bits of Hindu prayers and stories of the great epics. In his early childhood, even before he began to grasp class and social taboos, little Vishnu, uninhibited, became a little performer and entertainer in liberal families with hearts full of kindness.

In his new home in Shanti Nagar, while most of the inmates welcomed Vishnu, Shalini's son Aditya remained obstinately indifferent. Undeterred, Vishnu persisted in his attempts to connect with the boy. He even dared to gently chide Aditya for skipping the daily prayers, a bold move that surprised the boy. His personal charm and genuine concern for traditions won over the family, further solidifying his place in their home.

In the weeks that followed, Vishnu ceased to be a constant source of worry for the Guptas. In his neat blue uniform, he became a familiar sight, gliding in and out of the house with his quiet demeanour. Watching him shed his unkempt urchin-ness and bloom into a decent-looking schoolboy was itself a joy for everyone, especially for Shalini.

Ramu, the seasoned cook, was his official guardian not only by seniority but also because Vishnu's small room was nestled next to his in the servants' quarters. Inside, a rusty green tinplate box, its pale surface dotted with age, housed Vishnu's meagre wardrobe. His schoolbag was usually draped over it, while his books were kept on a small table. Ramu had fashioned a makeshift bed at the far end, opposite the table and chair. Shalini often found Vishnu contentedly ensconced there, Ramu's gruff presence a comforting anchor.

Gradually, Vishnu weaved himself into the fabric of the Gupta household. Even the reserved Ashok acknowledged his presence, surprised by the boy's quick reflexes. A dropped object saw Vishnu diving before him; a glass of water materialised before thirst even voiced itself. When important visitors arrived, Vishnu, despite his small stature, held his own,

leaving a lasting impression with his quiet charm and helpfulness.

There was also another side to him, a surprising wisdom and knowledge that belied his age. He had acquired much of it in his early childhood at random while accompanying his mother to wealthy households where she had worked as a visiting maid. He regaled the Gupta family and others with his own tales, dispensing worldly advice to them like an old soul in a young body. Athidhi found him a lively companion, her shopping expeditions enlivened by his amusing mannerisms and eagerness to help. Unlike the other servants whose genuine service bore a touch of timidity, Vishnu's servility was infused with a playful mimicry that disarmed everyone.

Vishnu's hidden talents bloomed during the monthly Poornima Pooja, a family ritual held in the sacred prayer room adorned with many revered idols and photographs. He assisted Ramu in cleaning and decorating, surpassing the other staff with his dexterity. The old visiting priest found in him a willing and capable helper, a miniature curate by his side.

But it was during the Aarthi-Pooja that Vishnu truly surprised everyone. Aditya, as usual, was absent, much to Vishnu's dismay.

Sitting with the servants just outside the pooja room, Vishnu couldn't help but join in the hymns, his young, golden voice, loud and vibrant, easily overtaking the senior priest's quavering notes. When the Aarti, the final offering lit by camphor flames and ringing of bells, was reached, Vishnu led the chorus, his voice soaring in fervent devotion, overtaking all other voices.

This display earned him newfound respect in the household. He became a minor authority on all things religious, even daring to lecture Aditya later that day on the importance of attending the Pooja. Aditya, surprised by the audacity, met his gaze briefly with a half-amused, half-annoyed flicker before brushing him off with a derisive smile.

Another time, spotting Athidhi entering the dining table with slippers on, Vishnu, assuming a pandit's role, turned to Shalini with a concerned frown.

"Ma'am," he said, "don't we owe respect to Annapoorna, the goddess of the grains? Can a Hindu take a meal with their footwear on?"

Shalini, charmed by his observation, smiled. Athidhi, too, appreciated his concern for customs, and with a sheepish grin, removed her slippers before resuming her lunch.

Vishnu's quiet integration into the Gupta household was unfolding like a hidden poem, each verse revealing a new facet of his unexpected depth, surprising eccentricities, and bold, unfailing confidence.



9. Mother as Beauty and Love

The first month of Vishnu's stay saw Shalini gravitating towards him in a way she hadn't, even to her own children. Her children had grown up, and their college schedules and distractions seemed to create a chasm, while Vishnu, with his quiet presence, filled a small portion of that void.

Initially, his family stories were terse and reluctant. But a sense of newfound security blossomed between them, allowing him to initiate conversations with Shalini. One Saturday, tucked in the backseat of her car while she drove to the department store, a question erupted from him.

"Ma'am," he said, leaning forward, "who should a child love more—God or Mother?"

Shalini, unused to such profound queries, fumbled for an answer. Recalling a familiar saying, she declared, "God, of course! God is above everything, Vishnu. All-powerful and full of love."

He fell silent. As they drove on, she felt his presence press closer again from the rear seat. Then, a grumble escaped his lips. "But God didn't take care of my mother!"

His simple truth struck a chord. Shalini couldn't find an immediate response. "But..." she stammered, searching for words that wouldn't sound hollow.

Vishnu wasn't finished. "God made us poor! My mother worked in three houses, all day, to keep us alive. Then, He took her away."

Shalini was astonished. How could such young shoulders bear such burdens of philosophy? His words, unfiltered and raw, painted a bleak picture, unaware of the weight they carried on her empathy.

Lost in his stream of memories, Vishnu continued, almost in a trance. "She had such a beautiful face, thick black hair with a tiny flower always perched behind. But her curls would tumble down to her neck. And for a necklace, just a black, braided thread." He chuckled, a fleeting glimmer in his eyes. "People said I looked like her."

Suddenly, the memory seemed to drain him. He slumped back, silent. Shalini pulled over, concerned about the tears she couldn't see. But all she got was a faint smile and a gentle, "I loved her so much, Ma'am."

"And she loved you dearly," she assured him. "See, she sent you to school, wanted you to learn. Maybe it is because of her prayers that we are there for you now. Now, the best that you can do for her is to study well. We are here to educate you. We will be there for you, always."

Vishnu did not respond to her in words. But she could sense that he had shaken off the sadness that had wrapped him momentarily, for he took her advice with an approving nod.



10. Heaven-made Friendships

Archana Printers was located on the ground floor of an old three-story building in one of the bustling streets of Hyderabad, not far from Ashok Gupta's residence.

This small shop, barely 25 feet long, faced the main road, its heart beating quietly with the rhythm of the city. Inside, air-conditioned comfort awaited Shalini Gupta, the owner, who had her office in the left corner, while Gopal Raju, the manager, sat in a spacious adjacent room, his domain filled with files and accounts. The layout was well-designed, offering ample customer space, bright lights, and a welcoming counter. Colourful displays showcasing Archana's services adorned the counter, and a double door at its far end led to the magic behind the scenes—offset printing, DTP, proofreading, binding, lamination, and more.

Shalini's morning routine involved a two-hour visit to her printing press, followed by an optional afternoon one to accommodate other commitments. Her presence had fuelled the unit's smooth operations and had ensured a steady income for herself for over a decade.

For Vishnu, Archana Printers held a special allure even before he entered the Gupta household. When Ramu, under Shalini's instructions, first met Vishnu, he had used “Archana Printers” as a potential future employer to entice the reluctant orphan to meet her. His chance to visit it finally arrived on a Saturday

morning, arising from an unexpected situation. Shalini, about to leave for the press, spotted him having overzealous fun with their half-wit gardener, Ramesh, under the shade of the almond trees at the far end of the garden. Ramesh held the toy phone in his hand and played its conversation nonstop, while both of them, in unison, rolled along, repeating a distorted version of the prompt, "May I help you?" Perhaps the two orphans were inadvertently mocking the vacuum that followed the melodious but empty promise in the prompt! Disapproving of Vishnu's boisterous fanfare with Ramesh, Shalini instructed her driver, Chandranna, to get the boy ready and put him in the car to accompany her to the press.

At the press, Shalini immersed herself in work. Assisted by Gopal, she reviewed daily tasks, checked deliveries, new orders, and quality control. Her quiet confidence and authority were evident wherever she went, and she always concluded her day's job with a visit to the work area to ensure perfection.

Gopal Raju, the quiet yet efficient manager, had been with Archana Press since its inception. He was a retired government printing press employee now in his late sixties. His confident looks and silver hair spoke volumes about his experience. Shalini valued his services but felt the need for someone younger to interact with customers. Hence, she appointed the young and flamboyant machine operator, Mohd. Samad Ali Khan. He was also to assist Gopal in the overall work supervision and customer care. Gopal, wise and understanding, seamlessly cooperated with Shalini's decisions, ensuring the unit's smooth functioning.

Ali Khan, the tall, fair-complexioned Assistant Manager, with his loose, soft brown hair combed back, was in his fourth year at Archana Printers. He had made himself an integral part of the press, mainly through his involvement in every activity at the press. Despite studying only up to ninth grade in school, he quickly mastered printing techniques through his dedication and grit. His enthusiasm balanced Gopal's calm presence, making him popular with both staff and customers alike. He was also Shalini's trusted right-hand man, occasionally helping her in her personal work.

The fact that Shalini had taken an orphan into her household and sent him to school was known to all, but this was the first time Vishnu was visiting the press. He quietly sneaked out of her office and began to explore the surroundings.

The man at the counter, amused by the boy's curiosity, beckoned him and opened the doors to the bustling work area. The rhythmic hum of machines and the chatter of a dozen young men and women filled the air. Vishnu felt a thrill coursing through him, yet remained transfixed in the shadows, mesmerised by the offset machine, printing pages like a living creature.

Ali Khan was the next to spot the young visitor. "Welcome, little brother!" his voice boomed as vibrant as the offset machine in action. Vishnu nodded shyly, his cheeks warming under the sudden attention. Amused, weathered faces turned towards him, their warmth and curiosity melting his initial nervousness. His hesitant steps transformed into confident strides as he explored the place. He paused when the workers

accosted him with a few questions and answered them, smiling shyly.

However, Vishnu's major fascination there was the offset printer. His eyes sought Ali Khan's approval, hoping for a chance to explore. Ali, flattered, offered him a stool to sit on and observe the machine. Soon, a group of girls, charmed by the cute boy, gathered around, chatting excitedly. Emboldened by the attention, Vishnu stood up, a mischievous grin playing on his lips. He pulled out his toy phone and mimicked the recorded greeting, "Good morning! May I help you?" The press erupted in laughter. Ali roared with delight, clapping Vishnu on the back. Most of the staff, their eyes twinkling, joined in the laughter.

Moments later, Shalini entered the work area to find Vishnu enjoying camaraderie with almost everyone. Her gaze met Ali's, and his beaming eyes reflected his appreciation for her ward.



11. Reminiscences Build Castles in the Air

The following Saturday afternoon, Shalini summoned Vishnu to her bedroom. Anticipating a repeat of his delightful experience at the printing press a week ago, he hurried to her and found her arranging half a dozen carry bags on her bed. She began with her customary question.

"Vishnu, do you have a lot of homework pending?"

Expecting this to be the initial query, he responded with visible joy, "Only very little, Ma'am; I can finish it in half an hour."

Pleased, Shalini said, "Very well! We need to take all these to my tailor; many require repair and alteration, while some need stitching. Please take all these bags and keep them in my car."

As he gathered the bags, she insisted, "I wouldn't disturb you if you have tuition or homework. Your priority must be your studies."

The warm afternoon sun, usually a welcome visitor in the rainy season, cast a harsh glare on the damp asphalt of the Raj Bhavan Road. Suddenly, Vishnu recognised that his Ma'am was indeed driving onto his familiar turf located not far from where he grew up. His repressed excitement knew no bounds as he quietly moved to the right end of the passenger seat,

avidly trying to catch a glimpse of his old school and the winding footpaths leading to the poor *busti* areas there.

Reminiscences, like phantoms, stirred up images of his beloved mother's desperate plight, weaving and fabricating imaginary stories out of the terrific screams of truth that had gone down and been buried in time.

"Ma'am, it happened right here, on this very spot," he said, his voice low and strained. "It was a dark evening during monsoon rains. We were returning from a small shopping trip—my mother, my younger brother, and I. The three of us were huddled under a single umbrella, our laughter echoing through the downpour. Then in a wink, everything changed: a combination of many things happening together, pouring rains making the traffic inaudible, the sky turning darker, my little brother slipping out of my mother's hold, and my mother, usually very cautious, losing her judgment."

He went on to describe the screeching tyres, the blinding headlights, and the sickening thud that echoed in his ears even now. He painted a picture of his mother's immobile body crumpled on the slick road; his own terrified screams mingled with those of his little brother, swallowed by the din of the city.

Shalini leaned forward, her eyes wide with horror. "Oh, Vishnu," she gasped, her hand reaching out to grip his tightly.

Tears welled up in Vishnu's eyes, blurring the image he had painstakingly created. "A kind gentleman — a doctor — he looked, with gold-rimmed spectacles that glinted in the sun," he choked out, "rushed out of the car. He knelt beside Mother,

his movements swift and practiced. He called for help, and a vegetable vendor, a kind stranger, stopped his cart."

Here, Vishnu seemed to falter a little, and the truth threatened to spill out. The image of the doctor promising to take his mother, an accident victim, to the hospital in his own car seemed unlikely to Shalini. But she did not want to hurt him.

Shalini squeezed his hand gently. "He took her to the hospital, didn't he?" She prompted kindly, her voice laced with a desperate hope. "Yes, Ma'am," Vishnu mumbled. "He said, 'Ask your people to come to NIMS.'"

Vishnu looked away, unable to meet Shalini's gaze.

"We were just children, Ma'am," he said, his voice barely a whisper. "In that odd hour, there was no one to rush to my mother's side in the hospital, no one to hold her hand."

He described his frantic search for the apartment janitor, the man who usually looked out for them. The janitor's dismissive words—children couldn't go to hospitals—echoed in his ears, adding another layer of despair to his agonising wait.

The memory of his frustration choked him, muted him, and enveloped him in a long silence.

As the car moved forward, Shalini's eyes scanned the stretch of road. Each pothole, each faded zebra crossing, seemed to hold a piece of Vishnu's story. She yearned to offer comfort, but the weight of his unspoken truth hung heavy in the air.

They sat in silence for a long time, allowing the brewing storm in Vishnu to settle down. Finally, he spoke again, his voice hoarse.

"We were alone, Ma'am," he rasped. "The rain... it took her away. Just like it washes away everything else."

Shalini turned to him, a tear tracing a path down her cheek. In that moment, their eyes met, and a silent understanding passed between them.

The fabricated story didn't matter, the hidden truth didn't matter, the raw pain, the vulnerability, the weight of loss, and the living ghosts of that loss—those were the shared threads that bound them together.

When the car came to a stop at their destination, Shalini placed a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"It's all right, Vishnu," she said softly. "We'll get through this together."

Vishnu didn't respond, but a faint smile of gratitude flickered on his face.



12. Sinking Hopes, Rising Resilience

Vishnu's early weeks in the Gupta household were an interplay of uncertain contradictions. Initially, he was too innocent to feel any erosion in his carefree status. The demarcation between the householders and himself was not yet palpable to him, prompting him to make attempts to placate them.

However, as time passed, he sensed that his efforts to win acceptance with playful jokes and mimicry fell flat, met only with vacant stares or tepid smiles. The crisp blue and grey uniform, red tie, and laced shoes, once symbols of newfound respectability, now hung limply on his small frame, his eyes reflecting the fading spirit within him.

The opulent rooms that had dazzled him in those early days transformed into a gilded cage, filled with stifling silence and polite indifference. He yearned for genuine connection, a hand on his shoulder, and a word of encouragement that transcended the formality of their interactions.

Only Shalini, with her gentle grace and quiet understanding, offered a flickering candle of warmth in the vast indifference of the others. However, she maintained a natural reserve, holding back any excessive compliments or laughter.

Vishnu's harrowing story of his mother's death, even with all the contradictions in its narrative, deeply affected Shalini, reinforcing her resolve to do her best to give him a normal life. She longed to share the pathos of Vishnu's ordeal with her family. But she couldn't find a moment in their conversations when the orphan figured in even remotely. She was distressed but could do nothing except pin her hopes on Vishnu's tenacity and hard work.

Frustration gnawed at Vishnu. A simple act of Ramu, the cook, forgetting to hand over the tiffin to him, became a symbol of his anger against the larger neglect he felt. He confronted Ramu with a torrent of pent-up fury, the words tumbling out like stones, each one shattering the fragile pretence of camaraderie. Ramu's eyes, glinting with resentment, mirrored the turmoil brewing within Vishnu himself.

The solitude of his dingy room became a refuge—a place where he could shed the mask and unleash the raw emotions hidden behind it. Flinging his books across the floor, he let out a choked sob, a primal cry of belonging to no one in this world. The memory of his mother's grief-stricken face surfaced, a poignant reminder of the life he had lost.

But Vishnu was not one to wallow in self-pity. The most valuable lesson he had learned in the one year since the loss of his mother was that he needed to be a go-getter in life.

His inborn courage, honed by the harsh realities of life, soon found an outlet in playful mischief. The old, melancholic watchman became his unsuspecting partner in pranks. A feigned phone call on his deaf ear from his toy phone would

elicit a comical look of bewilderment, followed by a slow, deliberate turnaround in search of the invisible caller. Vishnu's laughter, echoing across the courtyard, would draw out Ramesh, the gardener, a wide grin blooming on his weathered face.

Their camaraderie thrived in the shared language of laughter and light-hearted pranks. With Ramesh, Vishnu transformed into a miniature prince, issuing mock reprimands and imperious orders, drawing on lessons learned from his former employer, Bhaskar *Mestri*. These playful jabs were not meant to belittle but to bridge the gap between their worlds, forging a bond on the foundation of their shared amusement.

Yet, amidst the frivolity, moments of introspection surfaced. Vishnu, observing Chandranna, the driver, proudly espousing his left-leaning ideals, found himself offering a cynical counterpoint. "Are! *bhaiyya*! All politicians are thieves. They will do nothing to help you, *bhaiyya*! If you are poor and weak, you will live a miserable life and die miserably too!"

His words, laced with the bitterness of the underprivileged, echoed the harsh realities he had witnessed firsthand. Vishnu's journey in the Gupta household was a tapestry woven with threads of hope and disillusionment, courage and vulnerability. Each interaction, each moment of laughter and sorrow, shaped the contours of his young heart, marking his tentative steps into a world at once alien and familiar.



13. Echoes of Cracks and Rumblings in the Air

It was October. The air buzzed with bittersweet excitement as the Guptas prepared for their annual pilgrimage to Calcutta.

For Ashok and Shalini, it was a homecoming, a rekindling of familial bonds and childhood memories, woven into the vibrant tapestry of Durga Puja, the nine-day festival celebrating the triumph of good over evil. Athidhi, their daughter, embraced the trip with youthful enthusiasm, anticipating laughter-filled reunions with cousins, movies, outings, partying, and the endless indulgence of doting grandparents.

Aditya, however, remained aloof, his eyes already scanning distant horizons, yearning for adventures beyond the familiar shores of India. For him, this trip felt less like a homecoming and more like a temporary pause in his ambitious dreams of moving to the U.S. as early as possible.

In the pandemonium of the pre-departure day, Vishnu remained an enigmatic figure. In Shalini's heart, he remained a labour of Love. But for Vishnu, in the context of the growing distance he felt from the Gupta household, it was partial freedom and a sort of release from surveillance that made him silent and aloof at home.

Shalini longed to build a closer rapport with the orphan, find time to address his needs, and give him guidance and a sense of belonging. She was vaguely aware that she had not given her best to him, yet the intimate, reassuring session she had planned for him before her departure had to be delayed because of her logistical anxieties. All she could do was entrust his care to Ramu.

“Ramu,” she called out, her voice laced with concern, “please keep a careful eye on Vishnu. Remember, we plucked him out from a different world; adaptation takes time. I know, Ramu, I haven't even found the opportunity to visit his school to see how he's faring. I will look into all his problems and rectify shortcomings as soon as I return.”

Ramu, a man weathered by life's many storms, listened with a listless smile, his eyes betraying a dark shadow of helplessness. "Mem Sahib," he finally mumbled, "Vishnu is not the same Vishnu when you are not around. He has become uncontrollable now.”

After a pause, he continued in a whisper, “I hear he keeps skipping school and spends long hours at the printing press.”

Ramu wanted to say something more—something of a secret nature, about Vishnu's tuition sessions—but Shalini brushed it all aside. It was a reflexive impulse to ward off further stress and burden her mind right now.

However, she promised Ramu that she would speak to Vishnu again to reinforce the importance of obedience and respect. As an afterthought, she added, "Ramu, you'll have more free time during our absence. Please visit his tutor and see how he's doing

with his studies. Remember, Vishnu's holidays also begin next week; he should spend extra time catching up."

Ramu, saddled with the unwanted responsibility, swallowed his anxieties and silently walked away to the kitchen.

Later, Ramu was surprised to catch a glimpse of Vishnu slipping into his room, schoolbag on his shoulders, despite the early hour. Curiosity piqued, he confronted the boy, "Vishnu, it's barely past eleven. How come you are back from school?" Before Ramu could finish, Vishnu's retort crackled with defiance. "Ramu *bhaiyya*, I am not well; that's why. Is everyone here a saint, *bhaiyya*? I know what others do, too!"

He lowered his voice, a glint of cunning in his eyes. "Ramu *bhaiyya*, Memsahib must never know!"

The veiled threat hung heavy in the air, leaving Ramu reeling. Vishnu, it seemed, had discovered Ramu's vulnerabilities. A fleeting memory surfaced— last Sunday morning, when, reclining on Ramu's bed, watching a TV show, Vishnu's fingers had brushed against a hidden bottle beneath the pillow.

Liquor for servants was taboo in the Gupta household. The truth, once unearthed, became a weapon tucked away for Vishnu to use at the opportune time.

Now, faced with Vishnu's baffling warning, Ramu's earlier bravado evaporated. The steam had gone out of his admonition. His voice, stripped of authority, pleaded with forced sternness, "You are not doing the right thing, Vishnu; they give you so much...and here you are, skipping classes..."

He retreated to the kitchen, his muttered reprimands fading into the pre-departure chaos of their bosses. The air, once buzzing with excitement, now simmered with a tense undercurrent. As the Guptas prepared for departure the next day, shadows of uncertainty about Vishnu's behaviour lingered in his mind, hinting at the imminent conflicts and hidden truths that awaited him in their absence.



14. A Phase of Peaceful Pause in Time

The next morning, it was Vishnu's last day at school before eleven glorious days of release from persistent surveillance from everyone around. It was also the Guptas' day of departure to their native place.

Vishnu's stomach churned with a mix of excitement and dilemma. He got ready to leave for school but hesitated to go without seeing them off. He decided to wait for an opportunity to sneak in and say goodbye.

Sunlight slanted through the windows, painting warm squares on the pale tile floor of the dining room. The Guptas were at the breakfast table, the clink of cutlery and hushed murmurs weaving a tapestry of domesticity. Vishnu couldn't interrupt their morning ritual, so he went to the kitchen, unhooked his worn leather bandolier, dropped his school bag on a wobbly stool with a soft thud, and waited.

The aroma of spices hung heavy in the air, drawing him into the kitchen. Ramu, the kind but gruff cook, his temporary warden in charge for the holidays, was chopping slender okra pods. Vishnu, wanting to propitiate him, grabbed a knife, took his permission, and joined him in the chopping. At length, when Ramu went to serve the Guptas' beverages, Vishnu found

his moment, emerged from the kitchen, and presented himself to them.

Ashok, the head of the house, looked up from his seat at the head of the table. A smile, tinged with warmth and surprise, lit up his face. "You're looking good, young man!" Ashok boomed, his voice a comforting rumble, "though you haven't grown an inch."

The compliment, like a sunbeam in a dark room, chased away Vishnu's shyness. Even Aditya, usually engrossed in his own world, gave him a friendly nod. Shalini, ever the practical one, approached him, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"Remember, we'll be gone for two weeks," she said gently. "You have your holidays too, so focus on your tuition classes and studies. Don't waste your time playing with Ramesh. He doesn't have exams, but you..." her voice softened, "...you're not like him."

Vishnu, silent and eyes downcast, nodded; Shalini patted his shoulder again, her touch a quiet promise of care.

"Ramu will look after you," she assured him. "You're still a little guy, so listen to your elders. Whatever Ramu says, you must obey. All right?"

Vishnu mumbled his agreement, his heart swelling with a combination of gratitude, confusion, and guilt.

Slipping back into the kitchen, he collected his bags but was not in a hurry to leave, pausing at the entrance to watch the hushed atmosphere of the Gupta household in silence. He was

pensive and seemed to relive the leave-taking ceremony he had just held with the Guptas.

It dawned on him that the farewell had given him nothing to smile about. He was angry and ashamed that he was always the loser, for no one's fault. Eventually, he came out of the kitchen and walked away unnoticed, silent rebellion in his heart.



15. Empathy Serenades Innocence

That afternoon, instead of heading home from school, Vishnu's feet took him on the familiar path to Archana Printing Press. He approached the small door leading to the work area, anticipation buzzing in his veins. Used to his frequent visits, the lady at the counter nodded, her smile a testament to his unrestrained permission to come and go as he pleased. As he lifted the latch, a voice from behind, like sandpaper on wood, scraped his nerves.

"Hey! Where are you off to? Did school let out early? And what brings you here, boy?" Manager Gopal loomed behind him, eyes narrowed.

Vishnu, though caught off guard, had anticipated this confrontation. He straightened his shoulders, transforming from a mischievous boy into a paragon of innocence. "Sir, it's the last working day, so we finished early. Mem Saheb said, no loitering with the gardener, and my tuition master's out of town."

He awaited Gopal's verdict with bated breath. The old man studied him for a moment, grunted a bit, then turned back and walked away to his seat. With a sigh of relief, Vishnu slipped through the door, the sleek wooden latch clicking shut behind him like a conspiratorial wink.

Inside, the press hummed with familiar energy. "Hey! Come, come, my friend!" boomed Ali, pulling Vishnu into a boisterous welcome. Smiles bloomed around him, erasing the memory of Gopal's scrutiny.

Vishnu's past visits had woven him into the fabric of this place, forging friendships, especially with the women employees, whose workday he lightened, often by physically sharing their burdens with a playful grin.

One girl, her desk overflowing with papers, beckoned him over. "Vishnu! No phone today?" she teased, her eyes twinkling.

He fumbled in his pocket, extracting his mobile and handing it over with a shy smile. "Here!"

"Good morning," he chirped, noticing the workload piling up on her desk. "Need a hand?"

Ali, flashing his warm smile, quipped, "So, Mem Saheb's gone, and you're on an extended holiday?"

Vishnu, fearing his absent tutor's mention, blurted, "And my tutor's out of town, too!"

At this, a light punch from Ali landed on his shoulder, met with a nervous simper. Ali didn't want to confront the poor boy, but equally, he could hardly hide his indignation at Vishnu's neglect of his studies.

"Just thought I'd check," he winked, adding, "This is your chance to learn new things here, helping your sisters. The festival orders are flooding in, and we're drowning in work."

Though excitement bubbled in his chest, Vishnu kept his face neutral, eyes glued to the rhythmic dance of the Offset Printer. He craved a work assignment from Ali to justify his presence in the Press and to execute it perfectly.

Instead, Ali tossed him a printed page in the local language.

“Read it out, will you?”

A sudden gloom swallowed Vishnu's youthful face. What did the words on that page hold? Looking hard at the page, he saw the words as images of his classmates mocking him. He had no idea how these words would change the precarious balance between responsibility and the allure of the press.

The worn pamphlet crackled in Ali's grip as he held it towards Vishnu, eyes narrowed. "Read it!" he commanded, his voice rough with frustration.

He planted his feet defiantly. "No excuses, Vishnu! Reading, writing, arithmetic – these are your tools to rise up...."

Ali stopped midway, seeing a deep mix of pain and shame clouding the orphan's face.

Vishnu flinched, avoiding the paper. "Can't, Ali *bhai*," he mumbled, eyes downcast. "I can't read or write." Tears of desperation brimmed in his eyes and abruptly turned into a torrent flooding his cheeks. With a faint groan wrung from the depths of his heart, Ali spoke to him gently, trying to placate him.

At the far end of the room, he spotted a couple of Vishnu's stunned female fans looking in disbelief at their ever-bright

hero, desperate and despondent. Ali was quick to give them a decisive warning wink to keep away while his own heart sank with a deeper awareness of the orphan's helplessness. For the first time, Ali read the invisible Truth! The orphan had retained nothing of the alphabet he had learned in his first two years, after his tumultuous encounter with destiny.

Vishnu nodded his agreement to all the counselling Ali gave him, hiding his defiance behind a facade of agreement, till his heart tugged towards the alluring clatter of the Printing machine again.

Lunchtime broke the spell. Archana Printers became a place full of laughter and chatter. The female workers, a mix of personalities from Hyderabad's lower middle class, gathered around Nalini, the cashier. Unlike the others, Nalini's eyes carried the weight of a recent betrayal — her husband taken by another woman. Despite their different lives, a quiet thread of resilience united them.

Their simple saris and beaded jewellery whispered of their constant fight with life's challenges. Yet, the glint of their gold studs in their noses spoke of hope and a hidden defiance against their challenging circumstances.

Vishnu observed them, a seed of yearning stirring within him. He longed to break free from the confines of books and high expectations, to carve his own path. An orphan of his age and background was too young to harbour dreams of the future. What mattered to a child like him was today, now.

Ali's voice, a distant echo in his mind, told him that education was the chisel he needed to shape his path to higher places. But

he couldn't comprehend the power and magic of education. When his teachers asked him to read or write, he couldn't do either because he did not know how. Eventually, they bypassed him with disdain, and in time, with absolute neglect.

The midday sun cast long shadows through the bustling hall of Archana Printers, painting stark contrasts against the shared tablecloths of the female workers. Their steel lunch boxes, neatly packed with the familiar combination of rice, dal, and a sprinkle of semi-fried vegetables with tomatoes, lay open like miniature windows into their lives. Each bite held a quiet echo of shared struggles and the whispers of gossip about their small, circumscribed worlds.

Nalini, adorned in the heavy cloak of silence, remained a silent observer, her gloom a stark contrast to the prevailing vibrant chatter. Her meals were consumed in solitude, swallowed down with the bitter taste of abandonment and the fear of the new burdens that stared at her.

Across the hall, the two male employees, basking in the privilege of their larger pay, were enjoying their restaurant meals at their own perch — their aloofness and indifference testament to the invisible lines of class even within the press.

Ali, an outlier in every way, strode through the air of hierarchy like a rogue breeze. His non-vegetarian lunch from 'Crescent', a modest restaurant beyond the press walls, spoke of a completely different lifestyle.

He found Vishnu, perched on a stool like a misplaced sparrow, and extended an invitation to lunch. The boy's initial refusal, a flicker of pride battling with simmering hunger, spoke volumes

about his inborn dignity. Ali, with his gentle insistence and big brother's concern for him, shattered those walls of formality, carving a space for himself as Vishnu's mentor.

Their journey to Crescent was a study in contrasts. Ali, tall and slender under the midday sun, his silken hair glinting like fire, led the way with casual confidence. Vishnu, dwarfed by Ali's presence, shrank into a shadow, his anxieties eclipsing the excitement of a restaurant lunch.

However, the Crescent brought a sea change in his mood. The bustling dining hall and the cacophony of smells and sounds jolted Vishnu back to life. He watched in awed silence as Ali navigated the space with familiarity, the aroma of curries, kebabs, and sizzlers as a symphony for their senses.

Vishnu's initial shyness gave way to tentative bites, each mouthful a modest denial of his earlier claim of not being hungry. An evasive look from Ali made him instantly hesitant, prompting a gentle pep talk about how children must eat robustly to nourish their bodies and brains.

Their conversation was a cautious blend of formality and intimacy. When it touched on Vishnu's academic struggles, he was stung again. But the sense of brotherhood they had built helped him recover and regain confidence. Vishnu looked at his Mentor Number Two, eyes full of adoration, and made bold to speak of his confused perception of the predicament he was living through.

“*Bhaiya!* My schooling started late. My mother struggled to feed us. There was no one to take me to school, *Bhaiya*. School is not for the likes of us.”

With a glint of hope in his eyes, he implored, “Reading and writing are not my thing now. Give me something to do with my hands and my head—and that’s where I can shine.”

Ali showed no sympathy or emotion while listening to Vishnu’s past. He sat silent and transfixed, listening to him. Premature sympathies would only trigger self-deprecation in a child. His instinct was to keep Vishnu as beautiful a child as he was, and help him grow up without losing his self-esteem, resourcefulness, and buoyancy.

The orphan’s words resonated with some of his own experiences as a half-orphan after the loss of his mother in his childhood. Finally, when Ali addressed Vishnu, he knew he had to address him as his true well-wisher, his mentor.

“You will shine, Vishnu, no doubt, you will shine in everything you undertake”, Ali said to cheer him up, “with Ma’am’s help, you will do far better, Vishnu. I was an orphan too, a half-orphan, having lost my mother very early. I also had to struggle very hard. Getting updated to the 3rd level of Reading and Writing is not an impossible task for you. You’ll do it well.”

Childlike, Vishnu was happy to listen to the optimism in Ali’s words. Ali had just paid the restaurant bills, but before leaving, in a sudden, childlike outburst, fuelled by frustration and hope, Vishnu proposed an unexpected solution for the present – permission to spend the upcoming holidays at the Press. It was a desperate plea for escape from the monotony of the educational path imposed on him.

Ali, ever the understanding mentor, readily agreed. His permission felt like silent encouragement, a recognition of

Vishnu's yearning for practical knowledge and a possible path towards finding his place in the world.



16. Gathering Clouds

Shalini's return from Calcutta was a whirlwind of settling back into the rhythm of her home, the press, and her children. However, another storm-cloud also lingered in her, in the form of Vishnu. She knew she needed to address his truancy and alarming lack of attendance, but her busy schedule kept her from doing so.

A week later, under the cloak of an empty house, she finally broached the subject with Ramu. His sullen silence and hesitant confirmation of Vishnu's complete absence from tuition for more than a month sent a wave of exasperation and disappointment crashing over her. Her straight and easy plans for Vishnu to catch up through the tuition master seemed to crumble as she sat listening to her loyal cook, Ramu.

As Ramu, emboldened by her distress, unravelled the web of Vishnu's activities in her absence, Shalini felt a knot tighten in her gut. His dubious temple visits, covert escapes with Ramesh, and total refusal to study painted a picture of a boy far removed from the one she had envisioned. Overwhelmed by a fear of hearing more disconcerting aspects of his behaviour, she feigned tiredness and dismissed Ramu, seeking refuge in the bitter comfort of a strong coffee.

While reclining in the drawing room, her daughter's apprehension about “transforming the tramp into a cherub”—echoed in her mind like a well-meaning compliment she wasn't

sure she deserved. She struggled, in vain, to banish the harsh truth: she had failed to give her ward the time and effort a transformation of this kind required. Guilt gnawed at her, yet deep down, nestled within her was a sure path to peace for herself—her pragmatism, polished by years of social grace and quiet triumphs. However, dismissing all her apprehensions of failure, she soon tried to convince herself that entertaining the thought of giving up on Vishnu was unbearable to her. Hope for Vishnu burned in her—not as a flicker of sentiment, but as a steady flame that defied reason. In that quiet moment of reckoning, she renewed her resolve to do everything in her power to rescue the wonder-child she had come to love, not out of duty, but out of something far more enduring.

The next day, amidst the familiar hum of Archana Press, the disturbing image of Vishnu still loomed large in her mind. However, the workers' affectionate whispers about Vishnu offered her a glimmer of consolation, a feeling that there was still some hope. In their eyes, he was not a truant, but a little hero loved for his mischievous charms, helpful nature, and quick learning. His tiny frame, pulsating with energy and exuberance, had infused their monotonous lives with a burst of colour. Even Gopal, the stern manager, grudgingly acknowledged his skills and dexterity.

With all the support, affection, and attention he was receiving at the Archana Press, Dussehra holidays for Vishnu had been a breath of fresh air, a sanctuary from the constraints of school, home, and the loathsome tuition sessions. However, for Shalini, the reports of his talent and popularity offered only fleeting comfort. She knew the real story lay veiled in the quiet of her

home, hidden in the silences and shadows of his daily life. The mystery of this eleven-year-old tugged at her, urging her to dive deeper, to peel back the layers of pre-teen behaviour and unveil the truth, however harsh it might be. Only then, she realised, could she truly help him and herself, find peace.



17. A Journey to the Past

Made too Late

The next morning, Shalini, accompanied by Chandraiah and Ali, made her way to Vishnu's school. The car snaked down Raj Bhavan Road, a rough, potholed path, as a symphony of honks and shouts replaced the silence of the main Road. As soon as they reached the sprawling compound of the Government school, Ali, without even waiting for Chandranna to park the car, briskly walked to the Principal's Office to prepare the staff for the arrival of Shalini, the wife of the Under Secretary, Mr Ashok Gupta. Ali's proud bearing, as he walked ahead, weaving through craning necks, was itself an announcement of the arrival of somebody important.

Meanwhile, Shalini's car, an island of air-conditioned calm, thrummed slowly towards the office amidst the cacophony at the school gate. Shalini scanned the kids' faces, hoping to catch a glimpse of Vishnu amid the sea of brown and grey uniforms. But the boys blurred before her eyes, their brown faces and shining, cropped hair blending into a single indistinct crowd. Even their laughter, sharp and joyful, seemed indistinguishable.

Inside, the morning sun, warm and bright, filtered long shadows through the dusty windows, giving the wooden furniture a mellow, amber glow. Dressed in a simple blue sari of a sombre shade, her brown hair tamed into a neat bun,

Shalini entered the office untouched by the subdued atmosphere, her gaze unwavering as it met the principal's.

The principal, a middle-aged, amiable lady, petite and silver-haired with eyes that sparkled like sapphires behind her spectacles, rose to greet Shalini with a warm smile, Ali's smooth introduction paving the way. There was no haughty air about Shalini, yet she radiated an undeniable elegance that seemed to fill the room. Her quiet power and gentle dignity spoke volumes even before she uttered a word. In that stark setting, amidst the murmur of the inquisitive staff, Shalini bloomed, a beacon of unexpected grace and quiet strength.

When the Principal offered Ali a seat, he hesitated, eyes flicking to Shalini before inclining his head in deference. Only after a gentle nod from his boss did he settle beside her, his posture impeccably straight.

"Ms. Gupta ", the principal began, her voice laced with a hint of concern, " I'm afraid I have some news about your ward. There have been... difficulties concerning his attendance. However, I've requested his Class Teacher to join us and share a more comprehensive picture."

An unreadable smile flitted across Shalini's face, a mask of composure as she sat patiently awaiting the teacher's arrival.

Ali, meanwhile, slipped out to the veranda. A quick huddle with a group of boisterous students revealed Vishnu's uncanny ability to vanish even when physically present. "He's here today, too!" one exclaimed, gleefully pointing to the farthest corner of the schoolyard.

Following the boy's direction, Ali emerged onto the footpath and scanned the distant cluster. There, standing alone under a tree, was Vishnu, a head taller than his classmates. But his posture spoke volumes. Cowering and pale, he darted a fearful glance towards Ali, a silent plea in his eyes—a desperate hope to be spared an awkward confrontation. Ali, understanding the boy's unspoken plea, turned back, pretending not to notice.

The Class Teacher, a portly woman with pigtails that bounced like rubber bands on her back, swept into the office in a flurry of tittering greetings. After a dramatic rummage through a mountain of registers, she declared Vishnu's attendance "woefully irregular" before diving back into her paperwork, oblivious to the silent tension in the room.

Shalini's quiet grace, devoid of any self-importance, instantly put everyone at ease. The Class Teacher, after a series of throat clearings, delivered the facts in her high-pitched voice. "Amar Singh was present for all August days. In September, we saw him a mere four out of twenty-four, and this October, with nine working days gone, he hasn't set foot in class."

The truth about Vishnu was a discordant symphony in Shalini's ears, yet her composure remained immaculate. As the wife of a respected bureaucrat, she held her emotions in check. However, his unexplained behaviours gnawed at her. She couldn't grasp the workings of Vishnu's mind, his sudden descent into truancy. Perhaps, she pondered, his past held the key, the life before she took him in. The Class Teacher, she hoped, could unlock this mystery.

After a moment of quiet contemplation, Shalini turned to the principal and spoke in a soft, measured voice, "We brought him into our lives only about four months ago, wanting to take care of him and offer him education. His past—his life before us—must be influencing his present. Perhaps knowing his background will help us guide him. Could you connect me with someone who knew him before his mother's passing?"

Before the Principal could respond, the Class Teacher, Savithri, seemingly shedding her awkwardness, volunteered, "Until joining the third class, he was a smart little child—beautiful, bright and discerning, and polite with teachers, even the class monitor. But..."

Vishnu's teacher paused, the weight of unspoken memories hanging in the air.

"Soon after he entered the third grade, he began bullying weaker children. His younger brother wasn't spared either. The boy's mother, a familiar presence at school, tried to follow her elder son's progress. She used to be accompanied by his younger brother, a quiet, delicate child with spiky hair, radiant skin, and wide, luminous eyes."

"How old was his brother?" Shalini asked, a new concern etching itself onto her brow.

"He might have been about four at that time. "She said casually.

Savithri's revelations hung like a shroud in the cramped office. Vishnu's past, pieced together like shards of broken glass, revealed a desolate landscape. Finally, Savithri revealed that after the school reopened, his mother could hardly keep up her

visits. Amar's younger brother, Teja, also stopped visiting the school...Shalini's facade of composure flickered, a glimpse of raw pain momentarily piercing her calm demeanour.

"I apologise for burdening you with so many questions," Shalini whispered, her voice barely audible. "Could you tell me anything about their father?"

Savithri furrowed her brow, dredging up her hazy memories of Vishnu's elusive father. "I remember this family for the unwavering dedication of his parents to their son's education," she said, a note of respect softening her voice. "The father... he was all right, still, he was an enigma, reticent and aloof with us, but loving to the kids".

She spoke softly, her voice trailing off. "He met us only once or twice, I remember vividly the day Amar first stepped into the school—when the four of them appeared as a united, happy family." At this point, Savithri paused.

Her gaze swept anxiously across the room, seeking a flicker of understanding in her colleagues' eyes before she shared the delicate information.

"Amar's father," she began, her voice laced with the timber of curiosity, "while Indian, possessed a certain... otherness. His looks, though familiar in their broad strokes, hinted at a different origin altogether, perhaps a remote village, far to the north of the country. He was not educated. And so.....", she continued, a hint of wonder in her tone,

"For Amar's first admission, we had to rely on his thumbprint."

Shalini's face remained composed, but a steely glint emerged in her eyes. "Did he walk his son Amar Singh to the school every day in the beginning?" she inquired, her voice laced with a newfound resolve.

Savithri's shoulders slumped with regret. "I can't say for sure," she admitted. "My memory blurs around the edges. But if you truly seek to know more about Amar's past, there's someone who might hold the key."

Hope flickered in Shalini's gaze. "Of course," she said, her voice firm. "I need to know more about him, even if it's just a sliver of a chance to help. I won't let him slip back into the darkness of child labour and other uncertainties—not if I can help it."

Savithri's lips curved into a knowing smile. "The school sweeper, Satya, was his mother's friend," she revealed. "Laxmi, I believe, was her name. They were neighbours in the colony. Satya was the one who brought us the news of her death."

Shalini's heart ached for the young boy adrift and alone in the vast sea of grief.

"Amar told me they lost her in an accident," She murmured, her voice heavy with distress.

Savithri's eyes widened, a flicker of surprise crossing her face.

"Accident?"

She echoed, glancing at her colleagues. "Yes, an accident, I suppose. Details are hazy; time has erased much of them. Forgive me for not knowing more. One thing is clear: these

brothers were left to navigate life's storms alone after their mother's light extinguished."

As they walked together to the parked car, Ali sensed the turmoil simmering beneath Shalini's calm exterior. He cautiously approached; his voice laced with concern. "Ma'am," he began, "how do you feel about Vishnu's situation?"

Shalini paused, her gaze fixed on the school grounds where children played, oblivious to the shadows lurking in their pasts.

"There's more to him than meets the eye, Ali," she said softly. "His story is a tangled web, and I'll try to untangle it, thread by thread: for Vishnu, for his brother, and the memory of their mother. They deserve a chance, Ali, and I'll do it."

"Unbelievable," Shalini murmured after a pause, and fell silent. She was in no mood to elaborate, dismay clinging to her voice like fog. The Vishnu who had become a bright spark in her life in just a couple of months had suddenly receded, turning into a series of question marks and a disturbing spectre.

Ali, a whirlwind of concern, rushed to fill the silence. "He is a good boy, Ma'am. I have always found him bright with a robust thirst for knowledge. What could have gone wrong?"

His rambling questions echoed Shalini's inner turmoil. The defining questions irked her because somewhere within herself, she felt the pricks that she did not wish to acknowledge, even to herself, that something had gone amiss on her end, too.

Finally, amid the storm of emotions, Shalini spoke in a firm voice. "Thank you, Ali. Your concern means a lot. But this needs careful consideration. If and when I visit the sweeper

woman, as the Class Teacher suggested, and if I need your help, I'll let you know."

Ali, sensing the unspoken rebuke, fell silent. The weight of all that had happened in her meetings in the school hung heavy in their strange silence. Their ride together—usually easy banter and companionship—now stretched before them like a treacherous path, both lost in their own thoughts, the quiet tension between them an echo of the storm brewing within.



18. In Search of Lost Beginnings

Shalini returned from the school visit, torn by conflicting emotions, feeling each recollection of the Class Teacher about Vishnu a distorted reflection of the poor boy she thought she knew.

"He seemed to be such a plain child," the teacher's words echoed in her mind, a poignant counterpoint to the unsettling stories that lingered between the lines. Consoling herself with the thought of sharing the burden with Ashok later, she retreated to her chambers, unable to face Vishnu.

Vishnu arrived from school and walked in like a spectre of his former self, eyes blazing with the desperation of a caged panther, his luminous brown complexion turning darker. Shalini's school visit—an unexpected intrusion into his private world—had left him exposed and raw. A steely cunning lurked beneath the surface, his face a mask of studied neutrality.

In the days that followed, an uneasy dance of unspoken tensions unfolded in the house. Shalini, burdened by new information, yet yearning for clarity, kept a watchful distance. Vishnu, cloaked in his own inscrutable silence, moved within the household like a ghost, avoiding her gaze while always remaining within its periphery.

Sensing the dilemmas brewing in her, Ashok approached his wife with gentle understanding. He had witnessed Shalini's distress for days, the telltale crease between her brows, the uncharacteristically short nights. He knew she wouldn't rest until she unravelled the tangled threads of Vishnu's past.

"He had a very tough life," Ashok ventured softly, "but we have forged him into a new landscape totally alien to him. We can't judge him with our familiar yardsticks. He is not like Aditya, nor like any ordinary eleven-year-old. We have to see ..." His voice trailed off, leaving unspoken solutions hanging in the air.

Ashok was a man of few words. But Shalini had always found his observations inspirational and impactful, especially in crises. Slowly, a new resolve began to burn in her. With the weight of the information she had gathered from the school pressing down on her, Shalini was now fully determined to delve into the shadows of Vishnu's past and, thereafter, plan how best to help him. Discarding her routine morning walk, she spent an hour in the pooja room, immersed in the hymns of her chorus and prayers, seeking solace and strength. Her gait was purposeful when she emerged, her voice echoing with a newfound urgency.

"Chandranna, prepare the car! " She boomed, stepping onto the porch. Taking the car key from him, she put her index finger on her lips and whispered, "I have an appointment this morning".

The rumpled cotton salwar kameez felt alien to Shalini's usual meticulously chosen, beautiful sarees. But its unassuming comfort matched the mission swirling within her. Intimidating a poor sweeper woman of a government school with her

privileged veneer was the furthest thing from her mind. She kept her hair loose, a careless ponytail cascading down her back, and the only hint of vanity was a subtle pink shimmer on her lips. As she manoeuvred the car through the bustling crowd of construction-labourers next door, a wave of sadness washed over her.

The old White House, once a stately neighbour, was spiralling down like a fallen star. The Quisqualis-crowned trees, silent witnesses to countless memories, were gone, replaced by bare scaffolding and the clatter of construction. Their friends—the last occupants of the white house—had vanished only a couple of months earlier, but Shalini felt they'd flown the coop a lifetime ago, their destination unknown. The fleetingness of human memory alarmed her, yet she felt its ephemeral nature a jarring contrast to the weight of the unknown boy's history, which now burdened her.

As she passed the labourers at work on the road, a familiar portrait flickered in her mind, vivid and poignant. She saw the charming eleven-year-old, his round face tilted upwards, laughter crinkling his eyes beneath the morning sun. The orange scarf knotted jauntily on his head, the empty bucket hanging limply from his thin hands—an image etched forever in her memory.

"Perhaps today," she thought, gripping the steering wheel tighter, "the mystery and mythology of this little boy will begin to unravel."

The Raj Bhavan Road, now a blur of passing scenery, held the painful memory of Vishnu's account of the accident—the

accident that had orphaned him and his brother, leaving a teasing unanswered question mark on it. Hoping against hope, Shalini still believed that a lyrical destiny awaited Vishnu. Slowly, a defiant determination hardened in her that she wouldn't let him go—she wouldn't let the shadows of his tragic past swallow his young life whole.

So Shalini pressed on, the image of Vishnu's smiling face her compass, and her unwavering resolve the engine driving her towards Satya, the school sweeper, and the elusive answers she desperately sought. She knew the path would be thorny, but she would be the winner in the end.



19. Threads of a Fractured Past

Shalini took a deep breath as she steered through the rusted, groaning gate. Apprehension, unfamiliar and unsettling, gnawed at her. The compound stretched out before her, a stark canvas where desolation held sway, the steering wheel grounding her in the face of uncertainty. The school building, dwarfed by the vastness, seemed distant and unwelcoming. Two figures hunched beneath the distant Banyan tree. Their forms dissolving into the prevailing shade were the only signs of human presence.

Nearby, three scruffy dogs drowsily surveyed the scene.

The husband and wife, their faces etched with the sun's relentless kiss, shared a meagre breakfast from a single-leaf plate. A worn water bottle stood sentinel beside them. Yet the landscape, bathed in the golden flood of the morning sun, held a strange tranquillity. Shalini reached for her sunglasses, then stopped short. She didn't want to venture into anything that would distance her from the two people there. Today, she needed understanding and acceptance, not distance.

Shalini swallowed hard as she emerged from the car. A rustle of leaves, and a startled chirruping filled the air as another flock of birds erupted from the nearby tree, spiralling upwards before scattering into the vast blue. A lone dog, his bark a rhythmic challenge, broke the silence momentarily before retreating into the shade.

Emboldened, Shalini strode towards the couple. As she drew closer, the man rose, his gaze a curious flicker. "Amma," he said politely, "You're early. The principal and staff arrive only after nine. It's better to return then."

Shalini, shedding the veneer of her usual reserve, offered a warm smile. The words tumbled out, tinged with self-effacement, "I'm here about Vishnu, our ward. He was so keen on coming to school, but...well, lately, he's..." Her voice wavered, seeking understanding in their knowing eyes.

"Hoodwinked you, Amma?" Satya asked, a playful lilt in her voice. "Children, they find ways. But tell us, what troubles you now?"

Shalini was startled by Satya's light-hearted dismissal of Vishnu's absence from school and her assumption that an unknown orphan's educational setback couldn't be a significant concern for someone in a high position like Shalini. Shalini had been trying to explain Vishnu's repeated loss of educational opportunities, but Satya seemed incapable of grasping the profound value of learning. It struck Shalini as both sad and ironic that this couple, who had spent years working within a school, remained so blithely oblivious to the transformative power of education.

However, Satya's unintentional levity did ease some of Shalini's pent-up tension. She realised she needed to bridge the gap in understanding by guiding Satya through Vishnu's history, as far as her own knowledge of him would allow. She needed to begin at the very beginning, presenting the narrative directly, simply, and concisely.

Shalini grew genuinely emotional when she spoke of the collapse of her hopes for Vishnu. When she said, her voice a whisper, that in just two months, Vishnu's enthusiasm waned and he stopped attending classes, Satya intervened, "No, Amma! Vishnu stopped coming to the school, even when his mother was alive".

Noticing that Ma'am Saab needed a long narrative from his wife, the man headed to the school's main office and returned with a neat chair for their special guest.

Shalini, making herself almost unconsciously ensconced, went ahead with her story without even pausing for a break. She spoke about Vishnu's sudden withdrawal, the unsettling whispers swirling about him, and her own desperate need to know why Vishnu had dropped out of studies and what exactly his background was before she met him. Shalini's words flowed, unburdening her heart, finding solace in the steady attention that Satya was now giving her. She felt her throat go dry under Satya's intense gaze. The woman, lean and sunbaked, sat perched on a jagged piece of concrete, her silence as still as the prevailing morning air.

Her meagre breakfast remained unfinished, a testament to the weight of Shalini's unexpected visit. Satya wrapped the remaining food, her calloused hands moving with practised grace. The watchful dogs, sensing the end of their breakfast, shifted restlessly.

"Unfortunate kids", Satya murmured, handing the parcel to her husband, who was back from the building with two broomsticks in his hand. As Shalini's words hung in the air,

heavy with unspoken anxieties, Satya's gaze, deep and fathomless, was redirected to Shalini.

After a tense silence, Satya offered a faint smile, its arc a flicker of recognition.

Laxmi, Vishnu's mother," she began, her voice weaving a tapestry of hardship and endless toils, "was an impoverished village woman lured to the city's promises. What she found instead was back-breaking labour in a bakery and different apartments," Satya said.

As Satya spoke, the school veranda faded, Shalini imagined the stifling fumes of the bakery, felt the leering eyes of strangers, and the weight of loneliness on a young woman's shoulders. Shalini was lost in the narrative; her initial apprehension morphed into a burning need to understand the boy at the heart of it all.

"What is his real name, Satya?" Shalini asked. "Vishnu or Amar Singh?"

Satya's answer came in a quiet rumble, echoing the turmoil within. "He has both, Amma," she confessed, her eyes locked on Shalini's. "His father's shadow, his mother's hope, both burdens too heavy for a small boy's shoulders."

The slow sun climbed, casting long, overlapping shadows across the open school compound. For Shalini, the journey to understand Vishnu had just begun, and Satya, unassuming yet powerful, had become the unlikely guide, leading Shalini through the shadows of his past. Reading a glimmer of curiosity and an unmistakable question mark in Shalini's eyes, Satya

continued, a flicker of sympathy crossing her eyes, "For Laxmi, Vishnu's mother....., in her limited options, it wasn't like she could choose a prince, right?"

Shalini nodded, understanding dawning. Laxmi's choice, once seen as baffling, now seemed painfully clear. The harsh realities of a young widow, alone with a child in a bustling, unforgiving city, had shaped her priorities. Security, not passion, was the currency she craved.

Satya continued, her voice softer now. "Dara Singh wasn't much to look at. He was quiet, almost meek, small-built and fair, with light eyes and hair that stood up on his crown. But in Laxmi's eyes, those same qualities were his strengths. He wouldn't fight back, wouldn't raise his voice in abuse. He wouldn't gamble away his earnings, leaving her and her son hungry. He was a haven, a quiet harbour after the storm she'd weathered toiling alone—after her arrival in the city”.

A pang of sadness pricked Shalini. To think, love hadn't been the guiding light for her, but fear, the desperate yearning for a predictable shore. It painted the sad picture of Laxmi's minimal options and the invisible shackles of her circumstances.

Laxmi and Dara Singh had a humble wedding at the dusty edge of the slum. Marigolds and jasmine, vibrant against the faded ochre of a makeshift temple, bloomed in the garlands they exchanged. Dara Singh, looking happy, his eyes like emeralds dancing with shy amusement, tied a loose yellow thread around Laxmi's neck. Their haven was a single room in the same slum that Satya had lived in since her arrival in the city.

Soon Laxmi left her bakery job, trading her flour-dusted aprons for the familiar rhythm of domestic work. Dara Singh, though a gentle soul, had his share of life's hardships. The bakery owner and his colleagues bullied him because he was a quiet loner. A few of them even piled their tasks onto his allotted workload. Yet he returned each day, a smile lighting his face as he handed his meagre earnings to Laxmi, entrusting her with their shared expenses and the management of their home.

Four peaceful years had passed in their lives, marking time, the most significant being the addition of little Teja Singh to their fold a year after their marriage.

Satya's mention of the joyful moments shared by the young family brought a fleeting yet serene warmth to Shalini's face.

"Laxmi requested me to guide them to the office on the day of her son's first school admission," she began quietly, "Admission days usually buzzed with energy, the crowd swirling in vibrant chaos. When it was Vishnu's turn to be enrolled, the family arrived in full force, transforming the otherwise mundane proceedings into a little celebration for themselves".

At the forefront was Laxmi, Vishnu's mother, her simple apparel and a beaded chain proclaiming their poverty, yet radiant with the dream-come-true joy of her son being initiated into education. Her infectious smile lit the room as she strode confidently, holding her adorable son's hand. Close behind, Dara Singh followed, visibly nervous, their precious two-year-old in his protective arms.

Their presence turned heads—staff and students, and other visitors alike, couldn't help but watch this endearing procession.

Unfazed by the novelty of the process, Laxmi navigated it with grace. Dara Singh, quiet and shy but no less resolute, put up a bold face and played his role as Amar's proud father. When his eyes met the principal's, they reflected a newfound strength.

“In that defining moment,” said Satya, “when he pressed his thumbprint with unwavering determination on the admission form, Dara Singh declared to himself his role as Amar Singh's father and guardian, sealing his dedication with an eloquence that needed no words.”

Silence settled between Satya and Shalini, a heavy weight against the backdrop of birdsong that had long faded.

Sunlight bled across the school and its sprawling grounds, indifferent to the brewing storm in Satya's heart. The only sound was the distant tick-tack of a lonely broom echoing in an empty classroom. Shalini's fingers curled, a silent plea against the rising tide of anxiety. Her gaze drifted to the distant trees, where the symphony of birds had fallen silent, leaving a void mirroring the one growing within her.

At last, Satya's voice, raw with suppressed emotions, broke the silence.

“After the fourth year of their married life, one evening, while Laxmi was at home taking care of the children, Dara Singh returned from the bakery. He wasn't alone. A man followed

him, a shadow of a man, scrawny and bald with a wispy beard and eyes that burned with unsettling intensity.”

He swaggered into Laxmi’s hut, a sneer twisting his lips. Dara Singh offered him a chair, but the man remained standing, his presence dominating the small space. It was clear Dara Singh held no authority, no words to counter him. The man addressed Laxmi directly, his sunken eyes dry and intense. He declared he was taking his nephew, Dara Singh, to their village in Bihar for an urgent property settlement in their family, which required his thumbprint. ‘He’ll be back in ten days,’ the man had promised, his voice a final, unyielding baritone.

“For Laxmi, everything after that was a blur,” Satya said and paused. “He never came back, and Laxmi’s world imploded. She clung to a fragile hope, fuelled by letters written in Telugu, a language lost in the vastness of Bihar.”

Each letter, penned by Satya’s husband, Pandu, bore the weight of Laxmi’s desperation, her pleas swallowed by the indifferent distance. As days turned into weeks, murmurs about Vishnu’s skipped classes echoed like a relentless drumbeat against her broken heart. Daily existence became a challenge in itself.

In desperation, she turned to the baker’s wife, her only link to Dara Singh’s village. Hindi, the language of his home, replaced Telugu in the letters, each one a tear-stained testament to her pain and the children’s suffering. Yet, silence was the only reply. A couple of months passed. By this time, Dara Singh’s colleagues started whispering about him being held captive, a prisoner within his own family. Laxmi held onto a fading hope, even as mounting anxiety stole her peace and sleep. The truth,

stark and cruel, loomed on the horizon, waiting to shatter the delicate façade of her optimism.

“For Laxmi, returning to her mother was never an option,” Satya explained. “Her mother’s deteriorating health and Laxmi’s intolerant brother made it unthinkable. Besides, the whispers that would echo through the village if she returned with another child—one so different, with his fair skin, light eyes, and unruly hair—were too much to bear.” Poverty and despair became her familiar companions as Laxmi toiled to make ends meet. In the third month of Dara Singh’s exit, the landlord delivered his ultimatum: ‘pay up or vacate’.

While Laxmi navigated this maelstrom, Vishnu morphed into a truant, meticulously avoiding school. Monitoring the children became a luxury she couldn’t afford. Laxmi juggled domestic work across three flats, managing housekeeping, cooking, childcare, and whatever other work her employers demanded. They considered her indispensable, yet her younger son’s chronic cough and fever necessitated frequent hospital visits, further disrupting her work. All three households sympathised with Laxmi, but to deter her from taking leave, they jointly decided to pay her only for the days she had worked, docking her wages for every absence.

Satya paused, her face distressed, eyes vacant and distant, reflecting a profound dilemma about moving on to the next part of the narrative. “First Sundays of every month remained her dread, marked by the visit of the rent collector sent by the landlord.”

For the first two or three months, her neighbours collectively intervened, granting her some partial reprieve. Teja's medical bills and her employers' cut in her remuneration made it impossible for her to make ends meet. On the first Sunday of the fourth month, when the rent collector arrived as usual, Lakshmi received a respite again, though this time, at a price.

Bheemaiah, the gruff and paunchy watchman, became her unlikely advocate. His boorish pleading on her behalf with the rent collector only worsened the situation, his cavalier tone irking everyone present. In the cramped quarters of their colony, privacy was a phantom, and Laxmi winced at his stentorian outbursts, powerless to intervene.

This reprieve from the petulant rent collector, courtesy of the loathsome Bheemaiah, transformed an external crisis into an internal nightmare. The kindness masked a potential entanglement she dreaded.

Satya then came to the effect that all this had on Vishnu.

“He dropped out of school. His arrogance escalated, and he primarily directed his aggression at his younger and more delicate brother, Teja. A fair replica of their father, Teja was the silent victim of the violent storm that brewed somewhere in his elder brother's psyche, likely fuelled by a mix of jealousy and abandonment by Dara.”

One night, Teja's lisped report of Vishnu's absence from school to their mother was met with a violent outburst. Vishnu dragged the boy to the floor, raining blows until Teja's nose bled profusely. Laxmi, consumed by the pressure of her work and desperate to appease her employers, was reduced to helpless

cries, a mere echo of Teja's whimpers in the face of his brother's rage.

“Even the old neighbour-granny's reports of such frequent attacks did not deter Vishnu from his aggressive treatment of his frail brother.” Satya paused again, struggling to overcome her restraint.

“On the first Sunday of July, Bheemaiah came to Laxmi's hovel before the rent collector's usual hours of visit. He requested a chair, and Vishnu brought out a discoloured plastic one, placing it in the common quadrangle bathed in the dying light of the setting sun.

When the gaunt, bespectacled rent collector reached Laxmi's door, Bheemaiah stood up and silently whipped out six hundred-rupee notes from his pocket, handing them over. Neighbours watched from the quadrangle, anticipating the repeat of the previous month's scene. The man took the money, turned silently, and walked away.

“Bheemaiah's strident steps vanished swiftly, only to reappear at dusk, this time with a canvas bag full of his life”. Satya sighed heavily, lowered her voice further, and said to Shalini in a whisper: “Laxmi confided her deepest fears to me, not once, but twice, during the months that he entered the scene, offering to pay her monthly rent. While suspicion clouded every gaze directed at Bheemaiah, no one seemed to notice the mounting sorrow that silently consumed the poor woman's heart. Yes, no one was there to rescue her.”

“Thus began Bheemaiah's conspicuous presence in our colony!”

Satya, silent again, watched the shadow of disgust cloud Shalini's face. She'd been more forthcoming than Shalini expected, and now Shalini held space for Satya's emotions to settle. Beyond the half-open school gate, Shalini spied the first boys trickling in, each a fledgling Vishnu, their youthful innocence a dagger to her heart as she thought of Satya's burden and her own.

The shadows beneath Satya's eyes deepened like fringed canyons, etching a map of painful memories. She resumed her tale, voice rough with gravel and grief.

“Poor Laxmi left this world barely six months after falling prey to vile Bheemaiah—twice her age, a wretched drunkard whose veins ran with cheap liquor and cruelty.”

Through the thin, indifferent mud walls, neighbours sometimes caught the rhythm of their days: hushed murmurs dissolving into heavy outbursts, followed by silences, pierced only by the plaintive cries of children seeking comfort in a world that gave them none.

Shalini, with her own anguish, couldn't immediately lift her downcast eyes to meet Satya's. When Satya's saucer eyes, wide open after the revelation of her intense, so-far-unspoken secrets, finally met Shalini's, both women were unable to say anything more.

Satya had revealed a harsh, shattering, true story. Shalini had to reconcile this truth with the exasperating, fabricated, poetic creation of a loving, pining, yearning little son who was at pains to salvage his mother's honour and enshrine her, angel-like, on a pedestal.

While the raw truth wrestled with Vishnu's fabricated images in Shalini's mind, Satya had no idea that the Mem'Saab had a parallel story about Vishnu's mother's death. For her, Laxmi's passing was one of the most tragic stories of her life. Silence choked the air, and Satya's brow furrowed as memories woke up in her like demons.

"After Bheemaiah's intrusion", she began, her voice turning very quiet, "Occasionally Laxmi would send the children to me during his drunken rampages. That's how I got to know the kids so closely."

Satya halted briefly at that point, as if straining to continue.

"That afternoon.....," she began, her voice a mere whisper, "it was late afternoon when I saw them— both the boys— too quiet as yellow fallen leaves, perched on a concrete bench outside our colony. Their distraught faces and famished looks had spun a web of dark fears in me, and my senses got trapped in its chilling grip. I felt very weak in my knees and legs."

"Vishnu got up the moment he saw me, his eyes bursting into torrents of tears. I folded them both in my arms. Vishnu, his small frame in ragged clothes, was racked with sobs as he kept on shrieking to me that his mother was very sick. Little Teja also started crying, turning his face a bloody pink. Vishnu, his lips trembling, spat out that the man did not allow them to go near their mother."

Cold dread knotted Shalini's gut, whispering of lurking shadows and imperilled innocence. However, Satya seemed to be unaware of the unsettling implications of what she had described. As Shalini sat still, listening to her, Satya's brows

furrowed again, shadows of disquiet and pain flitting across her face.

“Yes, Amma! The worst was happening”, she said, her voice thick with grief.

“The words that spilt out in between Vishnu’s sobs were only half the story. His loud crying drew the attention of a few curious passersby. I couldn’t yell out and release my own pent-up emotions because I had to comfort the kids and keep them calm.”

Then a female voice called out from the crowd: “Poor thing! She had no choice. She had to do something like this!” And people moved like silent shadows towards Laxmi’s Shanty.

“As I turned, I could see Vishnu had already turned away, towards the road, his figure growing distant. Suddenly, I remembered little Teja. Looking back, I saw him lagging behind Vishnu. Weak, worn-out, and bewildered, standing at the edge of the road—giving me the feeling that he was struggling unsuccessfully to catch up—a deadly picture of the birth of another orphan.”

As Satya rose from the concrete edge of the ground where she had been seated, Shalini also stood, the shared sorrow of the tale momentarily paralysing them.

Satya turned and spotted her husband, broom in hand, waiting patiently at a respectable distance, eager to catch a glimpse of his wife. He pointed his finger at the ascending sun, a silent signal to his wife that they were getting late in winding up their morning duties.

A farewell to Shalini hung heavy in the air, unspoken, yet deeply felt. Shalini's eyes locked into Satya's, a silent testament to the transformation the story had ignited in her. All that Shalini could do was make a promise. "We will soon meet again".



20. Nature Makes Orphans Differently Abled

Chandranna had just finished washing Ashok's car when Vishnu approached him with a shy grimace. "No school today, *Beta*?" he asked, an ironic smile hovering on his lips.

Vishnu only shrugged. Ramesh giggled loudly from the bushes in the garden, his bulging eyes shining with the prospect of Vishnu's liberation from school and tuition. However, beneath the pranks and jokes, a cloud of gloom hung over the household. The exposure of Vishnu as a daring truant who had fooled everyone and betrayed his mentors cast a long shadow. But Vishnu was amazingly composed as he walked about the house feigning nonchalance. Alone with the servants, his face reflected neither remorse nor shame. When the Guptas were around, he sulked and furtively avoided them.

"What are you going to do now?" asked Chandranna, this time with genuine concern.

Again, Vishnu shrugged. "Sahib and Mem Saab are big people," said Chandranna speculatively.

Lowering his voice and taking Vishnu into confidence, he whispered, his sunken eyes wide open. "They will not keep children in the house for work; neither in their Printing Press nor in their house. It is against the law..."

He broke off because, at that moment, they heard Mem Saab's car entering. The watchman opened the gate for her, and Chandranna rushed to open the car door and take charge of its parking. Turning back, Chandranna saw that Vishnu had fled.

At noon, Shalini glimpsed Vishnu from the kitchen as he hung his washed clothes on the clothesline in the backyard. He seemed to have washed all his clothes, including his school uniform. The small pieces made a long row, and Shalini thought that perhaps his school uniform was on its way to be discarded, like the clothes of a deceased person. Spotting his Memsahib watching him from afar, Vishnu ducked instinctively and slouched away to a guilty retreat in his room.

This was the first time Shalini had seen him at home on a working day. Without his uniform, in his light breeches and thin shirt, he looked even younger than his eleven years. She remembered the carefree times she used to spend with him on their outings. The slight frame, the handsome visage, and the gently laughing eyes hardly hinted at the layers of experience and manipulative cleverness that lay beneath. The juxtaposition of the real Vishnu and his story, against the Vishnu who had vividly recounted the fabricated accident of his mother on the Raj Bhavan Road, sent a chill down her spine. Yet these sickening feelings were fleeting, morphing into understanding, forgiveness, profound sadness, and fear that such a bright young man could again find himself on the brink, working for a petty labour-contractor like his old Bhaskar *Mestri*.

Still, the faint hope that Vishnu might change his mind and agree to give studies another try was getting stronger in her.

The bigger question, however, was how to help him if he remained adamant and refused to go to school.

Late in the evening at tea-time, Shalini ran across Vishnu in the kitchen, where he had come to meet Ramu. This was the first time she had seen him up close since his truancy became public. At her piercing look, Vishnu stepped aside respectfully and stood still, bending and gazing down at his knees. However, before he was locked in that posture, in a flash, Shalini saw something strange and unfamiliar about him—his clamped lips, the veiled combative cloud in his eyes, and the expression of general aloofness. Immediately, she walked back to join her children at the dining table for the evening tea.

Dinner was the most relaxing time of the day for the Gupta family. While Ramu was engaged in serving them hot *rotis* and curries, Shalini informed the children casually:

“We are leaving for Vizag for two or three days; it’s your father’s routine official visit, and we may be back on Sunday.”

Ramu stopped short, all ears, while the children seemed not to hear. He shot a look at Shalini, his face filled with hidden anxieties and silent questions about their ward, Vishnu. "Ashok’s discerning gaze, however, caught the subtle hint of Shalini’s inner turmoil over the orphan. With customary composure, Shalini turned to Ramu and instructed him to prepare lunch a bit earlier the following day.



21. Pragmatism Knocks, Philanthropy Fades

It was the last Wednesday of October. The dull and indolent sun had not emerged from the large mix of grey and white clouds hovering in the low sky, even after eight in the morning. Shalini had summoned Ali to their Shanti Nagar home, ostensibly to brief him on the pending work and account maintenance at the press in her absence until the weekend.

Ali's appointment was for 8.30, but he reached the Guptas' gate a full thirty minutes ahead, in the hope of meeting his young friend in distress. The gate watchman in mufti, his threadbare brown shawl pulled over his scruffy outfit, was still asleep on the makeshift concrete bench. He jumped to his feet at the arrival of a scooter and witnessed the welcome visage of the familiar Ali Khan disembarking and smiling down at him. With a sigh of relief and a guilty grin on his face, he greeted Ali and opened the gates. Ali's affable nature had endeared him to everybody in the Gupta household except the Guptas themselves, who were habituated to keeping their subordinates at a distance with just a smile or a nod.

As Ali walked towards the house's entrance, the old watcher sauntered behind him, eager to help or at least start a conversation. Ali stepped onto the veranda and whimsically peeked into the drawing room through a corner window. Seeing

no one inside, he settled into one of the standard chairs there, deciding to wait.

Finding no way to engage the young boss from the Press, the watchman ventured to offer him the favour of fetching his friend, Vishnu, from the backyard quarters.

Ali remembered his unpleasant experience of meeting the orphan on Friday last at his school, where the shocking truth of Vishnu's truancy was exposed. The boy, leaving home for school every day as usual in full uniform and other paraphernalia, yet not attending a single class for a month, seemed appalling to Mem Saheb. At first, Ali, too, couldn't reconcile himself to his bold impudence. But now he chuckled, remembering what had happened with the boy. Whispers were flying fast about Mem Sahib's pet ward betraying her, and soon it became known that Vishnu had fallen from grace in the Gupta household.

The little orphan had a special corner in Ali's heart ever since he had taken him to lunch at Hotel Crescent. Ali could draw many parallels from his troubled childhood to match with Vishnu's, like losing a parent, sojourns at orphanages, risky escapes from such shelters, again to become one of the boys of the streets, the unbearable agony of loneliness, and other trials and tribulations common to orphans. Ali, remorseful, recalled the pain and shame he had inflicted on the hapless boy when he commanded him to read a page, assuming truancy was the reason for the fiasco. Only after several quiet weeks did he gently draw out the truth: that in the wake of his father Dara Singh's disappearance—and the couple of years of drifting that followed—every letter, every word, every trace of reading had

slipped from Vishnu's grasp, like rainwater vanishing into cracked earth. As he sat musing, Vishnu emerged from behind the house.

Escorted by the watchman, Vishnu approached Ali in slow, measured steps, unsure what his best friend thought of his character and behaviour in the face of the severe storm of condemnation he was facing now. His young heartbeat heavily with mixed feelings of fear and anxiety. Yet his eyes retained their candid look and the lovable glow of innocence. Ali knew he must seize the moment—light and easy—or Vishnu would burst. With a light laugh of camaraderie, Ali, bending, drew the slender figure towards him in a warm hug and began to joke:

“You are looking fantastic, Boss!” he said, “I haven't seen you at the Press lately? All your girlfriends are waiting for you, Boss.”

Ali's gesture of unconditional acceptance did wonders for Vishnu. A soft glow of inner joy permeated Vishnu's handsome features. His laughing eyes seemed to convey that he was not overly worried about the Gupta family's verdict on his future.

“Mem ‘Saab is going out of town this afternoon for a few days,” Ali said, adopting a tone of seriousness. “I am here to meet her at 8:30 now.” He looked at his wristwatch and, pointing to the chair next to him, gestured for Vishnu to be seated. Vishnu did not seem to hear.

“Where is your “May I help you -Mobile?” Ali joked.

“Hai,” Vishnu said, putting up both his slender hands in a mock sigh, humming an old popular melody, “*Tere bina zindagi se*

koi shikwa to nahin” from a popular Hindi movie, meaning, ‘In Life, other than you, I worry about none!’

Ali was taken aback. Did Vishnu understand the poignant meaning of these lyrics? More than its meaning, the music tugged at his heartstrings. Once again, he urged Vishnu to take his seat.

Vishnu's mind was elsewhere. "Bhaiyya, I wish my toy could provide me with a radio instead of just saying “good morning” and “may I help you”.

Ali's mind was still dwelling on the song he had hummed and its haunting rendition. But what impressed him more was the purity and articulation of his spoken Hindi, which incidentally was Ali's mother tongue. Snapping out of his reverie, he asked Vishnu how he had learnt all the prayers, songs, and verses he knew.

"Mostly from the families my mother worked for," Vishnu replied, "and some from the markets, school, and from nowhere too."

Again, Ali's mind raced, trying to decipher Vishnu's thoughts and plans. He beckoned him closer. "Come, sit with me."

"No, Bhaiyya," Vishnu whispered, "We're not allowed to sit. No one takes such liberties here."

"Did anyone tell you not to?"

"No, never," Vishnu paused; then said in a tone of pleasant acceptance, "but no one ever offered me a seat either. And no

one ever complains about such things here. I feel it is perfectly all right."

Ali nodded. "You're right, Vishnu. I invited you to sit because this is just an anteroom, you're a young boy, a student, and I'm with you... But I understand your hesitation. You are right."

At length, leaving aside all these other issues, Ali looked straight into his eyes and raised that million-dollar question, "Now that your schooling has come to a halt in the government school, how do you see your future?"

Vishnu was silent, his lips pursed, and his eyes downcast.

"How about giving another trial at the Shelter Homes for children?", Ali suggested.

At this, Vishnu looked up, and to Ali's surprise, his big eyes reflected a terrified look. Ali picked up the solo conversation.

"I know the challenges you faced there. I also tasted it, but you had it worse, having no one to follow up. But this time, if you are willing to give it another try, it will not be the same. Mem Sahib would put you in the best orphanage in Hyderabad. Sir and Mem Sahib would continue to be your guardians...."

All of a sudden, on the appearance of Shalini on the scene from inside, Ali broke off, getting up and greeting her. The boy crept out and walked silently into the backyard to join the others.

Dressed informally in jeans and a shirt, Shalini looked more agile and at ease than usual. She had her hair loose and wind-blown after a shower, an indication that her preparations for departure for Vizag were underway. The sun in the east still

seemed slow to rise, making the outside air cold and windy, the thickening drizzles portending imminent rains. Settling down, Shalini welcomed Ali with a smile. But what truly astonished Ali Khan was the profound change in her disposition over the brief span of five days. Her demeanour, previously weighed down by visible distress and anxiety, had now softened into a gentle grace. The change was so striking that it tugged at Ali's heart, filling it with a mix of relief and a stinging pain. Shalini gestured to Ali to be seated opposite her. She carried no files or notebook, suggesting she did not plan a lengthy discussion of business matters regarding Archana Press. However, justifying her summons of Ali Khan, she said, "I wanted to warn you that nothing should go wrong in my absence in dealing with the orders of our new, high-profile clients. In any case, before I leave, I will drop in, call Gopal also, and arrange a brief meeting in my chamber".

There was a pause. Ali looked up at her, wondering if there was more. She seemed to hang back, but recovered soon and said,

"Well, Ali, I saw Vishnu coming out of a conversation with you. What's the latest you've gathered about him? How shall we go about him?"

Ali was going to say something, but she cut him short, visibly impatient, and barraged him with a volley of questions on Vishnu's future.

Her voice, still subdued and dignified as ever, began with a straight question.

"Will he agree to give himself another chance at schooling?"

As she waited for an answer, Ashok's caution ran through her mind:

“Without his cooperation, we will not be able to help him. He is only eleven years old. But, having been independent and on his own for a long time, his age of experience and exposure to life is perhaps higher than his biological age. Probably he would decide what he wants to do next”.

Ali did not know how to respond to her primary question, nor did he want to attempt to engage himself with that question prematurely at this stage. As she waited for an answer, Ali decided to lie.

“Ma'am, I have not given it a thought so far. We need to plan, speak with him, and find a solution. As long as you are there to help him, his future will be safe”, Ali said.

Gaining ground, Shalini lowered her voice still further and whispered, “We must go to his mother's friend, Satya, the sweeper at the government school, once again. We will meet her in the school soon after my return.”

Again, not getting any response from Ali, Shalini continued.

“If he does not agree to schooling, do you think we can send him to an orphanage?”

To this, Ali responded decisively.

“No, Ma'am, I do not think it is a feasible proposal for a boy like Vishnu. About a couple of weeks after he lost his mother, two or three elderly men in his colony got together on a mission to save the boy, counselled him for days, and took him to a

government-run Orphanage located on the outskirts of the city, which had a government school nearby. Because both institutions were government-owned, the authorities made it mandatory for every physically and mentally fit child to attend school.”

“Unfortunately, this did not work well for Vishnu. His past performance in the government school, for the first two years, could be rated as indifferent, given his parents’ severe limitations. But the year that followed was tumultuous for the family.” With the sudden exit of Dara Singh, his mother, Laxmi, along with her two small kids, was thrown into abject misery and chaos, which eventually led to Vishnu’s irreconcilable absenteeism from school.

Shalini stirred gently in her seat, feeling hollow in her stomach. She said defensively, “I didn’t know this was the history of his schooling.”

Shaking off the fleeting reveries, Ali continued, "The struggles he faced in the government school these past few months mirrored, in many ways, the challenges he had endured in the orphanage—his total inability to read and write combined with relentless shaming, cruel teasing, and unyielding bullying. These experiences isolated him, sowing seeds of aggression and rebellion in his heart. Of course, in the orphanage, it was a torment doubled, as additional challenges of physical punishment and stings of humiliation awaited him each day as he returned from school. Trapped in this vicious cycle of mutual hostility in the orphanage, he eventually reached the breaking point. Defying all the odds facing him and risking his

very life, Vishnu found the courage to escape, accompanied by another young soul weathering a similar storm.”

"Vishnu sought refuge in the far-off labyrinth of streets away from Hyderabad, staying hidden until the authorities abandoned their search. When he finally surfaced, he found himself navigating the harsh realities of urban life, taking on odd jobs as a child labourer. It was then that he crossed paths with Bhaskar, a small-time labour contractor who embodied the typical grit and determination of the city's working class. Bhaskar wasn't formally educated, nor was he overly kind. Yet he carried a certain rough-edged compassion—a quiet acknowledgement of the struggles faced by the downtrodden. The unspoken covenant was that the orphan's work as a child labourer at the site, and as part-time house help for the family, should cover the cost of his boarding and lodging.”

Shalini remained silent, and for a moment, Ali strained himself to read the familiar lines of distress and regret etch themselves onto her kindly face. Still, he could only see her as a veritable, forlorn moon amidst dark, drifting clouds far up in the sky. As she began to speak, the reality of her resolve dawned on him. The gloom that had seemed to enshroud her gave way to a quiet reconciliation—a resigned acceptance laced with unexpected strength. Before speaking again, she offered Ali a mundane smile of appreciation.

"You've been proactive, Ali," she began, "and already given me valuable feedback on the matters I wanted you to look into. I'm also glad the boy feels comfortable confiding in you. Vishnu is a dear boy, and we must do our best to help him. Please, go

ahead and try to untangle this situation for me so we can reach a quick resolution."

Ali stammered, trying to explain that he hadn't been able to gather any information about Vishnu's plans for his future.

Shalini rose to leave, her departure punctuated by a rapid-fire volley of questions. "Okay, tell me then, does he want to continue school here? You know he doesn't. Is he happy here? We need to settle this. I'm entrusting you to investigate, make the necessary inquiries to find him a suitable alternative environment, and report back with the best option for the boy."

Ali, standing obediently behind her, listened in stunned disbelief. He felt the ground crumble beneath him. In the four years he had worked for her, she had never given him such a heartbreaking and emotionally fraught responsibility. Feeling utterly diminished, he trudged back to his chair, the weight of his new task pressing heavily upon him.

Oblivious to the drama unfolding inside Ali's mind, the heavens opened outside. Rain lashed against the already saturated greenery, a relentless downpour against the backdrop of a dawning sun struggling to pierce the dark clouds. Ali had no choice but to wait for the rains to stop.



22. Quiet, Before the Brewing Tempest

Thursday morning buzzed with the familiar rhythm of the Gupta household, a flurry of activity that centred, as always, on Aditya and Athidhi's departure to their routine engagements. The clatter of breakfast plates, the rustle of Athidhi getting ready, and the clipped instructions given to staff painted a fleeting picture of their influence. But as the front door clicked shut behind them, a stillness descended, tinged with gloom. It wasn't merely a gloom; it was the subtle consciousness of the absence of the dynamic presence of the irreplaceable anchor of the household, Shalini Gupta. Ramu, however, decided to reap some minor benefits from the situation.

Generally tasked with cleaning the Pooja room and performing the first prayers, Ramu found himself moving with an uncharacteristic languor today. The silence and the lack of watchful eyes offered him a rare, illicit moment of peace. Today, in Shalini's absence, he availed himself of the leisure of a shortened ritual, simplified to the limits of his faith.

Waking up, Vishnu remembered how enthusiastic he used to be about joining Ramu for these sophisticated and pious duties, and how his interest waned over time when he failed to get an audience. He woke up thankful for this slumberous day of unfettered leisure and freedom, closed his eyes, snuggled as

deeply as possible into his wraps, and fell off to sleep again. Ramu made breakfast in time, but today, he felt exceedingly empathetic to Vishnu and was very understanding, allowing the boy to sleep until he woke up on his own.

It was about 10.30 when Vishnu, refreshed and well-fed, showed himself at the gate. Having dropped the Gupta children at their colleges, Rajanna had just returned home and joined Ramu, who was seated at the foyer entrance, throwing up curls of smoke from his beedi. He sat there, pensive and thoughtful, watching the orphan intently from afar, his mind deeply stirred by the prospect of his imminent expulsion and an uncertain future.

Vishnu entertained himself by playing pranks with the half-deaf, angry watchman in the company of his applauding companion, Ramesh. When Vishnu found the watchman grumpy beyond all reason, he amused himself by singing broken bits of Hindi film songs. Ramu, coming up and joining in the fun, began playing Telugu songs on his pocket radio, and Vishnu started gyrating like the Telugu movie star Chiranjeevi, not entirely leaving pranks behind. Once, when he was enthralling his colleagues with his animated spins to a fast number, Ramu said, “You must be a tribal, or a gypsy, to dance like that!” Vishnu jeered at him and said loudly, “Ramu Bhaiyya! Orphans have no caste! If you are a small boy with no parents, no home, and no money, you have no tribe, no caste, no relatives, and no friends other than your workmates for company.

Ramesh, the gardener, laughed heartily as though this was the wittiest observation, his wet eyes burning bright as lighted bulbs.

“When are you going away, Vishnu?” Asked Ramu casually.

“I am ready! Just waiting for orders!” said Vishnu, winking at Ramu. “Where will you be going?”

Spinning and somersaulting on the stone-paved car park, Vishnu fell to the ground, as small boys do, anchored his outstretched arms on the ground in a reclining posture, and rolled his eyes heavenward for an answer. When their eyes locked, Ramu for the first time saw a dark shadow and a dry smile replace Vishnu’s fun and frivolity. But it was only a fleeting communication.

Driver Rajanna was also watching Vishnu silently. “I wish you were not leaving us”, he said, his face saddened by genuine concern for the boy’s future.

Ramu, on the other hand, questioned him with impatience.

“I am asking you one question, which I have been asking you since you dropped out of school: What are you going to do now? I mean, after..., or rather, if you leave Mem Saab?”

“Live!” said Vishnu, breezily laughing.

“Live? Very good! How are you going to live, big man?” Ramu scoffed.

“I will work. And someday, I will also improve my Reading and Writing! When I became a young man,” he paused, twisting his imaginary moustache, “You might see me as a

millionaire too.” Vishnu ended with a self-reproaching neigh of a laugh.

“If you are to go from here right now, where will you stay?” persisted Ramu, refusing to be diverted.

“That’s not a problem,” Vishnu said lightly, and languidly strolled away to the house's facade. Outside the gate, the watchman and Ramesh were puffing at their beedis and having fun watching passersby.

Ramesh seemed the one most genuinely distressed by Vishnu's leaving. As the thought of losing his friend surged through his mind, he remembered their favourite pastime and asked abruptly,

"Boss! I haven't seen your toy phone for several days now—the lady who says, ‘May I help you?’”

Vishnu nodded, adopted a serious professional demeanour, and said gravely, “I am dismissing her from service! She doesn’t keep her word with me.”

Ramesh was not amused. He was on the verge of weeping as he murmured, “Don’t throw it away, boss. Give it to me!” As his thoughts shifted again to Vishnu's departure, Ramesh yelled, his voice choked with emotion, “Don’t go away, Boss! You are my best friend!”

Vishnu didn't seem to hear him. He was getting weary of the lacklustre company he was surrounded by. He yearned to meet Ali and his other friends at Archana Press.

Ramu, his present boss in the Gupta household, used to monitor his outings with a monarchical eye in Mem Saab's absence. But today Ramu seemed kind and favourably disposed towards him. Emboldened, he walked towards Ramu and begged permission to go to Archana Press to spend some time with Ali and others.

As he waited with bated breath for an answer, he was surprised to see a glow of approval and a smile on Ramu's face. "Isn't it too hot to walk to the Press now?" he said with concern, seeing the puzzled look on the child's face. But whispered suggestively that Mem Sahib had hinted while leaving that he was not to stop Vishnu from seeing Ali.

As he turned away from Ramu, Vishnu could read it as a significant change in Mem Saab's book of rules and concluded that it was a positive development.



23. Homecoming Sans a Home

The capricious weather of Hyderabad in September and October, often a restless dance between rain, sun, and sweltering warmth, held the city in its sway. Wednesday had seen a deluge, a furious downpour that soaked the streets. Yet by Thursday, the midday sun—a fiery silver platter—reclaimed its throne, its relentless rays piercing the heavy, stagnant air.

Ramu, in a rare display of generosity and affection, pressed a ten-rupee note into Vishnu's hand, enough for the bus fare to Archana Printers, where Ali and his circle awaited. As Vishnu set out, his thoughts drifted, speculating on Mem Sahib's forthcoming decision on his exit from the Gupta household.

As Vishnu walked out of the gate, nostalgia whispered secrets in his ears. Memories of his mother's warmth and his brother's laughter echoed in his mind, evoking a tender ache. Slowly, as he walked, his thoughts drifted to Mem Saab again.

He remembered his initial reluctance, his hesitation in accepting what felt like an impossible promise. Yet, the first month had been a whirlwind of joy, a vibrant, fun-filled time where his natural enthusiasm had won hearts. But as the days bled into weeks, the warmth had begun to fade. The smiles grew rarer, the praise more conditional. The unspoken pressure on Vishnu to excel, to become the boy they wanted him to be, sprang up from everyone around him. He was reduced to a project to experiment on, not a person. No one there saw the

situation from the correct perspective, seeing him just as he was. He was just a boy, only eleven, unprepared for the weight they placed on him. The promised school, a place he had hoped would be his salvation, turned out to be a torture cell for him. His inability to connect with even the alphabet made him a victim of ridicule and isolation. The taunts, the stares—it had become more than he could endure. At first, he was forced to skip classes, but eventually, he dropped out to escape the ridicule and ostracism.

The recollection brought a dry chuckle to his lips. Something had begun to stir in him—not loud, not clear, but quiet and compulsive—that he must find his own way. Lost in these weighty reflections, he reached a fork on the road—one path leading to Raj Bhavan Road and the low-lying diversion towards the government school, ultimately leading to Sri Hari Colony, where his childhood home stood, and the other, to Archana Printers.

He paused there, surveying the long road ahead, an avalanche of memories blinding his sensibilities. At that moment, something unexpected pulled him. Almost unconsciously, he chose Raj Bhavan Road, his feet carrying him away from Archana Printers, his intended destination. Not feeling the heat of the blazing sun anymore, he discarded the comfort of public transport, deciding to walk the entire distance, driven by a force he couldn't name.

A subtle disquiet shadowed Vishnu as he walked on. It wasn't a defined anxiety but a tremor that resonated with a more profound unease. This subtle feeling unfurled into a wave of poignant reflection on his mother's hardships and the absence

of his loved ones. Yet, he carried himself with a quiet courage, seemingly untouched by life's turbulent shifts.

Vishnu's footsteps carried him past the imposing iron gates of his former school, a place he was not inclined to look at. The very sight held the sting of past humiliations; the echoes of his final days spent as a reluctant scholar and a hunted-down truant through the mire of incomprehensible lessons and rigid discipline. He pressed on, the school receding behind him like a fading nightmare, until he reached the threshold of his old world, a slum known as Sri Hari Colony. As he stepped in, it felt as though he had traversed not just distance but time itself, stepping into a realm untouched by the sterile order of the life of his recent past...

Before him, the *busti* unfurled, a chaotic yet deeply familiar tapestry of human perseverance. Thirty-odd hovels, each a testament to desperate ingenuity, formed the small colony, their homes mostly pieced together from the flotsam of urban life. Discarded building materials, rusted tin sheets, sometimes warped by sun and rain, and tattered tarpaulins, patched and repatched, formed the fragile walls and roofs of some of these homes. Narrow alleys, like dusty, meandering veins, snaked between the rows of the dwellings, their paths worn smooth by countless feet-fall.

Vishnu stood at the colony's edge, a knot of trepidation and fragile hope tightening in his chest. The hour-long trek under the relentless afternoon sun had left him flushed and weary, beads of sweat tracing paths down his temples. Yet, as he gazed upon the familiar landscape, a flood of memories surged, each one a sharp, vivid pang. This *busti*, with its rough edges and

stark realities, had been a sanctuary, a haven of unspoken bonds and emotional security, however fleeting. He thought of Satya aunty, his mother's steadfast friend, her presence a beacon in the often-turbulent landscape of his childhood. But he remembered this was not the right time to look for her here, as she might still be engaged in her cleaning duties at the school.

Parched and exhausted, he turned towards the community water pipe, a lifeline in the arid world surrounding him at the *busti*. His eyes, of their own accord, scanned the alleys, searching for the clusters of children who once populated these spaces, their laughter and cries, a constant symphony of existence. He yearned for a replay of their games, their squabbles, their uninhibited joy.

Overwhelmed by the tidal wave of nostalgia, he momentarily forgot his thirst and turned towards his old hut, only to find telltale signs of human presence. He hesitated, a surge of caution washing over him. Feigning the nonchalance of a wandering urchin, he executed a slow, deliberate retreat, his movements casual yet watchful. He walked towards the pipe, the cool water a temporary balm to his dehydrated throat, and then resumed his search for a place to rest, a moment of respite in the sweltering heat.

The colony presented a stark, barren visage, lacking the comforting green of vegetation and the sheltering shade of trees. It was four in the afternoon, a time when the working folk—men and women who form the backbone of this community—were still at work, their return still hours away. Yet, even in their absence, the air vibrated with a palpable sense of determination, a testament to the indomitable spirit of those

who call this place home. Each home, a fragile sanctuary against outside uncertainties, stood as a symbol of their unwavering resolve and hope.

Vishnu wandered through the slum, continuing his search for a corner to rest his weary body. Determined not to venture deeper, he soon turned back toward the open border where the scorching sun seemed to mock his every move. Yet, even with the harshness around him, Vishnu's inner strength hadn't completely faded. His eyes, sharp and observant, scanned the colony, searching for any hint of shade, a cage perhaps offering a sliver of shelter, or just some kind of roof over his head.

As he looked, his gaze fell upon what seemed like a graveyard of discarded things—a messy heap of broken bricks, cracked tiles, and forgotten pieces of old furniture. Then, peeking out from behind this pile of ruins, he saw it: a dilapidated, abandoned little house, an old structure that looked almost like a ghost of a hovel in its utter emptiness, sitting at the extreme right end of the landscape's open entrance. For a moment, the heavy weight of his tiredness seemed to lift Vishnu towards it, but as he approached, his path took him around a row of half a dozen locked hovel houses, until he finally stood before this crumbling structure.

It had no doors so that he could see straight into the single room inside, and it looked just as run-down as the exterior. Vishnu remembered the brawls he had witnessed in the area over the border between the hovels and decided that some serious dispute or legal entanglement had shut down this hovel permanently. Vishnu stood there for a moment, his eyes sweeping across the dusty space, making sure it felt like a safe

enough place to stop for a while. Then he squatted and began clearing debris from the hut's open entrance, trying to make a small area inside comfortable for him to rest a while. Finally, he sank onto the bare, grimy floor, its rough and gritty surface a harsh reminder of how different things were here from the comforts he had come to know in his recent past in the Gupta household. An innocuous sigh of surprise escaped him when he thought of the disparities. He chuckled.

Vishnu sat for a while on the rough floor, watching the colony slowly stir and come to life with the familiar hum and activity of its evenings. As more people returned, the crowd thickening, Vishnu felt a strange sense of belonging wash over him. The reveries of his far past possessed him, and he believed for a moment that this was his homecoming. "Where else could I possibly go?" he wondered to himself.

Eventually, his reveries gave way to nostalgia and, finally, grief. Memories of his life in the *busti* began to unfurl, each a vivid brushstroke on the canvas of his mind. The absence of his mother in their old home was a palpable ache, raising goosebumps on him, and a flood of tears that he wiped away with a trembling hand. He recalled the last time he saw his docile but kind-hearted father being led away from his family by an unknown stranger. That memory brought with it the sharper pain of his disappeared brother, Teja, and the sting of his own past jealousy and cruelty.

Overwhelmed, Vishnu wept, not only for the loss of his family but for the pain he had inflicted on Teja. Why had he been so harsh, he wondered, the question a silent cry. Why did he envy Teja's innocence, his sweet charm, his lisping voice, and the

easy affection he inspired? He wept, mourning the loss of his family and the pain he'd caused to his brother.

Eventually, exhausted by the midday heat and the weariness of his journey on foot, and the release of his pent-up sorrow, he sank into a deep sleep on the bare, concrete floor, like a hungry child, too tired to cry.



24A Treasure of Talents and A Heart of Gold

The world of Sri Ram Colony came back into focus again for Vishnu when he blinked awake at around five o'clock in the evening, the day's earlier adventures still clinging to the edges of his mind like a weird dream. A gentle tug-of-war between a sense of obligation to Ali Bhaiyya and a lingering warmth for Satya Auntie played within him, but the pull toward Ali, a more pressing need, nudged him to his feet.

Arriving at the familiar bustle of Archana Printers, he found his small army of female admirers getting ready to wind up for the day. A pang of wistfulness touched Vishnu—with the secret thought that the lively banter, the jokes, and the shared moments might not come again. Vishnu stood among them, a little frayed at the edges—his shirt askew, his eyes rimmed with fatigue, and his hair dishevelled. But utterly oblivious to any inner turmoil in Vishnu, they urged him to make more frequent visits for their much-needed cheer.

Janki, the skinny girl who was habitually slow and late in completing her binding and packing jobs, earnestly pleaded for his presence the following day, envisioning his helpful hands amidst her stacks of work. Vishnu responded with a warm smile and a softly hummed Telugu couplet, a gentle reminder that tomorrow had not yet been born. He was running on fumes

now, but the mask held firm. Assuming Vishnu's philosophical statements were for fun, one of the women called out to him teasingly and said, "Pandit Vishnuji, where's your melody phone? We miss that syrupy lady who used to say, 'May I help you?' as if she meant it!"

He turned slowly, the corners of his mouth lifting into that familiar grin. "Ah, yes," he said, voice dipped in mock grandeur, "I have dismissed her. Breach of contract. She always promised assistance, but never delivered. You won't hear her again."

The girls laughed, unaware that this was, perhaps, his last curtain call. Vishnu, at the same time, was gnawed by the thought of missing this bright spotlight of affection they all had given him generously, his legs aching, his mind scattered, but he held the pose—an actor to the end.

And in that moment, as the laughter swirled around him, he felt it: the intense ache of farewell, the weight of knowing the pain, and the strange dignity of pretending not to.

The ladies dissolved into laughter, some offering affectionate handshakes, some a gentle hug, none imagining these whimsical pronouncements might carry a deeper meaning.

As he entered the inside work area, the familiar, comforting drone of the printing press greeted Vishnu with the reassuring sight of his hero, Ali Khan, sitting on one side, the senior operator, Ravi, a steady presence in the Press, on the other.

"Vishnu! You rascal, where did you disappear to?" roared Ali as soon as he caught sight of Vishnu.

“I was beginning to think you'd vanished into thin air! As a Runaway!” The severe admonition brought an apologetic, sheepish expression of guilt onto his dry, drained-out face, the pathos of which cooled down Ali's ire.

"Ramu told me in the morning that you were headed here," Ali continued, his brow furrowing slightly, "and when you didn't show up for hours, my mind started racing."

Still flushed with guilt, Vishnu offered a concise account of his unexpected detour to the colony. Ali listened intently, his expression softening with understanding. When Vishnu got a welcome reprieve from Ali's sympathy, he was emboldened to inject a bit of levity in their conversation.

"It was like sleepwalking, you know? My feet just...decided to go for a stroll", Vishnu smiled.

Ali did not respond. He seemed lost in his own thoughts. At length, Vishnu ventured to break the spell: “May I meet you here tomorrow morning?” he said, his voice very quiet and respectful, guilt and shame still writ on his face.

Ali didn't seem to hear Vishnu's words because the machine operator, Ravi, was trying to get his attention about work.

“Yes, Ravi, go ahead,” Ali said to the machine operator, “complete the work allotted to you, ten to fifteen minutes, and then, you may wind up.”

Ali stood up and stepped away from the machine operator, giving him space to finish without interruption.

Ali then walked to the other end of the room, settled comfortably into a chair at the proofreader's desk, and motioned for Vishnu to join him.

Strolling to Ali at the other end of the room, the orphan read his new boss's face and concluded that he had something of great significance to share with him. Ali, at the same time, being cautious not to scare the child, got up from his seat, pulled a small chair for him, and gestured for him to take the seat across from him. But suddenly, out of the blue, Ali went straight to the subject and posed a direct question to him.

“Tell me, Vishnu, would you prefer to leave Mem Saab's house sooner rather than later?”

Vishnu's brow furrowed in confusion at the abruptness of Ali's straight gaze and direct query. He sat, staring at Ali as if to say, at this point in his dilemma, for him, Ali was both the question and the answer.

The bewildered expression of the young orphan tugged at Ali's heart. A wave of remorse washed over him for his indiscretion—for the insensitivity of swirling such an unkind question at the poor boy, when uncertainty dangled over him like the infamous sword.

However, Ali held back from apologising, fearing it might divert Vishnu's focus. Softening his tone to one of gentle reassurance, Ali continued, “Oh, this isn't meant to upset you. I simply need to understand your preference.”

He paused, giving Vishnu time to consider. But the boy remained silent. Ali then spoke softly, “You see, Vishnu, the

time has come for us to make some decisions. And I assure you, your well-being is my foremost concern. There's something else I need to share with you: Mem Saab has sensed your unhappiness here. She understood the situation, though perhaps belatedly. Ultimately, she asked me to find a way forward. Now, I want you to be clear about what you want. Take your time. I'm here to help you."

Vishnu's little heart was flooded with appreciation for his new mentor. But uncharacteristically, he could only mumble words, unable to express his gratitude to Ali Bhaiyya, who stood by him steadfastly, willing to share the heavy burden of his small life.

Watching Vishnu, Ali felt a secret, pious joy as the initial discomfiture melted from Vishnu's troubled face, replaced by an expression of ease and confidence. Basking in the newly acquired composure and quiet confidence, Vishnu whispered, "Mem Saab was always kind to me. I do not want to be a burden to her any longer". Vishnu paused briefly and added, this time, with more emphasis, "I wanted to leave their house for myself too, when I failed so hopelessly in their expectations."

After a long pause, he began to elaborate further.

"I wanted to come out of this situation. Hope whispered in my ears that new means of living would open up. My colony is where I belong. I mean, I know the earth there more than any other."

Silence hung between them for a while before Ali congratulated Vishnu on his visit to his roots. "It was very

thoughtful of you to explore your roots now. It's a testament to your courage and character."

The orphan did not respond to Ali's observations. It was like Vishnu had nothing more to add. The furrows of sadness on his forehead deepened. He sat there, still and silent, resembling a planted statue of a little god on a moonlit winter night. A few moments later, Vishnu looked up and murmured with the wisdom of a little saint, "Yes, Bhaiyya! I saw it—this Colony—as my home because I have no other place to claim any relationship with, anywhere. But this Colony doesn't recognise me. My sleepwalking to Sriram Colony was a fantasy—the desire of an orphan to reach his identity."

Ali stood there, struck dumb by the depth of the little orphan's words. Something in him froze, and he sat down in the chair without knowing why, wondering how a child could speak like that. Where had he gathered such truths? Silently pondering over it, he could see it all—sharp and clear: Vishnu as a child had lived through the shock and misery of his father being snatched away, followed by the shattering grief of losing his mother and brother too. He had known the sting of being pushed out and laughed at, the ache of having nothing and nobody, and the bruising of body and mind. With the fiery past of the boy surfacing in his mind, Ali did not have to look elsewhere for the source of his strange calm, clarity, and wisdom.

Ali felt something more shift inside him. In that moment, he understood how deep his own regard for the little boy was, and why something wordless kept pulling him toward him, binding him to take care of him.

While Ali remained silent and speculative, Vishnu moved forward once again, seeking permission to leave.

Ali Khan was in a precarious position, seeking answers and solutions to the multiple questions and challenges his ward had raised. However, on his end, he had made it his priority to maintain Vishnu's morale and prepare him to face the challenges ahead.

Ali, now returned to Vishnu's strong observations on identity. He did not want Vishnu to be too obsessed with his imaginary roots. He is not the type of bird to limit his domain to the Sri Ram Colony. Ali could not wait to instil in Vishnu the idea that he was special and that the sky was the limit for him, so he dared to add, "What is the great deal about getting a tag of identity from an obscure place, Vishnu?"

Ali paused. He was pleased to watch the intense curiosity grow in Vishnu's eyes.

"Sri Ram Colony, with all the mixed memories that it holds for you, would only remain as a temporary phase of your young life. One should strive—You must strive—to create an institution or be an institution of great value yourself! However, you are still too young to take up such lofty ideas now. Forget all that for the time being, Vishnu. Right now, we, you and I, must think of having some fun together."

Ali stood up, stretching his tall, slim frame to its full height, his silken brown hair partially falling on his fair face. As Vishnu stood looking up to him for orders, he smiled, giving him a curious wink, and said, "How about revisiting the Crescent Restaurant? We can eat, relax, and have a good time. Both of

us had a long, stressful day today. Don't worry about being late post-dinner. I will phone Ramu to say that you will be a little late tonight, and I will drop you there."

Ali paused and said, cheering him up further, "Yes, Boss! We will visit our old Crescent and celebrate your return to your roots, from where you will take off on golden wings to soar high in your future journey."

Vishnu was visibly happy. Ali's words reignited his spirits. Flashing a thankful smile, he said, "Crescent is a great place, Ali Bhaiyya, but after our happy dinner, where shall I get those golden wings?"

"From the surest source", said Ali, winking. Vishnu waited for the answer. Ali said with confidence, "From within. From yourself."

Ali, in his conviction that Vishnu was genuinely a super-intelligent boy, a prodigy merely denied opportunities, spoke to him with a ring of earnestness in his tone, "Vishnu! You are a star- with a treasure of many talents and a heart of gold!"



25. Temple Bells Ring in a Farewell Day

Vishnu's night out and dinner had been a sublime experience, one that would linger in his memory for a lifetime. Returning home slightly late, he headed straight to his room, washed, and changed into his home clothes. Pausing at the doorway, he turned to Ramu with a wistful warmth, offering a soft and lingering good night—a farewell that carried the weight of unspoken gratitude for the good soul who had always been a part of his days in the Gupta household.

As he slipped into bed, his joyous little heart silently sang a tune of contentment. Yet, amidst the quiet harmony, thoughts of Satya Aunty weighed heavily on his conscience. She was the only living legacy his mother had left behind for him, and the pang of guilt was undeniable. Resolving to make amends, he decided he would visit her family in the colony early the next morning, before she set off for her day's work.

November is perhaps Hyderabad's most charming month, ushering in the gentle embrace of a mild, lovely winter. Though occasional showers may visit, the air remains crisp and cool, carrying the earthy fragrance of dew-kissed soil, whispering promises of a fresh dawn.

Vishnu, still reflecting on his regret in skipping Satya the previous day, felt a quiet urgency today to stir himself awake in the pre-dawn hush. Today's morning schedule was clear—he would first see Satya Aunt's family and then visit his mother's beloved deity at the *busti's* Ellamma Temple.

Speculative thoughts about the surprises and harsh realities that the day would bring to the fore for him made his heart miss a beat. But soon, courage and determination took over. He knew he had to be patient, cautious, and accepting.

After careful grooming, he stepped into the calm stillness of the road outside the Guptas' gate. Fresh jasmine-scented breeze mingled with the faint *azaan* call drifting in from a distant mosque. The streets lay silent and empty, save for the watchful vigil of a lone night guard and the intermittent shuffle of an old stray dog.

By the time Vishnu reached the immaculately maintained Raj Bhavan Road, the rising sun spilt like warm golden ink across the pavement. The city began to exhale, the roads awakened with footsteps, voices, and the pulse of life was reborn.

Each breath filled Vishnu with renewed hope and a quiet confidence. Dinner with Ali the night before had steadied him with a brotherly reassurance of support as he prepared for this new chapter in life. Today, perhaps, would mark the beginning of something new and extraordinary for him. Could it happen today, he wondered? His departure from Mem Saab's household and the start of an independent existence?

The cold morning, with the light blue sky as a clear canvas, painted the horizon in a serene blend of pink and gold. Turning

into the lane leading to Sriram Colony, Vishnu inhaled deeply, feeling the gentle warmth dispel the remnants of the previous night. Scattered slum birds with their angry twitters marked their protests against the lack of quorum for a morning symphony.

Grateful thoughts of Satya swirled through Vishnu's mind as he walked, his eyes misting at the sight of a faint light glowing inside the old house where his family had once lived. He advanced to Satya's humble dwelling and knocked gently. The door creaked open, and Vishnu was in the loving fold of Satya's embrace as though Vishnu was her own son. Her jubilant welcome was so heartfelt that in no time, the entire family joined her.

"My child! Come in," she exclaimed, pulling him into a warm hug again. "What happened to you, *beta*? Are you alright?"

The room was full of the comforting aroma of freshly steamed *idlis*. Vishnu recognised Satya Aunt's family: her husband, Pandu Uncle, and their two daughters, who he remembered were younger than him. The unalloyed joy on their faces was heartwarming, their hospitality profound and fundamental.

"I'm leaving Mem Saab's household, Auntie," Vishnu announced, his voice a shaky whisper and his eyes shimmering with determination.

Satya Aunt's expression reflected her deep concern for the boy's future. "I suspected that a day like this would come. You are ready to spread your wings, my child. You are exceptional, Vishnu, you will manage!"

“Mem Saab is out of the station,” Vishnu said. “She had permitted Ali Bahiyya, her assistant at the printing press, to help me leave whenever I wanted. Ali Bahiyya is doing his best to rehabilitate me. He informed me that Mem Saab had asked him to visit you as well.”

At length, as Vishnu prepared to leave, promising to come again, Satya Auntie grasped his hands. “Remember, Vishnu, your journey is just beginning. Stay strong and never lose faith”, she said.

Satya’s eyes sparkled. “You’ll always have food and shelter with us, Vishnu. You will grow up here”.

The humility that Vishnu felt at that point was beyond words. Overwhelmed, he was silent and downcast for a moment.

Noticing that Satya had just set aside a share of breakfast for him too, Vishnu regretted his inability to join them today because of his vow of fasting for the Ellamma temple visit. Satya looked a little disappointed. A glowing smile lit up Vishnu’s face as he took to joking.

“My fasting today is for all of us, Auntie. It’s not for me alone. When Mother Shakti demands, how can we deny her? And she is not asking much.” Pandu Uncle nodded. With Satya’s blessings and a heart full of gratitude, Vishnu stepped out into the beautiful sunny morning, seeking celestial guidance for the new odyssey he might embark on today.



26. Negotiating Roots and Roofs

Vishnu had neither expected nor wished to be fostered by Satya's family. He knew too well the quiet burdens they bore just to keep themselves going. Still, Satya Aunty's offer—a generous gesture to help with his accommodation—had struck a deep chord. It lingered in his mind as he walked away, not for what it promised, but for what it revealed of her and her family.

The moment he stepped onto the road, the limits of her offer began to show themselves. The family had welcomed him with open hearts, made room for him in their affections—but their modest shack had no space to spare. His belongings could be kept safe at Satya Aunty's, and that gave him great relief and comfort. Yet the weight of many unanswered questions pressed in: Where would he stay? What if his exit came today?

Jumping life's metaphorical fence was no simple task. Self-reliance, quiet and insistent, whispered in him that he would endure. He would find a way. Even now, a slight glow of relief lingered—he had broken free from Shalini Ma'am's household. And in that, he felt something close to happiness. Not triumph, but the quiet satisfaction of choosing for himself, the feeling that he was the winner.

At the modest temple, cherished mainly by the less fortunate of the area, his past rose like waves crashing against the present, sweeping away his doubts and fears. It was his first visit to Amma Ellamma without the protective presence of his other

Goddess, his mother. Her memory flickered in his mind as he joined the ranks of devotees, closing his eyes and letting his thoughts drift upward, beyond the earthly, into the sanctuary of pure, invisible faith.

As he emerged from the temple, a streak of bright vermilion glowing on his forehead, his solemn expression stood in stark contrast to the awakening city. The streets were coming alive—workers hurrying out of their homes, children darting toward school. With determined strides, he retraced the short path back to Sriram Colony. To the bustling crowd, he was just another boy—small, solitary, navigating the fluid throng of faces and shadows. His youthful features exuded a calm demeanour, marred only by faint traces of resolve etched into his brow.

In that moment, it became clear to him: the fragile shelter he had sought the day before was no longer a mere choice; it was the only lifeline within reach. Accepting the bitter truth, he murmured under his breath, “So, here I am again.”

Thus, Vishnu, once again, stepped into the weathered, neglected confines of the shabby shanty where he had rested the previous day briefly. Standing still at the open door of the structure, Vishnu evaluated the essential work he had to do there immediately, just to spend the weary hours of the day and rest his head at night.

‘It would work, it must!’ he decided, even though the quantum and the duration of the work remained uncertain. With a heavy heart, he reflected that for an orphan, the concept of security was a fragile dream, an elusive luxury too precarious to hold onto for long.

Vishnu stood at the entrance of the small hut, its walls crumbling and its roof barely holding together. Determined, he removed his clean shirt, secured it at a safe spot outside the room, and set to work. From the colony's common dumping area, he selected an old broom, a small spade, a broken bucket, and other available essentials for cleaning and repairs.

The municipality's sweepers had begun piling waste a few yards from the hut, a clear indication that it had been vacant and unattended for a long time. The air was thick with dust as he swept the floor, each stroke of the broom revealing patches of the original mud surface beneath layers of grime. Seeing the rising sun grow hotter, Vishnu decided to complete the outside work first—limiting it to essentials—and then return to the rest of the work inside.

As he gathered the debris into the pile outside, his breath started coming in short, determined bursts. But Vishnu wouldn't give up. He pulled out the overgrown weeds, his fingers becoming bruised and dirty, but he didn't mind.

After doing his best to make the surroundings clean, he resumed work on the inside. The broken window let in shafts of sunlight, illuminating the invisible dust particles dancing in the air like scattered bits of laser beams.

Vishnu paused at the window, taking in the view before resuming the work inside. He dusted out the cobwebs from the corners and, in the process, tried to ascertain the stability of the roofs and the walls. When he finished, the house, though still horribly shabby and rickety—and without doors—had gained some semblance of order and form.

Vishnu was thoroughly exhausted, but he had a dazzling satisfaction in his heart. He could spare Satya Aunty the embarrassment of providing him a cluttered corner to sleep.

Before leaving the spot, he turned back, stood before it, and had an overall look at his creation. He chuckled, reckoning he would not have to resort to a filthy shop veranda on the first night of his expulsion from the mansion. Unlike countless orphan-kids who exist on the peripheries of buildings along roads and streets, he had his own roof and room.



27. A Farewell Gift Unparalleled

Late in the afternoon, when Vishnu returned to Shanti Nagar, saddled with the emotional weight of the impending farewell and debilitating physical exhaustion, the watchman, ever eager to trade whispers, excitedly announced that Ali Saab had arrived at 10:30 am. The news was delivered with the familiar tang of gossip. Ali had taken Ramu out on his scooter and, after a long shopping trip, had just returned. With this titbit echoing in his mind, Vishnu walked directly to the kitchen, feigning a mix of curiosity and jealousy, to confront Ramu.

Ramu stood waiting, his presence as steady and grounded as ever. With a playful glint in his eye, Vishnu issued a teasing challenge, demanding to know what treasures Ali Bhaiyya and he had brought home today. But before Ramu could respond, his discerning eyes caught the depth of the physical drain the little boy had subjected himself to after leaving the house in the morning.

“What happened to you? Where did you wander off to? You even missed breakfast,” Ramu inquired as he handed over to him a glass of water, his tone a curious blend of concern and airiness. Vishnu, ever elusive, merely offered a casual shrug, his winning smile accompanied by a conspiratorial wink.

However, before his own words could fully settle, Ramu’s gaze softened. He saw it—not just the exhaustion, but the quiet pride

nestled within Vishnu. The boy had ventured out on his own terms, carried his convictions through the day, and returned with the sort of tiredness that speaks of purpose fulfilled. A swell of emotion rose in Ramu—not alarm, but a tender respect. In his silent prayers, he felt it with certainty: this boy was born to persevere, to rise, to win in ways that mattered. And so, he smiled—not merely in response, but in quiet celebration of a spirit that had silently declared he would survive and soar.

As Vishnu set down the tumbler, Ramu placed a hand lightly on his shoulder—not to steady him, but to honour him. His voice, when it came, was low and unwavering.

“I guess you’ve done well, *beta*, not just in what you managed, but in how you chose to do it today itself, whatever it is that you have done today.”

Ramu paused and looked out of the kitchen to ensure no one else was listening.

Vishnu didn’t respond to his words of appreciation. He didn’t need to. He was aware of the strict discipline maintained in the household. Ramu continued, “I’ve watched you—closely, quietly. And I’ll say this once, because you’ll carry it with you: you have it in you to win the world. Not by force, but by the strength of your nature.”

His old Boss’s heartfelt appreciation settled into Vishnu, like a cool breeze after a spell of sweltering heat—an invisible blessing from someone who had seen him not just as he was, but as he was becoming.

His silent joy knew no bounds as Ramu led him to the small dining table, which was already laid for him.

Lunch over, Vishnu strolled out of the kitchen and headed to his room to ensure that he had taken all his belongings, and the packing was all right. He had already cleaned the room in the morning and now, again, took care that everything in the room was kept back in perfect order. In the stillness of these moments, he thought of Ali's imminent arrival and hastily made his way to the main gate.

Ramesh the gardener came running to Vishnu and met him halfway, sobbing profusely and hugging him, wailing, "do not go away, Boss, don't go so soon, how can you leave us all?"

Vishnu knew this friend was a half-wit, but a very loving, laughing guy, whose mind functions only in the present. Vishnu truly felt sorry for him, remembering their happy times together. He went back to his room, returned with the toy phone, and affectionately presented it to Ramesh, whose joy in possessing the speaking phone instantly washed out all his parting pains. Cuddling and kissing the precious present in his hand, his bulging, teary eyes shone, and his laughter returned. He hurried out of the gate, happily dissolving into the moving crowd.

Ramu, who was watching the tragicomedy of the two friends, suddenly became grave, beckoned Vishnu to his side, and said in a sad whisper, "Mem Saab will be back tomorrow or the day after. Are you planning to leave without meeting your Mem Saab? She still cares for you a lot".

Vishnu started drawing lines on the floor with his toe. When he looked up, his eyes were moist.

After a pause, in the comfort and ease of the intimacy that had come between them, Vishnu said, in a tone of resignation, “Bhaiyya, why trouble them? I will certainly come to see them. I think I will be in the city, eking out a living for myself”.

At that precise moment, Ali entered. The watchman, by habit, was escorting him, dragging himself along. Ramu ushered him to the back of the house while Vishnu ran ahead and brought him a chair. As he was getting seated, Ramu joked, “Someone here is all ears, curious about what made us go for shopping together, and what the purchases were and for whom”.

Ali gave Vishnu a playful wink, but he was eagerly reading his ward’s face and saw that he was not humoured by anything that the parcels could hold.

Ali took out the largest of the three parcels and set it aside, “This pack holds Mem Saab’s gift for Satya’s family.”

Vishnu gave Ali a perplexed look. Smiling, Ali explained, “Even I did not know Mem Saab had a meeting with Satya. Yesterday, from Vizag, she instructed me over the phone to buy some gifts for Satya and her family, specifying even the price range. I guess she might have met her to gather more information about you and your family—with the good intention of studying how best she could help you.

Ali had to tell him the truth, but it hurt him to see the fleeting discomfiture the news brought to Vishnu. However, nothing further was said about it.

The second parcel was for Vishnu. Ramu asked him to open it, but Vishnu hesitated, showing only lukewarm interest. After a brief pause, Ali opened it for Vishnu, eager to cheer him up, and pulled out two sets of shorts and shirts, and another two of long pants and matching simple shirts. The whole process was met with boisterous cheers from Ali and Ramu, and many positive comments, all intended to mitigate the prevailing tensions. By this time, his steadfast well-wisher, driver Rajanna, had also arrived, the sadness of Vishnu's departure writ clearly on his face. He had to leave the house to pick up the Gupta kids from college, so he bid the little boy farewell with a hug and a command to keep visiting them at least once a month.

Subsequently, Ali eyed the third parcel. He asked Vishnu to carry it to the anteroom adjoining the living room, then turned to Ramu and suggested they join him there to open it securely.

By the time they arrived, Vishnu had convinced himself the parcel held something special—something Ali had chosen just for him. His curiosity swelled with each passing second. Yet Ali, ever the mischief-maker, delayed. When he finally began to unwrap it, Vishnu noticed the deliberate slowness of his hands, the careful shielding of its contents.

Under the boy's impatient gaze, Ali paused mid-unwrapping. He gathered the loose folds back over the half-opened parcel, gave Vishnu a sly wink, and settled into his chair, resting both hands atop the bundle. His smile was playful, his eyes dancing with teasing affection.

Vishnu, now trembling with anticipation, was on the verge of exasperation.

“Guess what’s inside, Vishnu!” Ali said, his voice deliberately soft and calm with mischief still writ on his face.

Vishnu could only stare, speechless. Ali patted his shoulder gently, took his hands off the parcel, smiling, and said, “Go on, open it yourself.”

The boy obeyed with savage speed, tearing through the layers and placing the contents reverently on the small table between them. But before he could examine them all, the meaning of Ali’s gesture struck him with full force.

Books—textbooks for First and Second Standard, a math primer on numbers and simple Arithmetic, ruled notebooks, pens, and even a writing pad.

Vishnu’s eyes glistened. His breath caught, he turned to Ali and, overcome with emotion, embraced him tightly.

“I promise you, bhaiyya,” he whispered, “it will not go wasted. I will do my best.”

He could say no more. His silence, choked with gratitude, spoke louder than words.

They returned to the parcel together, Vishnu touching each item as if it were sacred.

“It will never be a waste, bhaiyya,” he repeated, his voice still thick with excitement. Again, gently sobering down, he said, “If I learn it myself, no one can take it away from me,” Vishnu said, his voice gentle but firm. “It’ll stay with me forever.”

Ali's face glowed with a quiet storm of hope, pride, and deep gratification at Vishnu's observation.

The spell was gently broken when Ramu entered with tea on a white tray. Later, as Ramu returned to collect it, Vishnu walked with him. Before reaching the kitchen, he made bold to tug at his elbow from behind gently.

“Ramu bhaiyya, I troubled you a lot. I apologise! I humbly seek your blessings! Saying so, he bent down and touched Ramu's feet in humility, in the Indian way of obeisance. Ramu gave him a tight hug, straining to put on a complacent expression.

“I'll light the holy lamp in the pooja room. Go, collect your bags and the parcel, and when you are back, I am ready with the pooja for you,” he said.



28. Footsteps of Today, Echoes of the Past

It was past five in the evening, the setting sun still warm, when Ali reached Sri Ram Colony with Vishnu, his beloved ward, riding pillion on his humble scooter.

The evening bustle on the byways compelled them to abandon the scooter and walk through the lively throng. The air was rich with the scents of evening cuisines, interlaced with the occasional smoky whisper of wood fires. The colony, now a tapestry of shadows, came alive with activity with the return of the daily wage owners to their homes. Men either went out in small groups for diversion or gathered to spend the time sharing their own tales and the day's gossip. Women, their movements purposeful, bartered with vendors, stirred fragrant pots, and kept a watchful eye on their children, whose joyful shouts and playful squabbles orchestrated a vibrant soundscape against the backdrop of deepening shadows.

Despite the bittersweet memories of slum life that clung to Vishnu's heart, he now felt an outsider's detachment, the impact of the many wanderings he had undergone, including the months of plenty he had spent at his former mentor's home. Ali's stories of transformation and triumph shot through his mind, fortifying his spirit. The slum's sights and sounds, once daunting, now fuelled his resolve. His brave young heart surged

with hope, confidence, and the thrill of the challenges ahead, the undeniable joy of leaving his mentor, Shalini Ma'am's home, eclipsing even the anxieties of the unknown. Ali, on the other hand, was feeling sad, his face etched with concern for the poor kid's future.

Satya and her husband, Pandu, greeted them with open hearts. Satya stepped forward, her embrace of Vishnu a silent vow of care and unwavering support. Moved by this simple yet profound gesture, Ali folded his palms in a deep *namaskar*, acknowledging the unspoken bond forming between them.

Satya was taken aback by the gift parcel, and the money Ali had brought for the family. Reluctant at first, she yielded with grace when Ali mentioned Shalini Madam's affection and appreciation for her. But when Ali presented the money from Mem Saab to buy gifts for the children, she resisted, uneasy about accepting a reward for what she saw as only a small act of kindness to her best friend's child. However, Ali's earnest insistence softened her resolve, and she accepted it with quiet gratitude. But she remained steadfastly resistant when Ali requested her to safeguard the money Shalini had left for Vishnu. In one fluid motion, she passed the envelope to Vishnu, who, without hesitation, entrusted it to Ali. It was more than an exchange of currency; it was an offering of trust, a quiet declaration that Vishnu had chosen his guide.

Satya wished for Ali to stay longer, but the evening was pressing on. When she asked for the Printing Press's phone number, Ali said he had already given all the details to Vishnu, assuring her they could reach him from any public phone. It was getting late for his presence at the Press, so Ali made haste

to leave, promising to return in the morning to see how they were faring.

"I'm not going away, Vishnu," Ali reassured, giving Vishnu a gentle hug, "I'll be back tomorrow by ten in the morning."

As he got up, Pandu decided to accompany Ali to his scooter, which he had to park at the start of the alley leading to Satya's home.



29. Castle on a Shaky Ground

As Ali's silhouette diffused into the gently permeating nightfall, Vishnu stood watching him motionless, his eyes turning misty. Satya, noticing Vishnu's momentary withdrawal and the way his lips pressed together in thought, rested a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Come in, Vishnu. Let's have some tea", she said.

Seated on a small, wobbly reclining chair, the young orphan watched Satya move with quiet ease in the kitchen, the aroma of brewing tea curling through the room like a soft blanket. Left alone, the orphan, despite his young age, slipped into reminiscences and speculations.

When had he last experienced such warmth in a home? He asked himself and sifted through distant memories. Scattered fragments of closeness, a hand on his head, the effortless ease of belonging, the unspoken freedom of familial love, the kind that didn't ask for anything in return. The fleeting recollections provided him with a glimpse of the true essence of love: a steady presence, a haven, an unwavering embrace. His thoughts lifted him into a realm of quiet happiness, humbling him with awareness of the gentleness that enwrapped him now. For a fleeting moment, the ache of being an orphan softened, replaced by the image of being a son cherished and becoming.

His thoughts drifted, and there stood Ali Bhaiyya in the landscape of his mind, like a steady, breezy mountain. Vishnu, perceptive as he was, sensed his mental horizons expanding and his understanding of life deepening in ways he hadn't imagined before. Vishnu was not yet twelve. Still, he could experience in the tender marrow of his being, the immeasurable worth of freedom—freedom, not just from hunger or fear, but from the smallness that had once defined him. His inner strength, once merely instinctive, now felt purposeful. His ambitions, once mere flickers, now ignited with a newfound clarity, as he learned that he had to define his goals for shorter terms as well as the future. Of course, he did not know precisely what he wanted, but he knew this: he would learn. He would grow.

He was brutally realistic, too. Even while riding pipedreams for the future, he was fully aware that his present was the raw reality of being just a poor orphan boy. He didn't cry about it anymore. And the dreams still came, not to erase the truth, but to live with it, both making him smile.

Satya was ready with tea. Her little daughters had tiptoed in, closely followed by Pandu. The girls, aged about six and seven, walked in straight and disappeared into a small, makeshift bedsit area—the brainchild of Pandu, their father—where they did their homework, played, and slept. The comfort and ease Vishnu felt in being part of that little crowd made him slip into an illusion that he was one among them, part of the family. Satya's husband, Pandu, settled himself beside Vishnu while Devi and Maya stared at them, their eyes bright with innocent curiosity.

As they talked, Vishnu felt even more deeply the subtle shift that had come to him—the easing of tension, the unspoken relief. Even so, his mind kept returning to an early morning adventure he had already set for himself as his first step toward his principle of self-reliance. However, his immediate concern was to slowly reveal to Satya and Pandu what he had been engaged with in the Sri Ram colony in the morning. His heart skipped a beat as he imagined the thrill and relief it would bring them. Vishnu had been waiting for the colony to settle down to its evening quiet to avoid any unwanted attention. Now, as Dusk began to spread, he decided that the moment had come to surprise them with his midday adventure. Feeling a little nervous, he abruptly stood up and went out into the open. Others followed.

Turning to Satya Aunty, he said, his little heart racing, “This morning, I spent some time here in the colony. I made something here. I want to show you what. Please come with me.”

Satya and Pandu exchanged curious glances. Filled with a quiet urgency, Vishnu led them through the narrow alleyways, the soft glow of the evening shimmering on the close-knit dwellings. The air hummed with the sounds of the fading day, but Vishnu’s mind was fixed on the surprise he held in store.

“Just a little further,” he murmured, the thrill now mingling with a more profound, almost unspoken longing.

When they reached the dilapidated hut, Vishnu turned to them, a broad smile spreading across his face, and gestured towards the newly cleared space. “I’ve made a temporary home partially

habitable for some time, Aunty! Come! Welcome to our new home!” he announced, adding softly, apologetically, “Of course, a lot more is to be done.”

The family stood in stunned silence, their eyes wide with disbelief. The structure still wore a dilapidated look. Inside, the available space was limited but clean and smooth. Astonishment quickly gave way to joy and admiration. Satya’s voice trembled with emotion as she spoke.

“Vishnu, this is incredible! I can’t believe you did all this on your own.”

Pandu, equally amazed, silently walked around the hut, inspecting Vishnu’s handiwork. “You have worked hard. Yes, our house needed some more space. Thank you, Vishnu!” he said, understanding dawning on his face.

“Returning from the temple this morning, I secretly worked alone for four hours, repairing and cleaning this abandoned place to make it liveable. I am happy you appreciate it,” Vishnu explained.

Divya and Maya darted around the small space, their giggles echoing, instantly making the hut feel more alive. A palpable sense of relief washed over the family. Tonight, they wouldn’t have to worry about accommodating Vishnu in the cramped quarters of their own home.

Pandu placed an arm around Vishnu’s shoulders. “You’re a remarkable young man, Vishnu. We’re lucky to have you with us.”

“On the first day of my visit, I slept here for a few hours in the afternoon. Today, this morning, when I realised, we didn’t have enough space, this was the most natural solution I could think of,” Vishnu added.

Their young guests’ ingenuity spellbound both Satya and Pandu, but Vishnu, being aware of the uncertainties and the risks involved, remained well grounded, his demeanour gentle. An inaudible sigh escaped him, but his spirit was never to be daunted.

“The uncertainty looms large, Aunty. Who knows, for how long... but let’s hope for the best.”

As the mild winter's night began to envelop Vishnu’s hut, they made their way home for dinner, their hearts still filled with excitement and admiration.

On their return walk to Satya’s home, Vishnu asked Satya for permission to go out early in the morning the next day on an errand he had undertaken.

“Tomorrow, I’ll visit a temple early in the morning and then meet a friend. I’ll return as soon as possible.”

Satya nodded, “Go ahead, Vishnu! And take care. We shall be waiting for your return.”

Back home, they shared a simple meal, their spirits still high from Vishnu’s dedication. Laughing lightly, Vishnu said, “It won’t rain tonight, so that’s not a problem. After all, life is full of uncertainties.”

That night, Vishnu and Uncle Pandu slept in the new annexe that Vishnu had built.



30. The “Will” that Wakes Up & Walks Before Dawn

An internal clock set by Vishnu’s unwavering determination gently nudged him awake as the reluctant dawn swept over the night’s lingering presence.

The previous day’s events within the colony unfolded in his mind, vivid, clear, and freshly etched on the clean page of his mind. Slowly, uninvited, the memory of his Mem Saab blew in like a cold wind.

He recalled the urgency with which Mem Saab authorised Ali Bhaiyya to resolve the prevailing uncertainties and of his precarious presence in the Gupta household. Still in bed, lying on his back, he tried to get into focus the faraway stars straining to reach him through the gaps in the dilapidated roof. He smiled; a soft blend of relief and hopeful anticipation strengthened his resolve.

Pandu lay in deep sleep on a modest mat on the floor. In the dim light, Vishnu saw his sleeping form silhouetted against the faint morning glow, a gentle breeze rhythmically stirring his hair. Vishnu’s eyes welled with tears of gratitude as he thought of Pandu’s instinctive magnanimity in keeping him company during his first night’s stay in that stand-alone, unfinished structure. Quietly collecting his toiletries, without a rustle or whisper, he slipped out and headed towards the common pipe

area of the colony. The cool, fresh air elevated the little boy's spirits. The pre-dawn sky glittered with stars, the hoary moon still tarrying. The tranquil stillness felt like a sacred prompt, urging him forward with renewed purpose.

By the time Vishnu was ready to leave, Pandu joined him outside their humble refuge. His weathered face softened into a warm smile. "You are unbeatable, my boy, neat and smart! And you are already out on your errands!" he said, handing Vishnu some money. "Take this for your bus fare."

Vishnu shook his head gently, a quiet dignity in his voice. Ali Bhai has given me enough, Pandu uncle."

They were near the bifurcation. When they reached the colony's entrance, Vishnu once again took permission to go out. "I'll visit the temple first and then see a friend. I will be back before Ali Bhaiyya's visit."

At the entrance, their paths diverged. Vishnu stepped forward into the waking world outside the colony, while Pandu turned back toward his family.

The alleys inside the colony and the streets beyond hummed faintly as daybreak arrived. The early morning labourers were like moving shadows in the vast space as the city gradually came to life. In the growing haze, Vishnu's figure melded with the other silhouettes and vanished into the lingering darkness.

Pandu lingered too, his mind pulled by an unspoken bond to the shelter Vishnu now called their own. His thoughts shifted to Vishnu—the little boy who had begun mending not just bricks

and mortar, but his own future, and he resolved to do his best to make his shelter as habitable as possible.



31. Sunlight Through Broken Roofs

The morning pulse of Sri Ram Colony had settled into a calm rhythm, its bustling alleys now serene under the golden embrace of the sun.

Pandu's first look at the dilapidated structure in the bright daylight left him momentarily stunned. Innocent and plain as he was, Pandu's gaze instinctively lifted upward to the almighty in a kind of thanksgiving. He exhaled in relief, thankful for the stillness of the air the previous night. A wry smile flickered across his face—a silent acknowledgement of the quantum of work yet to be done to make the structure a safe, if temporary, abode.

He did not despair, his mind already planning the work ahead. Ali's arrival rekindled his enthusiasm, and soon they were seated on the old, worn-out mats, companions in both dreams and efforts. Pandu spoke with confidence, narrating the brilliance of young Vishnu—the boy who had transformed scraps and ruins into hope. Ali listened, his heart swelling with a quiet pride for the ingenuity of his little companion who had fallen into his hands as a willing ward.

Later, when Vishnu appeared, his presence felt like a soft shift in the air. The boy's serene smile was one of quiet triumph, radiating self-reliance and humility at once.

Despite all the accolades Vishnu was gathering, Ali noticed a subtle shadow that had diminished the calm composure on the boy's face. The weariness from the arduous toil in the ruthless sun the previous day was also etched on his face.

While Pandu, ever practical, busied himself with measurements for a new roof, Ali gently drew Vishnu into a private conversation, his tone a delicate balance of casual interest and heartfelt concern.

"Tell me, Vishnu," Ali began gently, his eyes soft with curiosity, "where did your feet carry you this morning after your temple prayers?"

For a moment, Vishnu's bright gaze faltered, his eyes lowering as a shadow of unease crossed his face. His lips pressed into a hesitant silence, and Ali felt a flicker of concern stir within him. Ali reached out again, this time with a gentle, encouraging nudge.

"But truly, Vishnu," he insisted with a lilt of playfulness, "where did you go? Share your news, my boy—be it joyful or otherwise. Have you stumbled upon kindred souls, perhaps new friends?"

The care and concern of his mentor briefly brightened Vishnu's expression, then shifted, a fleeting cheerfulness giving way to quiet solemnity. As Ali studied the boy's delicate face, his heart ached, sensing the weight of some unspoken tussle or predicament that he was grappling with.

"I... I had hoped to bring back a pleasant surprise today for us to celebrate," Vishnu ventured after a pause, his voice

measured, almost apologetic. Ali waited silently, his patient gaze urging the boy on.

“I thought... perhaps I might return to where I left off four months ago. To earn my own keep, bhaiyya. I am no longer a child to depend so entirely on others’ kindness. I went to find Bhaskar Sir—my old employer, the labour contractor. To catch him before he leaves for work.”

Ali leaned forward, his attention unwavering. “And? Were you able to meet him?”

Vishnu shook his head slightly, disappointment tinging his words. “No, bhaiyya. He’d already left for the site. You remember, it was from there that I joined Mem Saab. Bhaskar Sir gave me small jobs on building sites and later, some work at his home as well. I spoke to his wife. She was kind enough to offer me a good breakfast, but mentioned they now have someone helping them full-time. She suggested I visit him at the worksite instead.”

Ali sat quietly, his eyes brimming with a mix of appreciation and empathy. He was pleased with the initiatives Vishnu had taken to be himself, but he wanted to know more. He wanted to know, specifically, how the little warrior was conceptualising his opportunities for the future.

“There’s a warrior! Congratulations, Vishnu, on the steps you had already initiated! What else have you considered?” Ali asked.

“You’ve always had sharp eyes and a sharper mind—what other avenues have you imagined?” insisted Ali.

Vishnu's gaze brightened with a spark of determination; his voice was steady yet imbued with longing.

"The Old City, bhaiyya! There are bangle workshops, textile mills, big tailoring units, and even *beedi* factories. Boys find work in these places... sometimes, they even learn trades. But honestly, bhaiyya, my heart yearns for something that would give me Time with my books, too."

He looked at Ali, his earnestness piercing. "Reading, writing, and math," he said with quiet conviction, each word a deliberate step into hope.

"Reading, writing, and math," Ali repeated, a deep, heartfelt laugh escaping his lips, a laugh that had the vibrant ring of genuine care and admiration.

Ali felt a profound sense of hope that Vishnu's small wagon was indeed hitched to a brilliant star.

A lump tightened in Ali's throat, and a film of emotion misted his eyes as he drew Vishnu into a warm embrace, whispering with heartfelt conviction and a heart full of love.

"This gritty tunnel, Vishnu, is never your destination! You will go places—your triumph, already dawning!"

