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ROWNAQ PRASAD



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Prologue



It was half past four in the morning. The streets outside were empty, as silent as a graveyard, as if someone had died and left the city to mourn quietly. The scene was almost perfect, exactly as Adil had pictured for months now.

He sat at his study table, the window beside him left slightly ajar. Mumbai's humid wind pressed against the glass, warm and heavy, but keeping it shut made him feel suffocated. Mostly because of the cigarettes - one every thirty minutes, like clockwork. Smoke needed to escape somewhere.

His typewriter stood before him, sleek metal and blank paper tucked neatly inside, waiting. The machine was eager, almost impatient, ready to spill whatever words he commanded onto the page. But he had nothing left to give it. All his ideas, all his stories, had drained out into his last book. What remained now was only silence and the quiet certainty that he no longer had the motivation to create - or to live.

A copy of *The Angel of My Nightmares* lay on the desk, its edge brushing against the typewriter. His holy grail. His answer. And his ruin.

Adil drew out another cigarette from the white pack of Davidoff Lights, lips closing around it carelessly. He lit it with

a metal lighter, flame flickering in the stillness. *Smoking kills*, the packet screamed in bold letters.

“So does life,” Adil whispered, smiling faintly, knowing how tired and overused that line was.

He wondered when exactly he had changed brands. Was it the money? The fame? The people drifting in and out of his life lately? A cigarette was just tobacco wrapped in paper regardless of its name. It filled time when there was nothing else to fill and slowly took your life in return. He imagined smoking an entire carton in one sitting. Would it end ‘it’ faster? Probably not. It would probably only make him sick before the actual deed.

His gaze slid to the Colt revolver lying still on his desk. That would be quick. Instantaneous, almost. But it wasn’t quiet. Mehul Bhai’s revolver had roared once at the farmhouse. The memory of the deafening sound still made Adil flinch. He couldn’t risk neighbours waking, footsteps running, voices interfering.

He thought of hanging himself from the ceiling fan. That might be silent. Clean, almost poetic. But what if the fan collapsed under his weight? That would end in humiliation. Frustrated, he stubbed out the cigarette, stood up, and walked to the bathroom.

In the mirror, his face stared back, faintly blurred by the washroom’s dim yellow bulb. His receding hairline was the first thing he saw, an old enemy. The broad forehead he had resented for years. Yet he liked his eyebrows. So had Rhea.

Slowly, he ran a hand through his hair, just as he did before uncertain moments in life. Brown eyes returned his stare, half-open, haunted.

Is this my only escape?

The mirror stayed silent.

Back at the desk, he cleared some space, drew the typewriter closer, and set his notepad beside it. With chin resting on one hand, he fidgeted with a pen between his fingers of the other. He wanted to write something, anything. But what? Nights had passed in this silent wrestling match.

His eyes wandered to the portrait of Salvador Dalí fixed to the opposite wall: sharp moustache, wide mockery of eyes. It felt as if Dalí was ridiculing him every night. The peach curtain fluttered with the wind from the half-open window. Adil shivered. *Not yet*, he told himself. Not time yet. Like a turtle stranded ashore, its nose close to the sea, refusing to slip back into water. He was committed to ending it, yes. But still, something stopped him. A faint voice inside: *Not yet*.

He dropped the pen and picked up the revolver. With a quick, practiced turn, the cylinder clicked open. Three bullets sat inside. Not six.

Why only three?

Mehul Bhai was calm and composed, the kind of man who never raised his voice. He kept the revolver in the glove compartment of his black Mercedes, purely as a precaution. For protection, not for fear. He hadn't noticed it missing yet that much was certain.

Mehul Bhai was the one who had given Adil life in the first place. An agent, a guide, almost a brother. He had propelled *The Angel of My Nightmares* into selling over two and a half lakh copies in three months, even without critics acknowledging it. The book had brought Adil money he'd never dreamed of.

Crores from film rights alone. Fame and wealth - everything had walked through the door with Mehul leading. And Adil had merely followed. What Adil was about to do would hurt him more than anyone else. But then again, Adil wouldn't be here to see the pain in Mehul's eyes.

He flipped the cylinder again, letting it spin like in gangster films. Misjudged the motion. The bullets slipped out, scattering across the floor.

"Shit."

Silence pressed against his ears. Nothing moved outside. He was, as always, alone in this spacious flat. Alone at his desk. Alone even in the presence of God. Only Dali refused Adil's company.

He knelt to search. Dust, empty cigarette packs, half-burnt matchsticks - the dead underbelly of the desk. One bullet had landed on the typewriter keys; another rolled against the wall. The third had disappeared entirely. Adil searched desperately, finally spotting one sliding beneath the door. He opened it, and the bullet rolled to his foot. Two down, one more to go.

It had rained heavily that afternoon. The power was gone too, as if the clouds and the electricity board had conspired to leave him and Rhea in the darkness of their own desire.

The balcony door stood open, as always. Adil couldn't keep windows shut. Smoke needed outlets, claustrophobia needed air. His bed was low against the floor, wooden planks nailed together, positioned parallel to the door. Beside it stood a small study table cluttered with books, a typewriter, and Rhea's black

handbag half open, a corner of her Gold Flake pack slipping out like an uncovered secret.

Her body was on his lap, her perfume merging with the smell of rain. He kissed her neck, whispered, "Your face makes the word *beautiful* feel inadequate."

Rhea smiled. "Why are your hands trying to go under my top?"

"Are they? I didn't notice," Adil chuckled, slipping his hands beneath the fabric, feeling the soft warmth of her ribs.

Her head tilted back as his lips traced her neck, then her ear. She shivered, trembling lightly, her hands tugging his vest away. Clothes dissolved slowly, piece by piece, their skin learning each other's language. He moved clumsily, eagerly, while she teased him with measured hesitations.

When she stopped suddenly, halfway undressed, she asked with mock frown, "So fast? Where did you learn to be so quick?" "I'm a quick learner," Adil said, unhooking her bra as if to prove it. Her body unfolded before him like a private secret.

Heat spread, breaths tangled, but Rhea suddenly pushed him back. "Why are you so eager to get me pregnant?" Adil glared, irritation rising. "Trust me, that's the last thing I want."

"But when this thing goes in this thing, that's what happens," she muttered playfully, her voice imitating a child's, her eyes glittering with mischief.

The irritation fled him. She was glowing, even in the dim gray light. Her skin seemed impossibly fair, delicate. He smiled helplessly. Trying to convince her again.

Rhea only shook her head, gently pulling on her clothes. “Not today,” she whispered softly, kissing him on the lips. “Not yet. Not until the right time.”

He accepted it silently, hugging her to his chest. On the opposite wall hung the photograph: Adil sitting while Rhea stood behind him, arms crossed around his shoulders, chin resting lightly on his head. He smiled at it, then at her, committing all of it to memory.

Rhea was his poison. Like cigarettes. He knew she would kill him someday, but couldn’t give her up. Every difference between them only sharpened his devotion. She was the wound he couldn’t stop scratching. The glass of poison he would drink eagerly, even if it tore him apart from the inside, even if it left him choking—just to look at her one more time.

No matter how many meetings, no matter how many nights, when he lay alone in bed, all he ever wanted was one more time.

Strange, he thought, how we often choose addictions that quietly destroy us. Like the box of Davidoff Lights sitting on his table.

Addiction has two truths: the illusion it creates and the warning it whispers. The sleek white packaging, the silver lettering - it promises class. Style. The illusion of glamour sold by actors stepping out of shadows with smoke curling around their faces. You believe in that illusion. You convince yourself these little scrolls of tobacco are a key to success.

Yet at the bottom of the same box, in blunt bold letters, the truth waits: *This will kill you.*

We choose to believe the lie and ignore the truth. Adil saw that. He knew it. Just like the illusions he'd chosen about Rhea.

By now, the missing bullet had slipped from his mind. His eyes rested instead on the triangular bottle of Glenfiddich beside the kitchen sink. The cork was still in place. He almost smiled, but no emotion reached his face.

He found a glass in the kitchen drawer. Three ice cubes survived the forsaken freezer. Good enough. He dropped them in, poured himself half a glass, and returned to the study.

He placed the whisky beside the typewriter, shifted his notepad aside, and picked up the revolver. Absently, he slid the two bullets back into the cylinder. It rotated smoothly into place.

Dali's painted eyes followed him. Still mocking. Still smiling. *What are you hiding, my friend?* Adil wondered if Dali too had borne invisible wounds beneath his mask of absurdity. Perhaps some sorrows are too strong to erase, no matter how bizarre your moustache.

He sipped the scotch slowly, warmth sliding down his chest. Memories rose—of parties, of friends and noise. He had tried to lose himself there, tried the mask of joy, liquor, laughter. But every time, he found himself alone in the crowd, whispering Rhea's name or crying into strangers' shoulders.

Scotch finished, he poured another, picked up the Colt in his right hand. He aimed at the ceiling first, testing its weight. Then, slowly, he placed the barrel between his teeth. The cold taste of oil and metal filled his mouth. He gagged, spat, wiped the muzzle with his handkerchief, then tried again.

He held the revolver firmly in both hands, resting the glass on the table. He tilted the barrel upward, careful, so the recoil wouldn't miss the part of his head he was targeting. Closing his eyes, he pulled the trigger.

The sound crashed around him, deafening. A ringing took over his ears. His hands felt as if they were melting, the gun dissolving into his mouth. Maybe it was blood; the taste was similar. His body slumped sideways, falling from the chair.

The room grew darker. His eyelids heavier.

Dalí still stared down at him, moustache sharp, eyes wide smiling his eternal, mocking smile.

1



Neighbours said it was the kind of sound that didn't belong to any particular hour.

Not the bursting impatience of a Diwali cracker, not the dull boom of a gas cylinder falling, not the metallic crash of a car accident. It was tighter, sharper, and then there was that strange silence behind it, like the building had sucked all its air in and forgotten how to exhale.

The watchman was half-asleep on his plastic chair near the gate, chin on his chest, TV glow from some distant balcony flickering on his eyelids. The sound sliced into his half-dream, and he jerked awake, heart hammering for reasons he couldn't immediately name.

For a few seconds he sat still, listening. The night went on pretending nothing had happened - distant traffic, a dog barking two streets away, a pressure cooker's last hiss

somewhere. But the watchman had lived in enough buildings to know when the quiet felt wrong.

He picked up the wooden stick that made him feel a little more official, and started climbing.

On the second-floor landing, near Flat A-2, he stopped. The corridor tube light hummed and flickered, making everything look like badly shot CCTV footage.

He rang the doorbell.

The chime sounded inside - soft, domestic, absurd in the stretched silence. No footsteps followed. No fumbling for the latch.

He knocked, first politely, then harder.

"Adil sahib?" he called. *"Darwaza kholiye."*

Nothing.

He pressed his ear against the wood. There was no sound in the flat - no TV, no fan hum, no shuffling.

In that absence, his mind did what minds do. It raced.

Break-in. Gun. Robbers. Someone hurt.

His hands shook slightly as he fumbled for his phone. He dialed the number he stored under "PS SHO" - the local police station.

"Hello?" came a bored voice.

"Sabab, main Ramlal, Crescent Towers ka watchman," he said, words tumbling. *"Second floor, flat A-2 se awaaz aayi. Jaise goli ki. Darwaza nahi khul raha. Lagta hai kuch gadbad hai. Aap log aa jao jaldi."*

The constable on the other end straightened in his chair.

A gunshot in a respectable building in his jurisdiction at this hour was a combination of headache and opportunity.

“Hum aa rahe hain,” he said. “Tum wahan hi raho. Koi andar jaane ki koshish na kare.”

“He hung up and, after a beat, pulled out his phone, scrolling through his contacts until he found ‘Mehul Bhai.’ He knew better than to make that call from the station phone.

When the line connected, the voice on the other side sounded like it had just been yanked from sleep.

“Haan,” Mehul said.

“Mehul ji, main Rajesh bol raha hoon, thana se,” the constable said, lowering his voice even though they were in a corner. “*Aapka dost Adil hai na, jo writer hai? Uska flat hai Crescent Towers mein. Wahan se gunshot ka call aaya hai. Police van nikal gayi. Socha aapko bata doon.*”

Silence.

The sleep had left his voice completely. “*Main aa raha hoon.*”

By the time the first white police Gypsy rattled into the lane, red and blue lights painting the sleeping building in nervous colour, another car slipped in behind it - lower, darker, quieter.

People were already at their doors, faces half-hidden behind grills. Some clutched shawls to their chests. Others held their phones like shields.

The inspector swung out of the Gypsy, his shirt still slightly crumpled from the late-night lull. He glanced around with

sharp eyes, assessing the building, the gathering crowd, the potential paperwork.

“*Kaunsa flat?*” he barked.

“A-2, *sabab*,” the watchman said, breathless from both the climb and the attention. “*Upar*. Second floor.”

Mehul stepped out of his car then, hair hastily pushed back, T-shirt thrown over track pants. The streetlight carved shadows into his usually jovial face, sharpening it.

He didn’t bother with greetings.

“*Adil ka flat?*” he asked the watchman.

The man nodded, eyes wide.

The inspector clocked the recognition, filed it away. He’d heard the name “Mehul” in other contexts - the kind of man whose phone calls could make files move faster or slower.

“*Chalo*,” the inspector said.

They climbed together, boots and slippers and leather soles thudding up the stairwell.

At A-2, the faint smell of something metallic hung in the air, just under the normal apartment-block scents of cooking oil and soap.

The inspector rang the bell out of reflex. The chime sounded again, too gentle against his impatience.

He knocked hard. The flat did not respond.

“Door break,” he told his constables.

Their shoulders hit the wood - once, twice, three times. The lock splintered; the door crashed inward, banging against the wall.

The living room was...normal.

Sofa cushions slightly disarranged, an empty whisky glass on the center table, a coaster stained dark where something had spilled before. Books on a shelf, a jacket slung over a chair back. Lamps casting warm light at angles. No overturned furniture. No obvious sign of intrusion.

A framed poster of Adil's book cover - one of the early prints, the only one he'd allowed himself - hung slightly crooked on one wall.

"Study," the inspector said.

The corridor to the room was short. The door stood half-open, mocking.

Mehul's chest tightened, a physical pull, as if someone had hooked a finger behind his sternum.

He pushed the door the rest of the way.

Adil was on the floor beside the study table, on his side, one arm flung at an odd angle, palm open. His face was streaked with blood, an almost dried trail running from behind his ear along his jaw. The blood had pooled underneath his neck in a ragged halo and soaked into the edge of the rug, turning the beige threads into a dark maroon.

His eyes were closed.

For a second, Mehul's brain did not register movement.

The inspector moved faster than thought. He dropped to his knees, fingers reaching to Adil's neck, then shifting to his chest.

“He’s breathing!” he shouted, his voice pitched to carry. *“Saans chal rahi hai!”*

Mehul’s sight tunneled. His ears rang. He noticed, absurdly, that Adil’s slippers were missing. Why was he barefoot?

Then he saw it too. A barely-there rise and fall under the stained T-shirt. Minuscule, but there.

“Ambulance!” someone yelled back toward the hall, though it was already downstairs.

A constable picked up the gun with two fingers, muzzle pointed away, eyebrows raised. It was Mehul’s revolver. A gift to himself from a prosperous year, license acquired through quiet channels, a symbol of having arrived. He had shown it to Adil once, after too many drinks, waving it around with macho stupidity.

Now it lay there like a physical manifestation of every careless decision he’d ever made.

The inspector flicked his glance from the gun to Mehul’s face and back, connecting dots.

“Sab baad mein,” he said. *“Pehle hospital.”*

Two constables slid their hands under Adil’s shoulders and knees, lifting him carefully. His head lolled. Blood dripped in a small, obscene trail, dotting the polished floor as they carried him out. The oxygen he was taking in sounded too quiet.

In the doorway, a woman in a nightie gasped and covered her mouth. Someone whispered, *“Hai Ram, Adil beta...”* The watchman backed away, spine pressing into the opposite wall.

They maneuvered the body down the staircase, the stretcher meeting them halfway when the ambulance attendants came up. Mehul trotted behind them, heart punching his ribs, the stairs narrowing and widening in his vision.

The ambulance doors slammed with a hollow clang. Mehul climbed in without asking permission and sat near Adil's feet, gripping the stretcher to steady himself more than anything else.

Under the harsh interior lights, Adil looked worse.

One nurse pressed gauze against the wound at the back of his neck, the white immediately blooming red. Another cut away fabric around it, hands practiced and impersonal but not unkind.

"*Tdhar*," one said, more to his colleague than to Mehul, indicating the small, blackened hole near the side of the neck. "Exit *piche*. Bullet gone through and through."

He began wrapping bandages in tight circles, layers building like an urgent turban.

"Major artery?" the second nurse asked.

The first peered closer, fingers quick but cautious.

"Looks like it missed jugular," he murmured. "If it had cut that, he wouldn't be here."

Mehul, who had been hearing words but not making sense of them, latched onto that one.

"Missed what?" he demanded. "*Kya bol rahe ho?*"

The nurse glanced up, eyes flicking between duty and empathy.

“He shot himself,” he said plainly. “Bullet went through the neck and came out at the back. It’s bad, but it missed the major blood vessels. If we can stop the bleeding and give him enough blood fast, he has a chance. But...nerves. Spinal cord. We’ll know later.”

Mehul wanted to be sick.

He wanted to shout at Adil, shake him awake, ask him what kind of idiot aimed for his neck and not his head. He wanted to take that gun and throw it in every river in the country.

Instead, he sat, fingers digging into the cold metal edge of the stretcher, and watched the city smear itself against the ambulance windows in streaks of orange and white as they sped through.

Lilavati’s emergency entrance was a fluorescent mouth waiting to swallow them.

The gurney wheels rattled loudly as they pushed Adil out of the vehicle and into the corridor. Hospital smell hit Mehul - antiseptic, stale bedding, boiled rice, fear.

A nurse tried to wave him back. “Sir, *yahin tak. Aap wait kijiye. Patient ko OT mein le jaana hai.*”

He stopped at the invisible line, powerless as the stretcher rolled away.

The waiting area outside emergency was a country of its own.

There were people in all kinds of clothes, sitting in all kinds of postures, united by the same strained eyes. An old man in a Gandhi cap snored softly in a plastic chair, chin on chest. A young woman paced with her phone pressed to her ear,

whispering fiercely. A child lay curled on her mother's lap, both asleep.

Mehul stood.

He tried sitting. His body rejected the idea, restless, pressing him back onto his feet. His strides were short and agitated - from the wall to the vending machine and back, from the reception to the "No Entry" doors and back.

The clock on the wall moved its hands with malicious slowness.

He replayed things he'd said to Adil in the last few months. Things he hadn't. Messages he'd ignored. Calls he'd answered mechanically. Parties where Adil had looked like he was present, and Mehul had let that be enough.

He replayed the moment he had taken out the revolver in Adil's living room weeks ago, showing it off like some half-baked gangster, handing it to him to "feel the weight". The way Adil had turned it over in his hands, thumb on the safety catch, mouth pulled into an appreciative grimace.

At some point, his mind, desperate for distraction, slid sideways into an unrelated memory.

He wondered now who had promised Adil something similar, and what had broken when that promise cracked.

The "OT" door swung open with a squeak.

A doctor emerged, mask pulled down, hair slightly mussed, eyes tired but alert. He scanned the waiting area.

"Adil ke saath kaun hai?" he called.

Mehul reached him in four strides. *"Main,"* he said. *"Woh..."*

He didn't finish.

The doctor put a hand on his shoulder. It was a reflex gesture, practiced.

"Patient is stable for now," he said. "He lost a lot of blood. We've transfused. We've cleaned and closed the wound. He is still sedated, will take some time to fully wake. We can only check for the nerve damage once he is fully awake. For the moment, his life is not in immediate danger."

The phrase landed heavily: not in immediate danger.

It left room for all other kinds of danger.

"*Main dekh sakta hoon?*" Mehul asked, voice rough.

"*Thodi der ke liye,*" the doctor said. "Don't try to talk. Let him rest."

The room Adil lay in hummed with controlled activity. Machines beeped calmly. An oxygen cylinder stood like a silent guardian at the head of the bed.

Adil looked smaller on the hospital bed.

He wasn't a huge guy to begin with, but stripped of his own clothes, wrapped in thin hospital fabric, he seemed...reduced. An oxygen mask covered half his face, fogging with each shallow breath. Bandages wrapped his neck in a thick collar. The IV lines pierced the back of his hands, taped down.

Mehul approached slowly. At the edge of the bed, he stopped, sudden tears blurring his view.

"*Tu bhi na...*" he murmured, fighting with himself. The room smelt of saline and antiseptic, and something metallic.

He reached out and gripped Adil's forearm gently, above the tape. The skin was cooler than usual but living.

"Bola tha na tere ko," he whispered, his face bending closer. *"Mat karna koi chutiyaap."*

His throat tightened. Words got stuck. The emotion he usually kept at arm's length cracked its way through.

"Itna hi akelapan lag raha tha toh phone utha ke bol deta," he went on, voice breaking. *"Ek baar toh mere se bhi help maang leta. Hum kisi ko dhundh ke goli maar dete. Par khud ko kyun?"*

The last syllable fractured. He swallowed the noise that wanted to come out, embarrassed even in front of an unconscious man and two indifferent machines.

He pulled the chair up then, sat, elbows on the bed, head near Adil's hand. His own eyes burned. At some point, exhausted by adrenaline and worry, he dozed off, chin on his forearms, the steady beep-beep-beep of the monitor the lullaby.

A nurse's hand on his shoulder shook him awake.

"Sir," she said softly. *"Patient responsive hai. Doctor aa rabe hain."*

Adil's eyes were open when he sat up.

Not fully focused, still hazy, but there. The doctor held a torch, flicking the beam into each pupil, watching them constrict.

"Can you hear me?" he asked. *"Naam bata sakte ho?"*

Adil's lips moved under the plastic. The first attempt came out as a muffled garble. He tried again.

"Adil," he managed.

The doctor tapped his shoulder, then forearm, then legs.

"Yahan feel ho raha hai?" he asked after each tap.

Adil nodded. Small movements, but clear.

The doctor straightened, relief loosening his posture.

"Tob abhi tak sab theek lag raha hai," he said. "No sign of paralysis. Reflexes normal. I must say, your friend is very lucky."

"Luck ka kya karega jab dimag aise kaam karta hai," Mehul muttered, but the anger had softened with relief. *"Phir bhi... thanks, doctor."*

When the doctor left, the room exhaled. It was just the two of them and the machines now.

Mehul took Adil's hand properly this time, fingers around his, thumb along his knuckles. The oxygen mask turned Adil's faint smile into a distorted, foggy thing, but it was unmistakably a smile.

He squeezed.

By eight in the morning, the administrative side of reality arrived in neatly ironed uniform.

The inspector from the night before walked in, carrying a notebook and the kind of face that had already rehearsed a speech.

"Kaise ho, Mehul Bhai?" he asked, perfunctory.

"Better than last night," Mehul said, glancing at the bed. Adil was asleep again, the sedation pulling him under in waves.

The inspector took a breath, as if bracing himself.

“Dekhiye, preliminary jo scene tha wahan...,” he began. “Pistol mila bedroom mein. Door andar se locked. Koi forced entry nahi. Struggle ka sign nahi. Lagta hai clear case of suicide attempt hai.”

The words hung there, clinical and damning.

They both knew what an official suicide attempt meant in this city: hospital forms ticked differently, police files marked with a certain code, newspapers occasionally smelling a story, neighbours whispering, parents collapsing under the weight of blame, insurance claims getting complicated, visas, future opportunities, all of it.

“Revolver...,” the inspector continued, “licence kiske naam pe hai?”

“Mere naam pe,” Mehul said. He did not bother denying that.

“Woh Adil ke flat mein kaise?” the inspector asked.

Here, Mehul lied.

“I’d gone there the other night,” he said. “Babut peeli thi. Probably dropped it. I didn’t realise. Mera bhi dimaag udta rehتا hai kabhi kabhi.”

The inspector’s expression didn’t change much. He had heard such casual admissions before. It was plausible. It was also convenient.

“Dekhiye, suicide case hai,” he said, lowering his voice slightly. “FIR to banana padega. Yeh sab documented hota hai. FIR ke bina hum log aage nahi badh sakte. Magistrate ko report jati hai. Control room mein entry hoti hai.”

Mehul’s response was immediate, a reflexive “no” thrown like a hand up in front of a punch.

“FIR *nabi banega*,” he said. “*Bas*.”

“*Arre, Mehul Bhai*,” the inspector said, hands spreading in a practiced, helpless gesture. “*Main bhi aapke jaise hi aadmi hoon. Samajh sakta hoon. Par system hota hai. Agar hum aise hi case ko....*”

“*Kitna lagega?*” Mehul cut in.

Volume had crept into his voice. A nurse glanced over; he caught himself, lowered the tone but not the intent.

The inspector looked around, making sure no unnecessary ears were close.

“*Yeh thoda complicated hai*,” he said. “*Case control room main recorded hai. Magistrate bhi dekh rabe honge. Akele meri marzi nabi chalegi. Sabko khilana padega. FIR nabi banne ka matlab hai file ko thanda karna, likhna ke goli accident se chali, safai karte waqt ya kuch aisa. Uske liye....*,” he paused, doing the mental math, “*5-6 toh lagenge hi.*”

“*5-6 lakh*,” Mehul repeated, as much to himself as to the inspector.

“*Aap apne bo, itne mein karwa dunga main*,” the inspector said, trying to sell the generosity.

“*Shaam ko aana*,” Mehul said. “*Baaki baat tab.*”

He didn’t flinch at the figure. He had moved larger sums with less moral pressure, bailing out other people’s mistakes because it kept business smoother. This time, the paperwork he wanted to bury had his friend’s blood on it.

There were people he didn’t want reading “Adil – suicide attempt” typed neatly in some register.

Adil's parents, for one. Old, small-town, the kind who still thought depression meant "weakness of character." Rhea, wherever she was, whose internal scars did not need this headline. The reading public, always hungry to turn someone's pain into content.

If money could make the system look the other way, he would pay. He would worry about his own bank balance later.

Certain kinds of guilt, he knew, were cheaper when shared among many people. This one, he would carry mostly alone.

Two days later, when the hospital finally discharged Adil with a stack of prescriptions and a list of warnings, the city felt too sharp.

The light in the parking lot hurt his eyes. The car seat felt strange under his still-weak body, as if he'd forgotten how to sit.

"*Ghar pe ja rabe hain mere,*" Mehul said as he eased him into the passenger seat.

"No," Adil said, voice rough where the tubes had been. "*Apne ghar. My flat...*"

"*Flat pe tu nahi jaayega abhi,*" Mehul interrupted. "Simple."

Adil turned his head with care, winced. "*Mehul Bhai, main theek hoon,*" he insisted. "*Doctor ne kaha na, nerves okay. I just need rest.*"

"Exactly," Mehul said. "*Aur rest tu akela flat mein nahi karega. Lonavala chal.*"

Adil stared out of the window at the hospital gate, at the auto-rickshaws jostling for fares, at the samosa seller ignoring the ambulance siren.

“You want me to become your paying guest?” he tried to joke.

“Tu mera guest hai. Payment too main nikalwa hi lunga tujhse,” Mehul said, half-laughing. *“Doctor ne bhi bola hai, akela mat chhodna. And frankly, main bhi apni revolver ke saath ek psycho writer ko city mein chhod ke comfortable nahi hoon. Farmhouse. Pahad. Fresh air. Yoga. Mera bad body. Tu, mera patient aur therapist dono.”*

It took a few rounds of persuasion. Adil’s resistance was more habit than conviction. He had clung so hard to solitude, believing it was the only way to contain his mess, that accepting company now felt like betrayal of his own script.

But the thought of going back to that flat, to that bedroom, that rug made his stomach churn.

“All right,” he said finally, voice a little thinner than he’d have liked. “Temporary. Few weeks.”

“Few months,” Mehul corrected. “Minimum three.”

Adil didn’t argue that last bit aloud. The car pulled away from the hospital and merged into traffic. The city moved around them, oblivious, as it always did.

The farmhouse sat on the edge of Lonavala like it was pretending it wasn’t rich.

The land around it sloped gently down to where the hills began their more serious ascent. Mango trees marked the border in a loose, uneven line. A gravel driveway looped from the gate to the front steps, cracked in places where weeds had decided nobody minded.

The house itself sprawled more wide than tall, whitewashed walls and green-tinted windows, verandas running along two

sides. From the front, it looked like a weekend retreat. From the back, where the land dropped away to reveal tiered fields and distant waterfalls, it felt like a small kingdom.

Adil moved through it like someone visiting a relative's house he hadn't seen since childhood - familiar enough to not be formal, unfamiliar enough to feel like he needed permission to touch things.

Days bled into each other at first.

He slept at odd hours, showered when Mehul pushed him, ate because someone put food in front of him. His dreams were noisy - gunshots, staircases, strangers' faces. His waking thoughts were fragmented, hopping from Rhea's last look to cash flows to book reviews to old conversations where he had been more arrogant than he could stomach remembering.

The wound on his neck healed from gruesome to ugly to an unremarkable deep line. His hair grew long enough to cover it, the hairs hiding the scar but not the memory.

One morning, a few weeks in, the sky was clear, the mist late, the air lighter. Adil sat in a cane easy chair in the garden, his legs stretched out, a glass of orange juice sweating on the armrest. A straw poked out, Mehul's overprotective insistence that he not tilt his head too much.

Mehul had decided this was the day he was going to master "forward bend".

He stood on a yoga mat in shorts and a loose T-shirt, a man with a body built more by office chairs and business lunches than by exercise. He planted his feet hip-width apart, straightened his spine with exaggerated seriousness, then hinged at the waist, arms reaching toward his toes.

His fingers struggled somewhere around his shins.

He grunted, exhaled loudly, pushed a little more. The strain on his hamstrings was visible on his face.

“Saans chhodo, Mehul Bhai,” Adil called, amused. *“Oxygen pe bhi jaldi mat karo.”*

“Tu chup reh,” Mehul puffed. He went for one ambitious push.

His balance betrayed him. His hands slipped, his centre of gravity tilting. He rolled over onto his side with a surprised noise, ending up on his back, staring at the sky.

Adil snorted, then clapped a hand over his mouth, trying to be polite. It didn't work. The laugh came out anyway, sharp, then rolling.

Mehul shifted onto his elbow and glared.

“Bobot bassi aa rahi hai?” he said. “Look at yourself before you laugh at me, sucking your bloody damn food through a plastic straw.”

Adil couldn't stop grinning.

“You know what's funnier? It's that we both did it to ourselves. You ate more than you could digest, and I ate what I couldn't.”

Mehul snorted, but a smile crept into the corner of his mouth.

“Even that bullet couldn't take out the assholiness from you, asshole.”

He sat up, cross-legged on the mat, hands resting on his knees. The laughter settled into a softer curve on both their faces.

“So,” he said after a moment, tone shifting. “Really. How are you? And don't give me metaphors. Plain Hindi.”

Adil looked out at the hills, the way they rose and fell, their green changing shade as clouds passed.

“It’s complicated,” he said. “On some days, it feels like I’m watching someone else’s drama. Like I’m outside my own life. On other days, it’s like every mistake I’ve ever made is sitting in this chair with me.”

He paused.

“It’s not that I regret...attempting,” he went on, the word awkward in his mouth. “Regret is the wrong word. At that time, it felt...logical. Like a conclusion. I’d been thinking about it for months. Planning it. It wasn’t drunken impulse. It was...an answer to a question I’d been asking.”

He swallowed, throat dry.

“But now that it didn’t work,” he said, “I don’t think I’ll try that path again. It feels...closed. I can’t explain it better. The idea of doing it again feels...boring, honestly. Repetition. And if there’s one thing I hate, it’s repeating myself.”

Mehul blinked, a short huff of unexpected laughter escaping him.

“Only you could describe suicide as ‘boring if repeated,’” he said. *“Tum log writers alag level ka chutiyaap hai.”*

He wiped his face with the end of his T-shirt, then leaned forward.

“Write,” he said simply. “Start again. Whatever. Crap. Scribbles. Just start. *Jo bhi pagalpan hai andar, word form mein nikal.* Right now, your head is like *band-wala system at baraat*, full volume, no clarity.”

“I tried,” Adil said. “In the hospital. Here. I open a notebook and write three lines: ‘I am sad. I am confused. I am useless.’ Then I get bored of myself. I can’t write it all down before I understand it. And I don’t understand it yet. Maybe I need a therapist. Maybe I need a guru. Maybe I just need to walk into a forest.”

“Therapist mil jayega,” Mehul said. “Guru mat dbundb. Guru log extra complications dete hain. Forest ka idea good hai. But akele... main abhi bhi comfortable nahi hoon.”

He stretched his legs, wincing as his hamstrings complained.

“What’s the plan, then?” he asked. “Next step. Apart from making fun of my asanas.”

Adil shrugged, shoulders rising and falling.

“I don’t know,” he said. “That’s the honest answer. I don’t have a five-year plan anymore. I’m still struggling to plan tomorrow’s breakfast. Right now, the only clear thought is: I don’t want to die this month. The rest is...fog.”

Mehul looked at him for a long moment.

“I guess we’re roommates in this fog,” he said. *“Tum apne version ke bankrupt ho, main apne version ke. Dono ka CV impressive lagta hai, actual mein dimaag ki dukaan band hai.”*

A crow, as if offended by the self-pity, landed on the garden light, cocked its head, and let out an enthusiastic caw.

It sounded like commentary.

“Abey chal nikal yahan se,” Mehul snapped, pointing at it. “Saale kaawe bhi content le rabe hain ab.”

The crow hopped once, then flew off. The absurdity of being heckled by a bird outside a farmhouse made Adil look at him reluctantly.

“Tune phone ka scene nahi dekha kya?” Mehul said suddenly. *“Calls thode kam ho gaye hain mere. Bollywood walon ne bhi apna kam shuru kar diya.”*

He told Adil then, properly, about the production house.

How twelve years of building it, choosing films like a shopkeeper who knows which items will move and which will gather dust, had ended in a boardroom where younger, more “creative” partners, backed by newer investors, had gently shown him the door.

How “we respect your contribution” had been followed by “we’re reducing your stake.”

How his insistence on profitability, his nose for numbers, his refusal to back passion projects that had no prayer at the box office, had turned, in their narrative, into “stifling creativity.”

How the same people whose EMIs he had indirectly paid now complained about his “obsession with money.”

He didn’t spare himself in the telling.

“I got greedy too,” he admitted. “I let them take more than twenty percent stakes. I thought, ‘Okay, short-term dilution, long-term gains.’ I wanted the company to be huge, so everyone linked to it could have cars, flats, fancy Maldives holidays. I wanted to be the guy who made that possible. But money has its own loyalty. *Aaj board meeting mein nahi bulaya, kal stake cut kar diya, parson politely bola, ‘Sir, maybe you should not come between nine to seven, it confuses staff.’*”

He looked down at his thick fingers, traced a line in the dust near the edge of his mat.

“I gave them cars as Diwali bonus,” he said quietly. “Who else does that? Where did that money come from? My so-called greed. Now they call it ‘toxicity’. They’re going to tank the company with their art-house dreams. And my name will sink with it. I still regret that *maine Sinha ke sir mein goli nahi maari*. Honestly. *Thoda hi sabi*.”

Adil listened, the weight of this confession different from any hospital-scene guilt. It was the unraveling of a persona he had always seen as indestructible.

“Why didn’t you tell me before?” he asked.

“You were busy trying to delete your own existence, bhai,” Mehul said. “*Kitna drama ek film mein dalte? Tera interval khatam hi nahi ho raha tha*.”

They laughed softly, the sound carrying across the garden and disappearing into the hills.

Time has a strange way of looping.

Almost a month after that conversation, on a morning when the mist had forgotten to show up and the sun came early, Adil stood in front of the farmhouse mirror and looked at himself as if he might see a clue.

He wore a thick, plain full-sleeve shirt, collarless, the kind that could be pulled over anything. Over it, he had layered a half-sleeve check shirt, open. Blue heavy denim sat snug on his hips, ends half-covering brown ankle-length leather boots that had seen years but still had the same strength and comfort.

He tilted his face to the side, watching the line that ran near the back of his neck in the reflection. The wound had closed. The skin had puckered into a deep mark, a permanent, narrow valley. His hair had grown long enough to hide most of it now, but he knew exactly where it was.

On the bed lay an old canvas duffel bag, military green, the kind of thing forgotten in garages and carried through wars. Mehul had found it in the far corner of his own and tossed it at him a week ago.

"Yeh le. Mere dad ka tha. tere trip ke liye perfect," he'd said.

The bag had a round base, lined with leather that had cracked but not withered. The body was sturdy canvas, stained in places with history. The top opening cinched with a cord that ran around it, drawstring style. Pull it tight, and the bag closed around its contents like a fist.

He stuffed in what he thought he needed and what he could bear to carry.

Four or five T-shirts, rolled tight. A windcheater, thin but waterproof. Two extra pairs of underwear, three of socks. In the side pocket, he slid a toothbrush, a small bar of soap, a strip of paracetamol, an old lighter he trusted more than new ones.

He hoisted the bag onto his shoulders. It settled against his back with a familiar, old-military weight.

Outside, the motorcycle waited in the garage.

It was technically Mehul's, bought in a fit of nostalgia for his college days but it had spent more time gathering dust than chasing highways. A Royal Enfield Classic 500, Desert Storm edition, its muted sand colour now further dulled by actual dust.

Adil rolled it out into the driveway, wheels bumping over cracks. He put it on the centre stand and stepped back.

The bike looked like it had been born for exactly this moment.

The teardrop tank, the single seat with its slight dip, the separate pad for the pillion, the wide handlebars that invited you to lean into them. It had the kind of stance that made promises: of distance, of noise, of stories.

He swung the duffel up onto the pillion seat, arranging it lengthwise, and began securing it with bungee cords. The elastic straps stretched with reluctant creaks, then snapped back into place, crisscrossing over the canvas, hooking onto the grab rail and frame in a web.

When he was satisfied that the bag wouldn't fly off at the first pothole, he sat down on the low wall beside it, elbows on his knees, just looking.

The morning light caught the tank, turning its dull paint almost golden. Birds hopped near the cow shed. Somewhere, someone in a neighbouring property played an old Kishore Kumar song on tinny speakers.

Footsteps sounded behind him.

Mehul emerged from the house, two ceramic cups of coffee in hand, each saucerless and filled to the brim. He wore loose track pants and a T-shirt that had seen better days. His hair stuck up at the back.

"Sab ready?" he asked, handing one cup over.

Adil took it, the heat biting his fingers in a way that grounded him.

"More or less," he said.

They stood side by side, looking at the bike like it was a third person in the conversation.

"Goa tak hi?" Mehul asked after a moment. *"Ya aage bhi duniya jeetne ka plan hai?"*

"Pehle Goa pahunchun," Adil said. *"Uske baad dekhte hain. Shayad wahi se wapas aa jaun. Shayad aage nikal jaun.* I don't know."

"Good," Mehul said. "Plans ruin everything."

He took a sip of his own coffee, then added, softer, "If at any point you're stuck - tyre burst, mind burst, *jo bhi - phone kar. I'll send money, men, or memes. Jo zaroori hua."*

Adil smiled around the rim of his cup.

After the coffee, he placed the empties on the garden table and swung a leg over the bike.

He settled in, feeling the weight under him, the familiar, slightly forward lean. He adjusted the bag behind him, making sure it didn't press too much into his lower back. His hands found the grips easily. A tank bag Mehul had bought along with the motorcycle but never used sat right on top of the tank. Adil slapped it in place the way it would fit right between his legs.

Mehul eyed him critically.

"The look suits you," he said. *"Bas cowboy hat missing hai. Baaki full filmi lag raha hai. 'Man on a mission' poster type."*

Adil snorted, then lowered his foot to the kick starter. He gave it a solid, practiced jab.

The engine coughed once, then caught. A deep, throaty thump filled the morning, vibrating through the tank, up his arms, into

his chest. The bike felt awake in a way it hadn't when it was just being pushed around in the garage.

"Let it warm up for a bit," Mehul shouted over the sound. Adil nodded, fingers resting lightly on the clutch. He closed his eyes for a brief second, letting the vibration travel up his spine.

For a couple of heartbeats, the weight of what he was about to do pressed on him.

He was about to ride out alone, no convoy, no backup car, no fixed schedule, no bookings. Just him, a bike, some cash, and a brain that had tried to kill him not too long ago.

A million things could go wrong. He could be robbed. He could crash. The bike could break down in the middle of nowhere. He could have a panic attack on an empty road. He could meet terrible people.

He could also, he realised, meet decent ones.

He turned his head.

Mehul stood with his arms folded, coffee cup balanced on one palm, grinning. His eyes, though, carried all the anxiety he wasn't speaking.

He gave Adil a thumbs-up. "*Adios, chutiya!*" he called suddenly, unable to resist at least one absurd send-off.

Adil burst out laughing, the tension cracking. He raised his hand, half-wave, half-salute.

He pulled the bike off the centre stand, soles digging briefly into the ground. The gentle shake as the weight redistributed was oddly satisfying.

He clicked down into first gear and eased the clutch out.

The bike moved.

Lonavala fell away at a speed that wasn't fast but felt relentless.

The big bungalows with their manicured lawns passed first, their high compound walls and security cameras watching him go. Then the smaller houses with shops under them - barbers, cigarette stalls, medical stores. Then the more rural stretch, fields and small temples and kids in uniforms trudging to school.

He found the main road easily; the one Mehul had told him to take toward the expressway.

At the junction, he paused.

Blue boards announced "Pune / Mumbai Expressway" in one direction, "Old Highway" in another. The expressway glowed with promise - smooth, wide, fast.

He knew bikes weren't allowed on it.

He also knew he could probably ride a few kilometres before someone tried to stop him. He hesitated, the old temptation to break rules for convenience raising its head.

A pair of cops on a patrolling bike noticed his confusion and pulled up.

"*Kidhar jaana hai?*" one asked, eyeing the fully loaded Classic, the city-boy face, the nervous scan.

"Goa," Adil said.

The cop frowned, then pointed. "*Expressway se nahi jaa sakte,*" he said. "*Do-wheeler allowed nahi hai. Old highway se jao. Yahan se seedha, phir right ka cut hai. Ratnagiri side. Wahi se goa ka rasta mil jayega.*"

“Thank you,” Adil said, genuinely grateful for the interruption to his indecision.

He turned away from the expressway. The choice felt symbolic in a way he was too sensible to talk about. No shortcuts. The long way.

The old highway welcomed him with more potholes and more character.

At first, he tried to ride with the kind of cautiousness that bordered on fear. He kept speeds low. He checked his mirrors more often than necessary. Every truck overtaking him felt personal. The smoke from diesel exhaust pipes stung his eyes, the smell burying itself in his clothes.

The sun climbed, turning the air dense. His shirt clung to his back under the jacket. His palms grew slick inside his gloves. His butt went from comfortably settled to numb within an hour.

The ghats began.

Hairpin bends carved into the hillside, one after another. Gravel gathered at the edges where careless drivers had thrown their vehicles into the curve without caring. Water seeped in small trickles from rock faces, making patches of road treacherous.

Adil took the first few bends almost too slowly, feet flirting with the idea of touching the ground. Trucks honked behind him, impatient, their drivers much more familiar with the dance of weight and momentum.

He realised quickly that over-caution was its own danger.

Keeping one foot hovering, hands too tight on the bars, attention split between too many things - this made the bike wobble more. Every bend became a negotiation with fear instead of a conversation with the road.

He forced himself to commit.

Both feet up. Knees hugging the tank. Leaning slightly into the turn instead of stiffening against it. Throttle smooth, not jerky. His body started understanding what riders always talked about: that balance didn't come from tensing up but from trusting movement.

At one point, after a series of curves taken cleanly, he felt almost...good.

He wasn't fast. He wasn't doing any cinematic leans. But there was a flow, however brief.

Then, of course, it went wrong.

The turn didn't look any sharper than the last few. A mild left, road sloping slightly upward. He entered it at about the same speed he'd used before.

His front wheel hit a patch of loose dirt where some truck's tyre had crumbled the edge of the tarmac.

The bike's weight shifted unexpectedly.

In slow motion, he felt the machine tilt further left than he'd planned, his instinct making him grab the front brake harder than he should have.

The tyre lost what little grip it had.

The bike slid.

For a fraction of a second, his mind went blank. Then time sped back up.

The motorcycle toppled sideways, metal scraping on rough road, the crash echoing off the hillside. His right leg went under the bike; boot pressed between exhaust and asphalt. His left elbow scraped, the leather of his jacket catching some of it, his skin the rest.

He ended up on his side, dust rising around him, one leg pinned.

The world paused.

He lay there, his heart hammering, breath shallow. Pain arrived in successive waves - the sharp sting at his elbow, the dull ache in his hip, the trapped throbbing around his ankle.

The bike's engine had cut out on impact. The sudden absence of its steady thump made the silence loud.

"Fantastic idea, genius," he said out loud, voice shaky. "Road trip to fix your mental health. *Babut hi smart move.*"

He tried to move his leg. The boot was jammed under the weight of the fallen bike. He could wiggle his toes. Good sign. But he couldn't pull the foot free.

He twisted awkwardly, trying to get leverage. The bike barely shifted.

The road was empty in both directions. No cars, no trucks, no honking. No one to see his current version of heroism lying on the ghat road, pinned by his own good intentions.

He laughed once, a short, humourless bark, then winced as his elbow protested.

He reached into his jacket pocket, fingers fumbling, and pulled out a cigarette.

If he was going to wait, he might as well do it properly.

He lit it, the flame trembling slightly, and took a drag. Smoke filled his lungs, tasted like dust and cheap tobacco and resignation. He lay on the edge of the road with his head resting on the tarmac.

A truck's engine growled in the distance.

He craned his neck, saw it appear around the bend - a bright-painted beast, loaded, moving carefully. He raised his free arm and waved.

The driver's eyes were on the road, on the bend, on the edges that could kill him if he misjudged them. He didn't see a man in dusty jacket lying at the roadside. Or if he did, it didn't register as something that required stopping.

The truck screamed past, hot wind and diesel breath buffeting him. His raised arm dropped back down.

He lay back, head on the rough tarmac, and stared at the side bank.

Small bushes clung to the slope, leaves dusty. Little white flowers dotted some of them, absurdly delicate in the midst of rock and road and exhaust.

"It's not that bad to ask for help," he muttered. "Maybe that's the lesson for today."

Time stretched. The sun climbed. Heat sank into his clothes. The back of his neck prickled.

Finally, after what his watch later told him was about thirty minutes but felt longer, an old Bolero emerged from the lower curve.

This driver saw him.

The vehicle slowed, stopped. Three men got out, all looking like they had been on the road for hours too - faces browned by sun, clothes dusty, eyes sharp but not unkind.

"Arre bhai, kya ho gaya?" one called, already walking toward him.

"Slip ho gaya," Adil said, stating the obvious. *"Pair neeche phas gaya hai."*

Two of them grabbed the bike, one at the handlebar, one at the rear, and lifted. The third slid his hands under Adil's shoulders and pulled him gently away, dragging him clear.

The bike came upright with a grunt, its weight redistributed onto the stand. Adil's boot came free. He flexed his ankle, winced, but could stand.

"Sab theek?" one man asked.

"Lagta hai," Adil said, dusting his jeans and jacket. The jeans at his right knee had torn, a small patch of skin underneath scraped raw. His elbow burned under the fabric.

He checked the bike: handlebar slightly twisted, mirror askew, footpeg scuffed, but nothing obviously broken.

He turned to the men, lowering his head slightly in gratitude.

"Thank you, yaar," he said. *"Dil se. Agar aap log nahi hote toh main aaj yabhi 'sun-tan' kar raba hota."*

They smiled, shook their heads.

He reached into his pocket, pulled out some cash, tried to press it on them. They refused immediately, almost offended.

“Chhodo na, bhai,” the oldest said. “Kal ko hum phasenge toh koi aur nikaal lega. Road pe sab ek jaise hote hain.”

They talked briefly - where he was headed, where they were coming from. Then they climbed back into their Bolero, waved, and rumbled off, disappearing around the bend.

Adil adjusted the handlebar with his weight, stamping the front wheel between his knees until it felt straight. He kicked the engine back to life, listening for odd sounds. It sounded normal.

He resumed the ride.

His knee hurt. His elbow hurt more. His pride hurt most.

The accident didn't scare him away from the road. It annoyed him.

It made him question what he was doing, yes - but not in the “go back home” way. More in the “is this actually helping, or am I adding new injuries to old ones” way.

By half-past twelve, his stomach added its own complaint. He pulled into a dhaba tucked into a wide curve of the road, shaded by a line of trees. Four trucks and a handful of cars were already parked outside, their drivers and passengers clustered around tables.

He took off his helmet, ran his fingers through sweat-damp hair, and walked to the wash basin near the entrance. The water ran lukewarm over his hands. He splashed his face, the sting in his elbow flaring when it bent.

Inside, the dhaba was all plastic and steel and stained tiles. He chose a table near the counter.

“Egg bhurji, dal, roti,” he told the waiter.

As he waited, he watched.

At one table, a group of four youngsters - probably on some college road trip - laughed loudly, cracking jokes, their phones on the table lighting up with messages. They tossed water at each other, annoyed the waiter, filmed it, made content.

At another, three men in formal shirts ate quietly, heads bent, talking in low tones about something that didn't seem to have much joy in it.

Outside, near a puncture repair shack, a man wrestled with a giant truck tyre, his hands black with grease, his face set in a nothing-new expression.

None of it matched whatever vague, romantic idea he'd had about what the road would feel like. Not that he could have articulated that idea before leaving. Somewhere in his head, he'd imagined something...cleaner. More cinematic. He didn't know what he'd expected. But it wasn't exactly this mundanity.

The food arrived, oily and hot and perfectly acceptable. He ate mechanically, aware of his own tiredness more than the taste.

When he finished, he went to the counter, paid, nodded, stepped back into the heat.

Sitting on the bike, he lit a cigarette. Smoke curled into the midday air. It didn't make him feel wiser, but it made the next few minutes easier.

At around two-thirty, he pushed off again.

By then, the bandana under his open-face helmet was drenched. Sweat streamed down his temples. He was grateful for the choice of helmet. A full-face might have been safer, but he knew himself well enough to know that feeling like his head was inside a baking tiffin box would have made him more reckless, not less.

The road unspooled. Trees shifted from thick to sparse to thick again. The sun moved from over his head to just behind his shoulder, casting long shadows that occasionally fell straight into his eyes, even through sunglasses.

He noticed something.

The more tired his body became, the sharper his focus got.

His mind, which at home would ping-pong between ten regrets in ten seconds, now narrowed to the narrowing road, to the timing of his shifts, to the way light flashed off a truck's side before it passed him.

The world outside still tried to seduce him - the way a line of palm trees against a blue sky looked like something from a postcard, the glimpse of a far-off river, the sudden appearance of a shrine painted bright orange against rock. But his eyes kept coming back to asphalt and its immediate edges.

For brief stretches, the boundary between him and the bike felt porous.

His thighs gripped the tank just right. His hips moved with the curves, guiding the machine with tiny shifts. His arms loosened. The bike stopped feeling like something he was riding and more like an extension of himself - an animal he'd figured out how to talk to without words.

Those moments didn't last long. They didn't have to. They were enough to show him why people rode for reasons that had nothing to do with destinations.

As evening approached, the countryside stirred.

Tea stalls emerged like mushrooms at junctions. Cookfires sent up thin plumes of smoke. The smell of frying something - always something - skated across the road: pakoras, vadas, bhajiyas.

He pulled up at one.

The stall was basic. A makeshift counter made from planks, a large *kadhai* of oil bubbling over a stove, glass jars with biscuits, a tin can of sugar, two benches.

As he took off his gloves, his brain, primed by too many hygiene horror videos, showed him slow-motion visuals of reused oil, dirty hands, flies. He glanced at the oil, which did, admittedly, look like it had a past.

"Ek vada pav, ek chai," he found himself saying anyway.

His better judgement groaned. His senses cheered.

The vada came wrapped in oil-stained newspaper, the pav sliced, a smear of green chutney, a smear of red. It was hot enough to burn his fingers and his palate. The first bite flooded his mouth with spice and potato and garlic and all the reasons people risk stomach upset in the name of flavour.

He closed his eyes briefly, chewing.

Gluttony, he thought. One of the old sins. If ever there was proof, he was still attached to this world, it was this - willingly scalding his tongue and possibly risking diarrhea tomorrow for a roadside snack made in questionable oil.

The chai, in a small glass, was sweet, strong, and just right.

He stood near the bike, glass in one hand, cigarette in the other, scanning the luggage. The duffel on the back seat had shifted a bit after the fall but still sat secure. The tank bag, where he kept his wallet, cigarettes, and some tools, had slid slightly to one side. He slapped it back into place.

He pressed his boots against the tyres, feeling the sidewalls. They seemed firm enough. He flicked on the headlight, checked the indicators. All working.

It would be dark in an hour. He wouldn't make Goa tonight. He didn't even want to anymore. His body had started sending clear messages about limits.

Belgaum sounded like a reasonable stop.

He rolled into a small highway town as night settled around him, neon signs cutting through the dark. A petrol pump glowed ahead, flanked by a "Hotel Sai Palace" that looked neither like a palace nor particularly devoted to Sai, but it had a generator out front and parking space.

He filled the tank first. Watching the numbers climb on the pump gave him a weird sense of security. Petrol was potential. It meant he could leave, go, continue, turn.

At the hotel reception, a tired-looking man slid a register toward him.

"Single room," Adil said. "One night."

The room they gave him was modest but clean enough.

A bed with a firm mattress, a side table, a plastic chair, a TV that he had no intention of turning on. The bathroom was dry, the bucket and mug in place, the tiles older but not mouldy.

The fan hummed. The AC rattled like it had asthma, but when he tried it, cold air did emerge after a while.

He dropped his duffel on the floor, kicked off his boots, and headed straight for the shower.

The water, even if only lukewarm, felt like luxury on dust-sticky skin. He watched the grime swirl down the drain, grey and brown. His elbow protested at the touch of water on the scrape; he hissed through his teeth and let it sting.

Wrapped in a towel, he ordered food over the room phone: dal, sabzi, some rotis, nothing fancy, everything heavy. The voice on the other end said “twenty minutes” in a tone that suggested it might be forty.

He didn’t mind.

He sat on the chair, the towel around his waist, his body humming with fatigue. He pulled his journal from the side pocket of his duffel. The notebook had a plain black cover, edges worn from being carried more than used.

He flipped it open.

Blank pages stared back. The last entry was months old, some half-hearted notes from before the hospital, from a time when he was still trying to pretend, he was fine.

He clicked his pen. The noise sounded louder than the fan.

He stared at the wall for a long time, words waving at him from a distance but refusing to step closer. Eventually, like a small, stubborn trickle, they started.

He wrote.

"The whole idea wasn't entirely idiotic. At least that's what I'm telling myself, so I don't turn around and ride back to Lonavala tonight.

Travelling alone felt necessary. Not glamorous. Not romantic. Just...required. I wanted distance from the poison brewing in my own head. I can't hang off Mebul bbai's shoulder forever; I'll pull him down with me. I need to find something that is mine to do, something that doesn't involve killing myself or hiding in his guest room.

Right now, the only 'purpose' I can summon is: run. Run from the demons shouting in my skull. From the apartment with the bullet hole memory. From every room where I've rehearsed the same arguments with people who are no longer present.

No one is coming to rescue me. Not Rhea. Not some enlightened guru. Not a therapist who reads three letters and hands me a solution. And I'm not going anywhere either if I keep doing what I've been doing these last twelve months, looping the same regrets like a bad playlist.

I have to do the boring work: fix myself, or at least stop actively breaking myself. Look at all the wrong turns. Look at the parts of my life I've edited out of the narrative because they make me look worse. There is more to the story than the greatest hits I've been playing on repeat. I know this in theory. In practice, I'm still scratching the surface.

I honestly don't know if this ride will help. Maybe it's just a more scenic way of delaying therapy. Maybe it's an expensive distraction. All I know is that the only time my mind stops sprinting back to the sources of pain is when my body is busy moving through space. When the road demands my focus, the past loses its grip for a few minutes. For someone like me, 'a few minutes' feels like a holiday.

I'm not sure where I'm headed. Geographically, the answer is 'Goa, maybe', and after that, blank. Emotionally, the answer is more vague. I'm not sure of anything: what I want, who I am without the book and the

mistakes and the drama, whether there is any version of me that isn't defined by the worst thing I did.

For now, the plan is embarrassingly simple: ride, eat, sleep. Repeat. Not forever. Just for now. Maybe, if I keep moving long enough, some other plan will appear that doesn't involve putting a gun to my own neck.

If it doesn't, at least I'll have seen some new highways before I loop back to the same questions."

There was a knock.

"Sir, *khana*," came a voice.

He closed the journal, the ink still wet, and set it aside.

Dinner was as forgettable as lunch had been: salt, oil, carbs. It filled the hole.

After eating, he turned off the light, lay on his back, and stared into the dim ceiling fan.

His body ached. His elbow throbbed. His ankle murmured reminders of the day's fall. His eyes burned with the residue of sun and dust.

He wasn't sure if anything had changed between waking up in Lonavala and lying here in a Belgaum hotel. The same brain lived in his skull. The same scars sat under his beard.

But the day had been spent moving, and in those hours of movement, his mind had not been able to sit quite so comfortably in the usual corner of pain.

That felt like something.

He closed his eyes.

Sleep took him quicker than analysis could.

N



The electricity had died some time ago. Adil's neck was slick with sweat, and the ceiling fan above him labored, its metal joints protesting with a loud, rhythmic groan, the sound of an old man struggling for air through a severe throat infection. It was clear the hotel's generator was merely a decorative promise; its operation left entirely to the meagre mercies of a few tired inverters. He woke up abruptly, annoyed by the sticky heat, and checked the dark face of the air conditioning unit. Disappointment was a heavy, familiar blanket; he buried his head back into the pillow.

His phone showed the time: 6:30 AM. Though he desperately craved a little more rest, the air was becoming unbearable. After a few minutes wrestling with procrastination and the mounting annoyance of the heat, he conceded defeat and decided to get ready. The silence of the power outage amplified his solitude; there was no one to complain to, no shared moment of frustration, just him against the morning heat.

Stepping out of the hotel, the morning sun hit him with a physical force, blinding and hot, like a rock hurled from the sky. His eyes, still adjusting from the dim room, recoiled violently. He quickly put on his sunglasses, strapped his modest luggage onto the motorcycle, and pulled away.

As he traveled, a small, irrelevant thought crossed his mind: why was the sun hitting his face so squarely when he was theoretically traveling south? The road beneath him was warming rapidly, radiating stored heat, yet the wind, cutting through the early air, remained surprisingly cool. It was still too early for the town to truly come alive. Shops were shuttered, their metal doors pulled down like eyelids. Beyond the rush of a few two-wheelers heading in both directions, the town was preparing, stirring slowly within the privacy of its homes.

A pervasive dryness irritated his nostrils, and the fine dust ensured that he inhaled the raw scent of the earth with every single breath. A dull ache of hunger began in his stomach, but nothing resembling a viable breakfast spot was in sight. Rather than wait aimlessly, he decided that continued motion was the better strategy.

The distinct *vibes* of Goan architecture, foliage, and people began to manifest long before he saw any geographical signposts. The air grew heavier, scented with different spices, and the homes took on brighter, almost Mediterranean hues.

He found himself wondering, with a sudden, restless craving, if he could grab a quick beer on the way. The thought immediately soured. To stop, sit by the side of the road, and

drink a cold beer alone - it felt inherently sad, a confirmation of his current isolation.

He began to contrive absurd ways to mitigate this loneliness, mentally mapping out how he might manage to sip a cold beer while riding. All the ideas were laughably unfeasible, carrying a high chance of spilling more than he'd consume. Contemplating the logistics of "beer-sipping-laced riding" and navigating the unfamiliar route to Anjuna took longer than he expected. By 2:30 PM, he finally arrived at the beach.

It was quiet, almost parched-looking, resembling the slightly dusty, deflated aftermath of a mediocre outdoor festival.

The beach shack Adil booked didn't look promising from the outside, but the interior offered a pleasant surprise: it was clean and cozy. He noted the bathroom's lack of absolute privacy, though he decided, philosophically, that any person taking the trouble to *actually* peep deserved whatever view they got. The entrance had a sturdy door with a proper set of internal locks. The floor was cleanly matted, and the bed to the left was neatly made with fresh sheets. He took a quick inventory, deciding to leave his dusty boots outside. The risk of theft felt like a better alternative than tracking the road grime into this small, clean haven.

Stepping inside, he kept his luggage tucked behind the door and collapsed flat onto the bed. Staring at the ceiling, he allowed himself to admit that the room wasn't *perfect* after all. Cobwebs lined the corners, and old stains marked a history of roof leakage. He flipped on the AC. The air immediately grew lighter, the oppressive humidity receding. He could breathe a little easier now. With his body tired and his back aching from the journey, his awareness of the cottage's flaws, the humidity,

and the roaring shores outside faded. He was carried away by sleep, the indistinct chatter of the world melting away.

By the time he woke, it was 7:00 PM. His head felt heavy, burdened by hunger and dehydration. He could hear faint, squirming young voices chatting and bickering outside his cottage, an irritating reminder of the world's continued movement.

A small group was clustered around three scooters near his cottage, arguing and giggling, perhaps guests in the neighboring unit. He walked toward the little cafe directly opposite his row of cottages and bought a bottle of water and a can of beer. He settled onto the steps of his cottage, facing the sea. He gulped half the water, letting the cold liquid shock his system, and then slowly began sipping his beer.

The darkness had settled. People were emerging from their hotels and shacks. The residue of the afternoon heat was being slowly washed away by the cool sea breeze. The air was a complex, intoxicating mix: salt, sand, sea, and beer, with occasional wafts of marijuana smoke tumbling on the uneven currents.

The arrangement of the small camp was like a cozy, haphazard arrangement: a U-shaped cluster of huts, most serving as cottages. The open end of the 'U' faced the beach. The hut at the north end functioned as the reception and entrance, while the one on the south was the cafe for drinks and light snacks. All the huts surrounded a dirt patch where a few scooters were parked and people sat, chatting or simply idling.

The loud youngsters were still in the middle of their argument, blaming one member for a time and money-wasting idea from

the day. Soon, the topic shifted to their plan for the night. One suggested going back to a hotel to rest; the others were clearly not finished with the day. A girl proposed an "invite-only" beach party in South Goa where she had friends. The idea was shot down instantly; no one wanted an hour-and-a-half scooter ride.

"Why not just go to the **Curlies**, ya?" a boy groaned. "I am in no mood to circle the whole of the fucking Goa just to get a good hit, man."

The others fell silent, a collective moment of contemplation or, perhaps, disapproval. There was no way to tell. Adil continued to sip his beer, studying the quality of their silence. Moments later, they mumbled a collective affirmation. Curlies it was.

"What about you, 'Oldman'? You wanna party-party?"

She was looking directly at Adil. She raised her left hand, moving it in a playful, undulating wave, and offered a cheeky wink, her tongue flicking out briefly.

Adil shook his head with a slight smile and took a sip of his beer.

"Should have gone to Rishikesh to meditate," she teased, moving slightly where she stood. She took a long, slow drag from a slim white cigarette and winked again.

Adil found himself staring, momentarily trapped. She wore a septum ring, a small steel ball dangling from the cartilage, not the usual nostril piercing. Her complexion was dusky, her dark skin glowing like polished bronze in the ambient light. Beads woven into her left - side locks stood out vividly as she let her

hair swing loose. *How old was she?* Adil wondered, the question a subtle, internal ache.

She wore a black, deep-necked, sleeveless tank top. Delicate jewellery, silver or steel, decorated her neck, shining faintly, much like the chrome on Adil's motorcycle. Her eyes had an intriguing oriental slit, contrasted by a sharp nose. Her upper lip was a little thinner than her lower, a feature that complimented her defined cheekbones every time she smiled.

He caught himself staring for far too long, the scrutiny bordering on the inappropriate. He quickly averted his gaze, looking at the beer bottle in his hand.

Meera, as he would learn her name to be, noted his hesitation, looked down, and smiled a private, knowing smirk. The air around him suddenly felt heavy with the weight of years and the crushing sense of loneliness that his motorcycle trip was supposed to have cured, but had only amplified. He watched a group laugh, a shared, easy moment that he had not experienced in months, and felt a profound gulf separate him from the simple joy of connection.

Adil was absolutely not in the mood for a crowded club; his desire was to sit next to the ocean and slowly sip his beer.

A couple of hours later, he was doing just that. He was sitting on the beach, his beer nearly finished. A few youngsters settled near him, spreading a bedsheet on the sand. They sat, danced a little, and smoked. Initially, it was a minor annoyance, but soon, Adil began to enjoy the mood. The music from a small boom box was present but not intrusive, a gentle pulse. The house music seemed to sync perfectly with the loud, rhythmic crash of the waves.

Watching them dance, having fun, and simply *being* together, a strange feeling of comfort washed over him. He had not seen anyone's face other than Mehul bhai's for a couple of months, let alone conversed easily. He felt awkward, a little rusty, but he strangely liked the company.

The hours passed. The group next to him had moved into a different zone, sitting in comfortable silence, staring out at the sea. Radiohead's 'melancholy' notes provided the perfect backdrop. Adil checked his phone. It was almost 9 o'clock, and he was hungry.

Scanning the shoreline behind him, he could make out two or three shacks, their tables mostly empty, at the edge of the beach. He got up and began to walk. The sand was too difficult with slippers on, so he kicked them off, holding them in his hand. Walking barefoot was a fresh, grounding sensation. The wet sand tickled his soles, and his toes dug pleasantly into the cool earth with each step.

After a short walk, he reached the shacks. He was facing a sand-colored stone statue, perhaps a crude mermaid's face. Two shacks stood on either side. He chose the one with fewer people and a larger bar, the one on the left.

He sat down and ordered a **King's Premium**, Goa's local beer, as the waiter informed him. When the beer arrived, he asked for the food menu and couldn't help but notice the name **Curlie's** boldly printed at the top. *The kids must have been disappointed and left*, he thought wryly. The bar area felt deserted, emptier than a church on a Monday. The music was doing little to lift the atmosphere. He ordered fried prawns and a plate of garlic bread.

He watched the few people on the beach: walkers, talkers, and a few bored hawkers selling Maggi and cigarettes. Slowly, he sipped his beer, letting himself melt into the rhythm of the waves. It was calm, soothing, and perhaps exactly what he had longed for.

Lost in the waves and his own thoughts, Adil lit a cigarette, placing the lighter on the table. Someone picked it up. Before he could turn and look, a voice, startlingly familiar, spoke.

“So you finally decided to party, huh?”

It was the girl with the septum ring.

Adil dramatically looked around the empty shack. “Your definition of ‘party’ is really strange,” he mocked.

She rolled her eyes and effortlessly slipped into the seat next to him. “I am hungry too. What all have you got?” Without waiting for an invitation, she started munching on the prawns and garlic bread like someone who hadn't eaten in days.

The light was significantly better here, allowing him a clearer, more intimate look at her. She had bold **kajal** tracing her eyes, and her hair, which had looked straight back at the camp, was wavy, almost wild.

Adil looked at her and smiled, a genuine, unguarded smile.

When she was done, she wiped her mouth and said, with an air of conspiratorial knowing, “You are in the wrong place, old man.” She grabbed his hand and tugged him up.

Adil paused, stopping long enough to wave at the waiter to pay his bill, but she waved dismissively at the waiter, who simply nodded in response. She dragged him toward the bar. Right next to it was a narrow staircase. He followed her up to the first

floor. The entrance was a heavy, imposing door. As they entered, they faced a second door. He could already hear the muffled, resonant thud of EDM. The moment the second door opened, the music was a physical blast against his eardrums.

The concept of seeing different shades of darkness was something Adil couldn't wrap his head around. The room was immense and profoundly dark, lit only by various fluorescent spots on the walls and ceiling. Circles of purple light, varying in size and shade, kept moving from the ceiling, across the walls, and over the bodies of people sitting or swaying to the music.

There was no formal furniture, no tables or chairs, only a scattering of mattresses and bolsters on the floor, and clumps of people huddled together. The only actual pieces of “furniture” were the colossal speakers, shaking the entire place with every beat.

She pulled Adil toward the northern corner of the hall, where a group of familiar and unfamiliar faces were lounging on the floor. They didn't seem to care about the absence of a cushion or mat; they were simply in a state of bliss, giggling occasionally, then returning to intensely stare at nothing in particular.

Adil sat down with the bunch, the girl with the septum ring right beside him.

“So, what were you having?” she asked, leaning in.

“Beer.”

“Ahh. Hang on...” She muttered something to a boy sitting opposite her, and he quickly left.

“I’m Meera,” she said, extending her hand slightly and smiling, her head tilted with a playful air.

“I’m Adil.”

He took her hand. Instantly, the vast, echoing hall seemed to narrow to the charged, electric space between them.

Adil liked to be a man defined by a calculated poise, his character hardened by decades spent unshackling himself from the burden of his past experiences and a series of heartbreaks. Yet, sitting in front of Meera, he felt an unexpected, heavy anchor dragging him directly toward her.

She was a figure of unfiltered, vibrant radiance. While Adil’s face carried the faint, distinguished lines of years of complexity, hers was a canvas of terrifyingly smooth clarity. Her skin possessed that specific, dewy luminosity that belongs solely to the very young. He couldn’t discern if this flawlessness was the result of a disciplined routine or simply the arrogant, unquestioning vibrancy of her youth.

When she smiled, her head tilted with an unburdened, playful grace that made him feel every single one of the years that separated them. Her upper lip was thinner and delicate, parting to reveal a small, charming gap between her teeth, a detail so innocent it felt like a provocation. Her eyebrows were thick and dark, groomed into a sharp, striking arch that framed eyes heavy with mascara.

As his palm rested against hers, a scent wafted toward him, sending a sharp, involuntary jolt through his nervous system. It was an intoxicating, chaotic contrast: the sharp, acrid bite of

cigarette smoke layered over a lingering sweetness, perhaps a peach-scented lotion or a cherry lip gloss. It was the scent of late nights and carefree rebellion, a sensory reminder that they truly existed in two different eras of life.

His gaze drifted, almost against his will. Her frame was slight, defined by the lithe, narrow fragility of a woman who hadn't yet fully bloomed. Her waist was impossibly small, tucked into low-slung, distressed denim, and her slender shoulders sloped forward with a relaxed, slouching confidence.

The physical reaction was immediate and punishing. Adil felt a heat coil deep in his gut, a primal pull that defied his better judgment. Looking at her, he felt a sudden, urgent hunger, not for her specifically, but to bridge the gap between his structured world and her world of vibrant, smoky chaos. She was lean and lithe; a slip of a girl who made him feel both dangerously powerful and completely undone.

He did not release her hand immediately. He felt the coarse texture of her torn jeans in the periphery of his vision and the steady warmth of her skin under his. In her presence, his customary composure felt like a thin, easily torn veil. He was utterly smitten, not just by the aesthetic perfection of her face, but by the raw, electric energy of a woman who was just beginning to burn, while he was already a steady, controlled flame.

Adil watched Meera retrieve the beers, her movements quick and efficient, a contrast to his own more deliberate pace. She then produced a small, unassuming strip of paper, tore it neatly in half, and placed one half on her tongue. Without a moment's hesitation, she offered the other piece to Adil. Already pleasantly warmed by the beers he'd consumed, and entirely

captivated by her fearless ease, he accepted it and let it dissolve on his tongue.

Meera reacted with a sharp, surprised intake of breath, then burst into laughter. “You did not!” she exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with wicked delight. “Do you even know what you just took?”

Adil, feeling a wide, reckless grin stretch across his face, simply shook his head.

“You’ll thank me later, I promise,” she assured him, her laughter softening into a low murmur. She then turned her attention to a girl in their group, leaving Adil to absorb the low-lit atmosphere. He observed the scene: a cluster of foreigners near a large speaker, one man vigorously head-banging, seemingly attempting to physically merge with the music. Everyone was loosely connected but deeply absorbed in their own, private rhythm.

About half an hour later, Adil felt a peculiar lightness begin in his head. It was a subtle, upward pull, a feeling of mild levitation. He stood and headed toward the restroom. Standing at the urinal, the sensation intensified, a faint but definite detachment from the ground. He braced himself against the wall, finding his balance momentarily uncertain.

Returning to the group, he found the arrangement unchanged. Meera turned to him with a quick, intuitive glance. “You okay?” she checked.

Adil nodded, feeling marginally steadier.

“Stay put, then,” she advised, her voice dropping to a low murmur. “It’s about to get interesting.”

He reached for his beer bottle, but his depth perception seemed off; he misjudged the distance and fumbled, nudging the person next to him. He recovered smoothly, hoping his small stumble went unnoticed. Meera rested her elbow lightly on his left shoulder, leaning close enough for that distinct, intoxicating mix of smoke and sweet fruit to hit him with force.

“Feel anything, old man?” she whispered playfully into his ear.

Adil turned his head, but her face was too close for his eyes to focus sharply. Her features blurred at the edges, yet the shape remained intensely familiar and inviting. He squinted. She smiled, her eyes slightly hooded, and repeated, “Everything alright?” He tried to respond, but his throat felt strangely constricted, the words catching.

A sudden, warm rush spread through his core, but his physical coordination lagged, creating a momentary, disorienting disconnect. He looked around. Everything had taken on a slower, more deliberate cadence. The colors seemed richer, bleeding slightly into the shadows at the edges of his vision. People appeared to melt into and emerge from these deeper tones.

He looked back at Meera. She was sitting back, supporting herself on her hands, her head tilted to the ceiling, her hair sweeping the floor. She was swaying gently to the deep bass. Adil felt an underlying, undefined apprehension, a sense of something monumental shifting, though nothing tangible was wrong.

His vision became choppy, a rapid sequence of stills rather than continuous motion. People jumped from one position to the next in quick flashes.

Then, he spotted a figure near the bar, a man in a long, flowing, off-white robe, with a grey beard and mustache, possessing a striking resemblance to common images of Jesus. The figure seemed to cover ground instantly, appearing first by the bar, then suddenly closer to the door.

Adil was profoundly perplexed. He squeezed Meera's hand, which remained lax in his grip. He watched the figure move, his hands clasped solemnly in front of his torso. A younger woman, strikingly dressed like Mother Teresa, appeared momentarily nearby, adding to the bizarre, semi-religious tableau unfolding in his mind.

He focused intently on the bearded figure, his mind seeking a rational anchor in the chaos. As he did, he noticed the man was not engaged in a divine display of teleportation, but was instead using his right hand to meticulously rub a mixture of tobacco and something else into the palm of his left hand.

The sheer absurdity of the scene washed over Adil, instantly dissolving the momentary confusion. The celestial visit was simply a patron preparing a joint. He let out a silent sigh of relief and relaxed his grip on Meera's hand, who remained lost in her own static, drug-induced reverie.

By **3:00 AM**, the club had emptied, and all the patrons found themselves on the beach outside. Some swayed in their drug - and alcohol-induced happiness; some crowded near the Maggi and sandwiches stall; others, like Adil and his newfound, temporary friends, simply sat near the sea, with the waves gently splashing on their feet.

"Let's go back to the shacks," Meera said, her eyes still fixed on the dark horizon of the endless ocean ahead.

Adil followed her gaze and watched the lights from the establishment behind him reflecting in long, shimmering streaks on the receding waves. The long, strange night was over, and as he began the walk back in the dark, silent company of Meera, the overwhelming weight of his prior **loneliness** had lifted, replaced by a charged anticipation of what the morning, and Meera's presence, might bring.

Adil did not wake so much as surface.

The shack was nearly dark when his eyes opened. His phone was dead, and the time seemed fluid. Outside, the world had already shifted into night-mode: neon, noise, and too-loud music pulsing through the thin wooden walls. The muffled thud of bass from nearby shacks and beach clubs rolled over him in waves; voices rose and fell, young throats screaming over speakers and surf. The air inside smelled of salt, beer gone flat, and his own stale sweat.

Tomorrow had apparently come and gone without his permission.

He, on the other hand, felt oddly blank. Not quite hungover, not quite sober. Just empty.

He sat on the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees, rubbing his face with both hands. Part of his mind wanted to stay right here, to ride out this strange neutral gear in silence, maybe find a cheap thali, maybe just walk along the darker stretch of beach and listen to the waves. Another part, the part that had dragged him to Goa in the first place, whispered that stillness was dangerous. If he stopped moving, the memories would catch up: Rhea's last words, the cold hospital ceiling, the cliff's edge.

He reached toward the minifridge and pulled out a random bottle. The first gulp of cheap beer tasted metallic and wrong, but the second went down easier. Outside, the howling of the younger crowd thickened as more bodies converged on the sand. The night was winding up.

A sudden knock rattled his half-closed door. Then Meera's voice, unmistakable even through the music: "Adil! Oye, Oldman! You alive or what?"

He exhaled; some tension he hadn't recognised easing at the sound of her.

He pulled the door open. Meera stood there, lit from behind by strings of fairy lights that made her hair glow. Her eyes were bright, pupils still a little too wide, a mischievous tilt already at the corner of her mouth. Behind her, three others hovered: two boys he vaguely recognised from last night's circle near the beach bar, and a girl in an oversized T-shirt holding a helmet.

"You slept the whole day?" Meera said, pushing past him into the shack without waiting for an answer. She sniffed dramatically. "Smells like a graveyard of hangovers in here."

He tried to smile. "What time is it?"

"Party o'clock," one of the boys called out, peeking in from the door, waving a cigarette like a tiny flag. "Come, bro, we're heading out."

"It's almost eight," Meera translated, softer. She looked him over, her eyes making a quick inventory of his crumpled T-shirt, his unshaven jaw, his still-unsteady posture. "You okay?"

Adil opened his mouth to say no. That he wasn't okay, that nothing in him had found level ground since he'd walked away from the hospital. But the words dissolved. He shrugged instead. "Just slept too much."

Meera grinned. "Good. You'll need energy. Tonight, we're going proper. No tourist nonsense. Real Goa." She jerked her head towards the outside. "Come. You ride behind me. My scooty is a rocket."

That, more than anything, unsettled him. The way she claimed his presence in her night as casually as if they'd been friends for years. The way she assumed he would come.

His hesitation wasn't about the party. It was about her.

Last night, somewhere between the third beer and the fourth shared cigarette, a line inside him had begun to blur. Maybe it was the way she kept bumping her shoulder against his as they walked, or how she'd thrown her head back laughing at some offhand comment he barely remembered making. Maybe it was when she'd leaned in close to shout over the music, lips brushing his ear, the smell of tobacco and coconut oil and rum mixing into something that went straight past his head and into his stomach.

She was younger. That difference had hung over him even as he let himself be pulled along in her orbit, a quiet, persistent reminder that he came from a different decade of heartbreaks and bad decisions. She moved through the night like she had endless beginnings left. He was already on his second life, stolen back from a cliff's edge.

He'd felt a pull, undeniable, visceral, but every time his eyes lingered a second too long on the slope of her neck or the way

her lips wrapped around a bottle, something in him tightened. Not guilt, exactly. More like a fear of overstepping into a space that didn't belong to him. The idea of being wanted by her had sent small, electric thrills through his chest. The idea of wanting her back fully, without brackets or caution, had scared him.

They stopped near a temporary shed of a building.

The club swallowed them whole.

Inside, the music was thick as syrup, coating his ears; coloured lights smeared across the room like wet paint. Perfume, sweat, cheap deodorant, fried fish from some distant kitchen, all of it clashed in the air until breathing felt like forcing air through a filter of other people's lives. Adil found himself in a corner with the group: plastic chairs, sticky table, cold beer; faces morphing into strangers and back again with every sweep of neon.

Time unhooked itself. Maybe two hours passed. Maybe ten minutes.

Voices grew louder, gestures sharper. Laughter took on a strange, serrated edge. He caught fragments of stories: college pranks, exes, road trips, office politics, but they slipped away before he could attach them to anyone.

Meera appeared at his elbow, grinning like this was the best night of her life. She opened her fist to reveal a tiny sugar cube wrapped in crumpled aluminium foil.

"Try?" she said, eyes gleaming.

Adil's first instinct was a shake of the head, a faint barrier, some thin sliver of the self that still believed in lines not to be crossed. His chest tightened with a quick shot of fear, of the

unknown, of losing whatever remaining control he pretended to have. Meera winked, an easy, conspiratorial gesture, like they were already friends, like this was nothing.

Around them, bodies undulated, voices merged into a single roar. Adil felt as if he were standing on the edge of a precipice again, but this one was inside his skull. The thought came, quiet and seductive: you already jumped once; what's a smaller fall?

He took the cube. It sat on his tongue, strangely weightless. He bit down.

The world did not explode. Not at first.

Fifteen minutes, perhaps. Then the edges sharpened. The same club, the same people, the same music, but everything had been sanded and polished to a terrifying clarity. Music no longer thudded; it sliced. Each beat had a texture. Colours crystallised, neon turning into glass shards suspended in the air. Bodies around him were no longer just people; they were patterns, loops and waves and intersecting lines, all pulsing in some intricate choreography he could almost understand.

He wasn't drunk. Not in his old vocabulary. Alcohol dulled. This did the opposite. It electrified.

Every sense vibrated. He wanted to run, to dance, to shout, to eat, to confess his entire life to someone and then vanish into the sea. Desire came in a hundred directions at once, none of them specific, all of them urgent.

The dance floor pulled him like gravity.

He moved, at first with awkward self-consciousness, then with an abandon that frightened him even as it thrilled him. His knees eventually buckled, and he slid down beside a gigantic speaker. The bass pounded directly into his ribs, making his

bones feel hollow and resonant, like he was an instrument someone else was playing.

Others collapsed beside him laughing, hugging, limbs thrown over shoulders, strangers becoming intimate without introduction. At some point, steaming Maggi noodles appeared, plastic forks poking out of flimsy paper plates. They ate cross-legged on the dusty floor; noodles slurped between sentences that went nowhere. Someone cracked a joke that, for a radiant instant, turned into the funniest thing the universe had ever produced. Then it dissolved, leaving behind nothing but the echo of laughter in his chest.

Faces drifted in and out of his field of vision, some he might have known from the shack, some entirely new. Each felt, for a second, like they could become a lifelong friend or a lover or a ghost, but the timeline of his life had been shredded. Forever and tonight were the same length.

Around four in the morning, the press of bodies became too much. He pushed his way out into the open.

The beach greeted him like another planet. The sky was an exhausted purple, the waves rolling in with a lazy, hypnotic rhythm. The lights of the shack-lined shore softened at this hour, blurrier, less aggressive. People remained clusters of silhouettes: couples walking at the water's edge, a guy spinning poi, their trails painting circles in the air.

And then there was the boy.

He moved through the scattered crowd like some wild street preacher born out of a fever dream, thin as a matchstick, hair long and matted, clothes mismatched. His smile, though, was a flare of pure light. He laid a hand on shoulders, pressed his

forehead to other foreheads, blessed strangers with a touch and a grin, as if he carried some private sun in his chest.

Adil watched, first amused, then strangely drawn.

When the boy's eyes found his, it felt less like a coincidence and more like a decision the night itself had made. He drifted closer.

"You look like you've just been born," the boy said, laughing. "Or like you died and they sent you back because you forgot your wallet."

Adil laughed, too loud, too long. Words spilled between them, fragments about Goa and God, joy and death, about how every wave looked the same and yet none of them repeated. Adil followed some of it, lost the rest, his attention swinging back and forth between the boy's bright eyes and the endless, rolling sea.

The world felt impossibly full. Every grain of sand, every salt droplet in the air, every breath seemed loaded with meaning. At the same time, a hollow tunneled quietly through his chest, whispering that if he reached out to grasp any of it, his hands would close on nothing.

Full and empty. Alive and numb.

Eventually, he found his way back to his shack, though "found" was generous; his feet carried him on automatic while his mind drifted elsewhere. Sleep would not come. He lay there, nerves humming, thoughts racing without sequence. LSD, he concluded with a weirdly scientific detachment. Of course. The label made no difference, but his mind insisted on one anyway.

His feet buzzed. His hands refused rest. Time stretched like chewing gum.

At ten in the morning, the door burst open. The group from the night, faces sweaty, eyes bright, laughter ragged, spilled into the shack like they owned it.

“Party some more?” someone shouted, as if this were a question with more than one possible answer.

Adil’s shoulders rose and fell. A shrug. His body had turned into a vessel with “yes” written in its bones. He climbed onto the back of a girl’s scooter, barely catching her name over the roar of ignition. He looked around for Meera; she followed. The world streaked past in a smear of trees, posters, and sunlight as they tore down narrow lanes, the wind slapping his face awake.

Half an hour later, they pulled into an alley behind a nondescript club. No signboard, just a rusted metal door at the back. Inside, cool air and heavy beats exploded outward.

There were six of them now three girls, two guys, plus Adil. All somewhere in their late twenties. All looking like the kind of people you met in transit anonymous enough to forget, open enough to share things you’d never tell your oldest friends.

Beers first. Then whiskey. Then tequila. The rounds blurred into each other until even the act of raising the glass became automatic. Time surrendered; the clock was now just a meaningless shape on the wall.

By three in the afternoon, they stumbled back out into sunlight that felt hostile, unforgiving. The sun roasted their brows, sweat shone on their faces, laughter had turned hoarse and cracked. They made their way to a nearby hotel, one of the nicer ones,

all white and gold, marble floors, a lobby that smelled of air-freshener and high tariffs.

Upstairs, the room they entered was large and cool, the curtains drawn against the harshness outside. The air-conditioning hit Adil like a wall, his body suddenly heavy. He collapsed onto the bed, too drunk, too spent to care whose bed it was or what he was doing there.

“Get up,” someone barked. There was no malice in it, just impatience, a strange camaraderie sharpened by chemicals. A porcelain plate appeared on the glass-topped coffee table, a thin line of white powder arranged perfectly, and a rolled five-hundred - rupee note offered like a ceremonial object.

He could have said no. He knew what this was, knew what it meant to cross yet another invisible border. But the emptiness after the high terrified him more than the risk. The thought of returning to his own unmedicated mind felt like stepping naked into a storm.

He leaned forward. Inhaled.

Within minutes, the fog in his brain thinned. The room sharpened: the pattern on the carpet, the exact shade of beige on the curtains, the chipped corner of the coffee table. His thoughts lined up in a tidy queue, his nerves tingling but steady. He felt not high, but corrected, like someone had re-tuned him.

On the sofa, a couple curled into each other, hands intertwined in a wordless loop. On the floor near the window, the two boys rolled a joint with almost meditative concentration, their brows furrowed like philosophers trying to solve some ancient riddle.

Against the wall, Meera leaned, bare feet crossing at the ankles, picking idly at her nails. She turned her head, eyes sliding over Adil with sudden interest.

“You good?” she asked.

He shook his head.

She giggled, a sound that surprised him with its texture, bright and musical, like a small bell in a smoky temple. She beckoned lazily, and he shuffled closer, sinking down beside her. Up close, he could see the exhaustion at the edges of her eyes, the faint smear of yesterday’s eyeliner, the chapped skin at the corner of her mouth.

She slipped into Malayalam, words tumbling out in a soft, rapid stream. He understood almost nothing, but he caught names - “Amma,” “Appa,” “Muthachan” - and occasional English fragments: “small village,” “backwater,” “mango tree,” “rain.” Her voice rose and fell like a lullaby, like she was half-talking to him and half-talking to a version of herself far away, sitting under a coconut tree somewhere in Kerala.

Meera, the name suited her - liquid, slightly old-fashioned, holding within it the shimmer of rivers and the weight of myth. He repeated it silently in his head, trying it on his tongue without sound.

He had no idea why she was happy. She didn’t belong to the couple, had met the boys only a few days back, had no visible anchor in the room. Yet she laughed as though some secret inside her was untouched by all this chaos. Maybe it was the drugs. Maybe the alcohol. Or maybe, Adil thought, it was the strange freedom of knowing no one here knew her past, her mistakes, the stories her family talked about her.

The glass table flashed again. Another line had been arranged, waiting. Adil hesitated for exactly as long as it took to remember how empty he felt without chemical assistance. Then he leaned in and inhaled, chasing a clarity that he already knew would evaporate as soon as he reached for it.

The room thickened with smoke. The boys lit the joint, passing it around with practiced hands. Adil didn't feel "high" this time. He felt...other. Slightly removed, anchored yet detached, as if he were both participant and observer in his own life.

Meera shifted closer. Her head found his shoulder, heavy and warm. He caught the scent of her hair - ash from the joint, sweat, and a faint fruity note, maybe from a cheap shampoo she'd used yesterday. Her breath ghosted against his neck, rhythmic, matching his own in a way that made something inside him loosen.

As her body relaxed, her limbs draped over his stomach, one hand sliding inside his shirt almost by accident, tracing slow, half-conscious circles over his skin. The touch was light, almost absent-minded, but it sent small shocks through him.

His body responded before his mind could. Arousal rose, insistent and inconvenient. Yet his attention kept snagging on the bikers' conversation across the room - tales of Ladakh, of how the Gata Loops looked at dawn, of ghostly truck drivers who appeared at high passes and vanished in rearview mirrors.

Meera's lips brushed his neck, bringing him abruptly back to the now. She unbuckled his belt with clumsy determination, her fingers finding him ready, stroking with a tenderness that contrasted jarringly with the harsh lights and the stale smell of the room. Heat built between them in small, deliberate increments.

He drifted between worlds: the erotic pull of her hands, the lure of the road stories, the faint heartbeat of his own buried grief. She curled tighter around him, rubbing her leg against his thigh, palm spread over his cheek in a gesture that felt almost protective. He tried to tilt her chin up, to kiss her properly, to make this something more than body against body.

Before he could, her weight went slack.

Her hand slipped from his chest, her head lolling forward. Passed out - heart, lungs, thoughts - all surrendered at once to an exhaustion deeper than sleep. The party had finally claimed her.

Adil froze, then carefully supported her, letting her rest fully across his lap. He watched the light outside thin towards evening, his own energy draining in uneven waves, until sleep dragged him under too.

Night did not begin with a clean break. It seeped in.

When he stirred again, the haze in the room was denser, music playing from someone's phone - a soft throb rather than full club volume. Meera shifted in his lap, pressing closer, as if seeking warmth in a suddenly cold universe. Her legs folded over his, her breaths deepening in sync with his own.

Her fingertips traced the lines of his chest through his thin cotton shirt, exploring as if trying to memorise the geography of him. Buttons parted beneath her hand, then her fingers slid under the fabric, mapping his shoulder, collarbone, the dip at the base of his throat. Heat radiated from her skin; each sigh against his cheek felt like a question she was asking without words.

His senses narrowed to the small radius of her body. The curve of her calf hooking around his thigh. The soft scratch of her nails against his ribs. The way her voice caught slightly each time their bodies shifted closer. His own hands, uncertain, found the hem of her shirt. He slipped beneath, fingertips resting at the warm small of her back, before daring to press, drawing her closer still.

The air inside the room grew heavy and intimate, thick with smoke, sweat, and unspoken intention. The drugs humming in his veins made every touch feel magnified, every hesitation echo. He felt on the edge of breaking, both fragile and wildly alive.

Meera peeled her shirt off in an unhurried motion, as if suddenly deciding she was tired of barriers. In the dim light, he saw the dusky slope of her shoulders, the smooth line of her collarbone, the soft curve of her stomach just above low-slung jeans. He met her mouth in a deep, searching kiss that felt less like seduction and more like clinging to a ledge.

The room faded out. For a breath, there was only her, only the mingled taste of smoke and cheap whiskey and something uniquely hers.

Her laughter, unguarded, almost surprised at itself, bubbled up as she tugged his shirt over his head. Her fingers traced the hollow at his throat, drifted down his chest and stomach, lingering at small scars, faint lines of muscle. She swung a leg over and straddled him fully, knees hugging his hips, body settling into his like it had been looking for precisely this shape all night.

Her hair fell around his face, strands tickling his cheeks as her lips sketched the outline of his jaw. For a few fleeting seconds,

the worries that clung to him - Rhea's silence, his parents' disappointment, Mehul bhai's - slipped to the very edge of his awareness.

He let his hands roam, tracing the curve of her waist, the dip at her lower back, the shape of her breast beneath lace. His touch grew bolder as she arched into it, her skin shivering under his fingers. The tiny sounds that escaped her - half-giggle, half-moan - drew him further in.

Her fingers unfastened his belt with surer movements this time, hand sliding into his jeans, wrapping around him with a deliberate, building rhythm. Every nerve tightened. He could feel himself balanced on the lip of something vast and dangerous.

He wanted to disappear into this. To drown the last of his sadness, his shame, his confusion in the immediate simplicity of flesh and friction.

But in the half-light, the shadows on the wall betrayed him.

A whirlpool appeared in the swirl of smoke and faded paint, at first just a smudge, then a spiral spinning inward on itself. His breath caught. A hand seemed to reach from its center, fingers long and pale, stretching towards him. It was wrong, impossible, yet it felt more real than the floor beneath him.

Fear stabbed through the pleasure, cold and precise. His body tightened, half-ready to bolt.

Meera's weight anchored him, her thighs warm against his hips, her arms looped around his neck. She sensed something shift in him; her hips slowed, her mouth moved from his jaw to his ear, whispering nothing that felt soothing anyway. Her own vulnerability leaked through in a slight tremor in her voice, a

searching look that asked silently if this moment would also abandon her.

She unclasped her bra and let it slip to the floor, pressing herself fully against his chest. His mouth traced the line of her collarbone, then the swell of her breast, lips closing gently around her nipple until she gasped and pressed closer, seeking more.

The whirlpool churned harder. Colours flashed in its depths, twisting into shapes that almost resolved into faces. Adil's heart hammered. He held to Meera's body like a lifeline, the softness of her skin, the tang of her sweat, the firm grip of her thighs.

Her fingers tangled in his hair as she moved over him, breaths coming in uneven bursts. Their bodies found a clumsy, urgent rhythm, fumbles and laughter and sudden gasps. Desire and fear tangled together, each sharpening the other.

Just as the spinning darkness seemed ready to swallow him, Meera stilled. She leaned back enough to see his face clearly. His eyes were too wide, pupils blown not just from substances but from terror.

She cupped his cheeks gently, thumbs brushing along the line of his jaw. "Close your eyes," she whispered, three words that sounded less like instruction and more like a promise.

For a heartbeat, he resisted. He wanted to keep watching the horror grow, to face it, to not be the man who always ran. But the tremor in her voice, the earnestness in her gaze, the simple human tenderness in that moment tugged him the other way.

He closed his eyes.

Her lips found his again. The whirlpool shattered not with a bang, but with a quiet, almost merciful dissolving. For a

stretched, timeless instant, there was only warmth and breath and the blurred, animal rush of pleasure.

Adil let go. Fully, recklessly. Swept far from himself, held together by the arms of a stranger who, for that night, felt like the only safe place in the world.

When he woke, light had shifted.

It was around seven in the morning, suggestive sunlight filtering through a gap in the curtains. Meera lay sprawled across his lap, head heavy on his thigh, one hand resting idly against him, fingers curled like a child's. Her hair masked half her face. She looked disarmingly young.

His mouth tasted of stale smoke and something metallic. His brain throbbed, not quite a headache, more like an alarm clock that had been ringing too long inside his skull. Hunger twisted his stomach into knots.

Carefully, he slid out from under her, lifting her and placing her on the couch where the couple had been curled together the previous night. She murmured something in Malayalam, barely opening her eyes, then sank back into sleep.

The couple was gone, bathroom door closed, the faint sound of running water behind it. The boys lay sprawled on the floor, limbs thrown wide, like fallen soldiers after a battle.

Adil made coffee in the small electric kettle, his hands shaking slightly. The bitterness grounded him. He stepped onto the balcony, blinking at the glint of the hotel pool below, the neat symmetry of pool chairs and umbrellas, the early-morning staff preparing for another day of tourists who would never know this room's story.

Eventually, the boys woke, groaning, rubbing their faces. They asked about hangovers with the casual camaraderie of co-survivors. Adil nodded, feeling too empty to elaborate.

One of them, eyes still half-closed, lined up another thin trail of white powder on the glass table. “Last one,” he muttered. “To fix the morning.” The lie hung in the air, naked.

Adil inhaled anyway. Not because he believed it, but because he didn’t know what else to do with his hands.

They went down for breakfast together, Meera in tow. Her hair was pulled into a loose knot, her eyeliner smudged into smoky shadows under her eyes. At the table, she kissed him lightly on the cheek, an affectionate, almost childish peck, before ordering eggs and pineapple. Conversation was thin. The clink of cutlery against plates sounded too loud.

Afterward, the couple re-emerged, the whole group drifting back up to their temporary kingdom in the sky. Music started again, trance loops cycling endlessly on someone’s playlist. Beer bottles opened with soft sighs. Lines were cut and vanished. Smoke layered once more over the air.

Meera leaned against him on the couch, studying his face with a playful, intent seriousness. She smiled without warning, leaned forward, and licked his beard like a teasing cat. Then she giggled, delighted by his startled expression.

The room shifted around him. Shadows stretched. The familiar whirlpool began to spin on the wall again, darker this time, colours draining towards its centre. A hand emerged once more, waving, twisting, insisting on his attention.

As Meera climbed into his lap again, wearing only her bra and jeans, the hallucination and reality collided. Her neck brushed

his lips; her body pressed into his chest. He could feel the warmth of her skin, the weight of her in his arms. But over her shoulder, the figure in the whirlpool sharpened: a woman with distorted, clay-smeared features, eyes too bright, hair like spun silk caught in a storm.

Rhea? Someone else? Some composite of every woman he'd failed?

Adil's arousal faltered. Terror rose like bile. He lay rigid, eyes glued to the ceiling, heart pounding against his ribs as if trying to escape.

Meera sensed it again. She stopped moving, her breath falling quiet. She followed his line of sight upwards, saw nothing but stains and shadows, then turned back to him. Her hands framed his face with surprising gentleness.

"Close your eyes," she said again, voice steady this time, almost firm.

He met her gaze, caught between refusal and surrender. She nodded once, slowly, as if promising to hold back the dark.

He resisted a heartbeat longer. Then, exhausted, he obeyed.

The whirlpool vanished behind his eyelids. The world shrank to the narrow universe of their bodies and the constant, low thrum of the music.

Her eyes held his, dark pools reflecting the dim flicker of the single bulb overhead. There was no demand in them, only an invitation laced with certainty - a quiet promise that whatever came next would anchor them both against the night's pull.

Adil stood frozen in the doorway, chest rising unevenly. Part of him wanted to turn away, to retreat into the familiar cage of his

own doubts. Another part - the raw, unquiet core that had carried him this far - yearned to step forward. Her nod came slow, deliberate, like a hand extended across a chasm.

He held out for one more heartbeat. Then surrender washed over him, warm as breath on skin.

Meera rose from the chair, her movements fluid, unhurried. She took his hands in hers - small palms against his callused fingers - and led him into the room. The door stayed open behind them, a sliver of shadowed corridor watching indifferently. She perched on the bed's edge, the thick mattress dipping slightly under her weight, and looked up. Her gaze didn't waver.

Adil leaned down. Their lips met, tentative at first, then deepening, her mouth soft and yielding, tasting faintly of the chai they'd shared earlier. Salt and sweetness mingled, a spark jumping between them like live wire touching water.

She eased back toward the centre of the bed, pulling him with her. He followed, careful, knees sinking into the mattress on either side of her hips. Too aware of her slight frame, he braced himself on one elbow and both knees, hovering just close enough to feel her heat without pressing down. Her skin glowed pale in the low light, fragile curves rising and falling with each breath.

Meera's fingers found his belt buckle, deft and sure. The leather slid free with a soft rasp. She tugged his jeans down, the denim pooling at his thighs, taking his underwear with it. Her right hand wrapped around him - a firm, warm grip sending a jolt through his core. Her left cradled the back of his neck, drawing him closer as she stroked slowly, rhythmically. Their lips met again, kisses turning urgent, her tongue tracing his lower lip.

Adil's hands moved to her bra clasp, fingers fumbling once before it gave. He peeled the fabric away, tossing it aside. Lowering his mouth, he took one breast between his lips, then the other, trying to capture all of her in the heat of his mouth, suckling with a hunger that bordered on desperation. She arched slightly, a soft sound escaping her throat, fingers threading through his hair.

She released him then, shifting to shimmy out of her own jeans. The last barrier fell away - bare skin against bare skin now, electric in the humid air. Adil's hands spanned her tiny waist, fingers nearly circling it completely. In one fluid motion, he lifted and rolled her on top, pulling her astride him.

Meera gasped, a sharp intake that turned into a surprised smile, eyes widening with delight. She steadied herself, palms flat on his chest, nails digging lightly into muscle. Slowly, she lowered herself onto his hardness, guiding with a teasing roll of her hips. Warmth enveloped him, slick and tight, her body yielding inch by inch. A trickle of her arousal coated him, heightening every sensation.

Her rhythm built - first exploratory circles, then firmer slides, friction sparking like flint on steel. She gasped, breath hitching, head tilting back as pleasure pulled a low moan from her. Leaning forward, she captured his hands, lacing fingers, then kissed him fiercely. Her lips trailed fire: down his jaw, along the scar-hidden line of his neck, across his chest, pausing to flick her tongue over a nipple. Lower still, to his stomach, teasing the taut skin just above.

She hovered over him, breath ghosting his length. Her tongue darted out, circling the tip once, twice - eyes locked on the whole time, bold and unashamed. Adil's fingers wove into her hair, not pushing, just holding, anchoring. In that gaze, the

shadows in his mind dissolved, guilt evaporating like mist under sun.

Convinced, she rose, positioning him at her entrance. With a slow exhale, she sank down fully. Adil gasped as her walls clenched around him, velvet heat gripping tight. Meera bit her lower lip, stifling a cry, brows knitting in exquisite strain.

His left hand claimed her waist, thumb pressing into the dip above her hipbone. His right slid behind her neck, pulling her down into a bruising kiss. She moved - undulating waves, rising and falling, each thrust deeper, more insistent. They kissed through it, broke apart panting, kissed again. Her pace quickened, hips grinding, bodies slick with sweat.

Nothing existed beyond this: her warmth pulsing around him, his hands mapping her curves, the electric current binding them. She wouldn't let go. Neither would he. In the rhythm of flesh and breath, the world narrowed to just enough.

The three-day binge ended not with a dramatic scene, but with a quiet collapse of sound.

When Adil woke again, it was nine. He lay in the bed - it seemed bigger - beneath the chaos of the crumpled sheet half-covering him. He was completely naked. The air-conditioning blasted cold air over his skin, making his teeth ache.

The room was a mess: bottles, ashtrays, discarded clothes, used tissues, empty food containers. But no people.

He got up, the floor tilting slightly under his feet, and searched. Bathroom empty. Balcony empty. The living room bare except for the debris of the past days. No Meera. No boys. No couple.

The first true shard of clarity pierced through him: not chemical, but emotional. He looked for his jeans, his jacket, his bag. When he finally found his clothes, they were scattered around the room.

It hit like a physical blow. A cheated breath. The room seemed to tilt again, but differently this time - without the cushioning haze of substances.

He showered under scalding water, scrubbing at his skin as if he could rinse off not just the sweat and smoke, but the feeling that he was the punchline of a cruel joke. The water did nothing but redden his shoulders.

Downstairs, hunger drove him towards the restaurant. He hadn't eaten properly in days. But before he could sit, two hotel staff members intercepted him, posture stiff, faces carefully neutral.

"Sir, you need to clear the outstanding bill," one of them said.

Adil blinked. "What bill? I'm not even -"

"For the suite," the other clarified. "Three nights. Plus, all in-room dining and beverages."

He stared, disbelief and panic tangling in his chest. "I wasn't the one, I mean, I just, I was with -"

They listened for about fifteen seconds, then began to retreat behind procedure, behind policy. The words responsibility, registered guest, and cannot release you overlapped with the roaring in his ears.

As they led him to the reception desk, reality solidified. Of course they were gone. Of course, the room had been booked in his name - or his ID had been used somehow - or maybe

he'd handed over his wallet thoughtlessly when someone had said, "Give, I'll handle it." Of course, the fun had a bill, and of course it had been left for the most breakable person in the room.

Fifteen minutes of arguments bled into each other. He tried logic, tried anger, tried wounded pride. None of it moved the staff. Rules were heavier than his words. Slowly, as their politeness grew thinner, as the line of waiting guests grew longer, a brutal understanding settled inside him.

He'd been used. Rinsed. Emptied. The last three days were not just a blur of bad decisions; they were carefully orchestrated to be sponsored by Adil.

The number on the bill might as well have been carved into his chest: one lakh twenty-seven thousand. An obscene sum for someone who had left Mumbai with just enough to outrun his own death wish.

Shame flushed hot in his face. He thought of Meera's laugh, the weight of her head on his shoulder, the way she'd said, "Close your eyes," as if she were saving him. Had any of it been real? Or had she been counting bottle caps and bills the whole time?

The confusion hurt more than the money. He had no clear story to file the last seventy-two hours under. Had he walked willingly into a trap, or had he wanted the trap all along?

With no choice left, he called Mehul bhai. Explaining it was harder than any fight he'd had with Rhea. His voice shook, cracked in places he hadn't known could break. He heard the disappointment on the other end of the line, poorly masked behind practical questions and instructions.

Mehul bhai sorted it. He always did. The bill was paid. The hotel's tension dissolved, their smiles returning with the electronic confirmation.

Adil slumped into a lobby chair, hollowed out. Relief came, but it was bitter, wrapped in self-loathing. He had escaped death only to become the kind of fool who let strangers erase his identity in exchange for three nights of oblivion.

That hurt in a new way. He could forgive himself for wanting to die; he wasn't sure he could forgive himself for being this naive.

He stared at the polished marble floor, at his own reflection warped in its shine. The lobby's soft music and clink of cups felt like another planet compared to the chaos upstairs.

Someone was watching him.

He felt the gaze before he saw the man: sitting a few chairs away, late thirties, clothes that immediately set him apart from the typical resort crowd. A light beige khadi kurta hung loose over his frame, checkered harem pants billowing slightly over slippers that looked like they'd been fashioned from old gunny bags. His hair was uncombed but clean, his beard untrimmed but not fussy. There was dust on his feet that did not belong to this lobby's neatness.

Once the staff stepped away, the man shifted, leaning towards Adil's line of sight but not intruding.

"Do you still have the stomach for breakfast," he asked mildly, "or did you lose your appetite back there?"

Adil looked up, startled. The instinct now was suspicion: every new face a potential con, every friendly tone a prelude to

another bill. He examined the man's eyes for that familiar glint he'd begun to associate with danger masquerading as fun.

Instead, he found...curiosity. And something like recognition. Not the "hey, bro, let's get wasted" recognition, but the deeper kind - two people identifying the bruise in each other.

"I don't know," Adil said honestly. His voice came out rough. "I'm...hungry. But also...done."

A corner of the man's mouth twitched. "Sounds like Goa," he replied. "Come on. Worst case, we go sit with coffee and you stare at your plate. It's still better than staring at this floor."

Hunger won. Or maybe it was the desire not to be alone with his thoughts just yet. Adil followed him towards the café.

The place was sunlit, big windows opening onto a sliver of pool and a slice of sky. They chose a table near the glass. A waiter appeared, practiced smile in place, oblivious to the storm that had just passed through Adil's life.

"Jojo," the man introduced himself once their orders were in. Just Jojo. No surname.

"Adil," he replied, still wary, but the name felt a little less flimsy when spoken to someone who hadn't just conned him.

Jojo spoke with an easy, unhurried cadence, as if the world always moved at the pace of his sentences. He asked no prying questions about the spectacle in the lobby; instead, he drifted into talk of motorcycles and roads.

He'd noticed the key-shaped tan line on Adil's wrist, the faint oil stain on his nails, the stiffness in his shoulders that came from hours spent on a bike. He spoke of his own machine - an

old, stubborn Royal Enfield parked somewhere outside, loaded with just enough luggage to suggest a man who had not decided where he'd end up.

Adil, still numb, listened.

Jojo had been in Goa for a month, he said, arriving with vague plans and a whole library of expectations. He'd imagined healing here, or reinvention, or some cinematic epiphany on a moonlit beach. Instead, he'd found repetition of parties, of conversations, of small talk thick with sweat and smoke but thin on truth.

"Every night I thought, maybe tonight is the night I find it," Jojo said, stirring sugar into his coffee with unnecessary focus. "Whatever 'it' is. Some person, some answer, some feeling. And every morning I woke up more tired of my own face."

He smiled when he said it, but the line between his brows betrayed the ache.

"So you're leaving," Adil said quietly. Wondering if he could ever be as calm about tomorrow as Jojo.

Jojo nodded. "Rajasthan. I don't know why there. Maybe because it's the opposite." He shrugged. "Dry after wet. Desert after sea. Silence after this noise. I just know I can't keep going back to the same bed every night, hoping it becomes something else."

The words hit Adil harder than he expected. He thought of his last three nights - how he had willingly, eagerly, sought the blur, the noise, the crowd, believing it might drown out the break-up, the failed jump, the hollowness. Instead, he'd woken more lost each day, ending with this final humiliation.

“I came here with no plan,” Adil admitted, surprising himself with the ease of the confession. “Just...away from Mumbai. Away from a cliff. Away from myself, I guess.”

Jojo looked at him for a long moment, not pitying, not judging. Just seeing.

A wave crashed somewhere in the sea out front, Adil felt it in his chest. He waited for the usual questions-the scar, the bike, the reasons a man with fresh gunshot wound is drifting alone.

“And how’s that working out?” he asked. Instead.

Adil let out a breath that felt almost like a laugh. “Terribly.”

They both smiled, a brief, shared flash of humour at their own expense. For a second, the café, the bill, Meera, the cliff - all of it receded. There were just two men in dusty clothes, eating breakfast too late, carrying stories too heavy to fit in small talk.

Jojo spoke of dreams he’d once had: starting a café somewhere in the hills, learning a musical instrument he always postponed, a love he hadn’t found yet but still believed might exist in some narrow street of some unknown town. Each deferred plan had become a stone in his backpack. Adil reflected the plans on himself. Something he has thought a few times himself but never hard enough to speak it out loud of serious enough to actually work on it.

“I thought Goa would fix it,” he said. “Like how people think relationships fix them. Or money. Or a new job. Or a bigger bike.” He smiled, wry. “Turns out, wherever you go, you’re still the one riding.”

Adil swallowed, the metaphor sinking in with uncomfortable precision. His entire journey had been framed in gears and

roads, but he'd treated Goa like a parking lot - somewhere to stall, to idle in self-destruction - not a stretch of the road he had to own.

They talked of routes of coastal highways and desert roads, of Pushkar and Jaisalmer, of places where the sky opened like a question and the night crashed down heavy with stars. Jojo didn't oversell it, didn't spin Rajasthan into some spiritual paradise. He spoke of punctures and bad *dhabas* and lonely motels as readily as of sunsets and chai by roadside bonfires.

Through it all, he never once told Adil what he should do.

That, more than anything, made Adil listen.

As the plates emptied and coffee cooled, something subtle shifted inside him. The betrayal still stung, confusion coiling tight in his gut whenever he thought of Meera's small, intimate gestures, now recast in the harsh light of manipulation. Part of him wanted to rage, to track them down, to demand answers, apologies, a refund - anything that might tidy the narrative.

But another part, quieter and strangely more solid, recognised a different truth: Goa had shown him the shape of his lowest gear. This was what happened when he stopped steering, when he let strangers and substances dictate his direction.

The thought that he could turn the key again, consciously this time, felt both terrifying and exhilarating.

Jojo pushed his chair back, patting his stomach. "I leave tomorrow morning," he said. "Or tonight. Or in ten minutes. The bike decides sometimes." His eyes crinkled. "If you ever find yourself on the road north, keep an eye out for a madman

in a khadi kurta on an ancient Bullet. Could be me. Could be someone you like more.”

Adil smiled, the expression genuine for the first time in days. “Or I just decide to follow you out tomorrow,” he said, half-joking, half-testing the taste of the possibility.

Jojo tilted his head. “Or you decide to leave tonight,” he countered, not as a challenge but as an invitation. “Goa’s not holding you. You’re holding Goa.”

They paid the bill separately. No one vanished. No one left a debt for the other.

Stepping out of the café, sunlight hit Adil full in the face. It hurt his eyes, but it also felt clean. The sound of the sea carried faintly from beyond the line of hotels and shacks. Somewhere in the parking lot, a bike’s engine coughed to life, then steadied into a familiar thrum.

He thought of his own motorcycle, stranded by the shacks he booked, waiting like a patient animal for him to reclaim it. He thought of the road curling out of Goa - northwards, then east, then wherever he chose to let it lead.

He was broke, shaken, stripped of illusions. Confused as hell about why Meera’s absence hurt more than her probable betrayal should have. Heartbreak layered on heartbreak: Rhea, Meera, himself. Yet under the ache, under the humiliation, something else flickered - the same restless spark that had made him kickstart the bike the night he walked out of the hospital.

Adventure. Not the Instagram version. The raw, unfiltered kind where you had no idea who you were becoming, only that you were not done becoming him.

As he walked out into the glaring morning, leaving the shack for one final time, Adil knew this much: Goa had taken from him, but it had also given him a new kind of hunger - not for more oblivion, but for roads he hadn't yet ruined. His heart ached, his mind spun, but his hands itched for handlebars again.

Somewhere ahead, the second gear waited.

He stepped towards it.

2



The morning departure felt less like leaving Goa and more like leaving a version of himself behind.

For days and nights, Adil had moved in and out of noise - pills, bottles, neon lights, strange hands, the slick laughter of people who forgot each other's names by sunrise. The past seventy-two hours had been a smear of clubs and cheap liquor, Meera's bright, reckless grin, the hollow high of chemicals, and the sharp, humiliating low of waking up stripped of money and whatever remained of his self-respect. The hotel lobby, the bill he couldn't afford, the unfamiliar signatures on room charges, the realisation that he'd been neatly used - those memories still sat raw behind his ribs.

And yet, on this morning, his head was clear.

The sky above Anjuna had that washed-out early hue - violet thinning into gray, the last stars fading. The breeze rolling in from the sea was cool, gentle, almost apologetic. For the first

time since he'd reached Goa, Adil woke without his head splitting in two. No pounding behind his eyes, no cotton in his brain. Just fatigue, soreness, and a sharp awareness of the mess he'd crawled through.

His motorcycle stood outside the shack as if nothing had happened. Dusty, tired, but upright. The handlebar mirrors were speckled with salt and sand; the front fork carried a new scratch he did not remember earning. But it was there. Waiting. A machine that had never lied to him.

He stepped out, his bag already strapped to the rear seat, an extra bungee cord he'd borrowed from the shack owner holding it down. His fingers brushed the tank, feeling the reassurance of cold metal, the indentation where his knees rested. He could have sworn the bike felt mildly offended at having been abandoned for Goa's chaos, but also faintly forgiving - like a companion who had seen worse.

A familiar, tuneless humming floated down the narrow lane before the man himself appeared.

Jojo came into view, wrapped in the same easy, dishevelled simplicity Adil had first seen in the hotel café: light beige kurta, loose, checkered pants, those ridiculous slippers that looked like they'd lived five lives before ending up on his feet. He had a faded backpack slung carelessly over one shoulder, the exact opposite of a well-planned touring kit. It looked too light for any serious journey - like luggage for an overnight stay that accidentally kept stretching into weeks.

He was humming an off-key Bollywood number, tapping the beat on his thigh with two fingers. When he saw Adil standing beside his motorcycle, helmet in hand, he broke into a grin that

looked almost boyish despite the lines etched at the corners of his eyes.

Adil felt a vague familiarity towards Jojo, kind of like he developed for Meera, but it was more of a curiosity than attraction. He wondered if Jojo is running from something or has, he found it. The calm and carefree attitude Jojo carried made Adil miniscule jealous but more of curious about what led Jojo here, on this motorcycle with this luggage. Everything about Jojo intrigued him.

“Arre, miracle!” Jojo called out. “You’re vertical before the sun. I thought I’d have to pour chai down your nose to wake you.”

Adil managed a crooked half-smile. His body still ached from three days of abuse; his stomach sat uneasy and hollow. But there was something about Jojo’s presence - unhurried, unpretentious - that had already begun, in the last twenty-four hours, to carve a small pocket of safety around him.

“You ready,” Jojo continued, coming to stand beside the bike, “or shall I tie you to the carrier and drag your corpse out of Goa? Both ways we’re leaving today.”

Adil exhaled a quiet breath that was almost a laugh. “I don’t even know where we’re going.”

Jojo slapped the motorcycle’s seat with open, affectionate palm. “Pushkar,” he said, as if naming a person rather than a place. “By way of the long road.”

Adil frowned. “There’s a short one?”

“There’s always a short one,” Jojo replied. “Shortcuts, highways, flights, trains, teleportation.” He shrugged theatrically. “But

only the long road teaches. Shortcuts just deliver. You want delivery, you call Swiggy. You want to learn something, you ride.”

The word “learn” lodged in Adil’s chest like grit. He wasn’t sure he wanted any more lessons. Life had already beaten enough into him: how love could rot when fed ego, how a fired bullet did not care about human regret, how a hangover of shame could last longer than any drunken stupor. But the alternative to learning, he knew, was stagnation. And stagnation, for him, had very nearly ended in freefall.

He looked once over his shoulder at the shack - the warped wooden planks, the patched tarpaulin roof, the fading signboard where someone had painted “Peace Hut” in clumsy blue. It had given him a mattress and an electric socket for his phone, a flimsy door between him and the chaos. It had also been the starting point of the worst binge of his life.

He tightened the strap of his helmet.

“Okay,” he said. “Pushkar.”

They kicked their machines to life - the Classic with its heavy, throaty thump; Jojo’s old Bullet answering with a slightly higher, stubbornly cheerful note. The sound of the twin engines rolled down the sleepy lane, scattering a few dogs and startling a crow from a power line. It felt, for a moment, like they were announcing themselves to the world: broken men with working bikes, claiming another chance at movement.

They rolled out of Anjuna while the sky was still soft. The shacks along the beach were shuttered, fairy lights switched off or dimming, the sand empty except for a few early walkers and one drunk foreigner still trying to argue with a chai seller over

five rupees. As they turned onto the main road and began to climb away from the sea, Adil glanced in his mirror.

The beach receded quickly: a narrow strip of pale sand, a line of leaning palms, the glint of waves. Beyond that, Goa blurred - the bars, the cheap guesthouses, the overexcited crowds, Meera's scooty, the balcony where he'd watched the pool, the hotel lobby where his humiliation had played out - they all shrank into a single, indistinct cluster of memory. A chapter he hadn't finished understanding, but one he knew he had to close by riding away, not by analysing it to death.

As they crossed the small bridge that marked the invisible line between Goa's fantasy and the regular world's monotony, a flock of crows exploded from a roadside tree, startled by the roar of their engines. They shot up into the pale-violet sky, black silhouettes cutting across the morning like flying parentheses.

Second gear took the weight.

The Highway Begins

The early stretch of highway felt like an exhale that kept expanding. The road out of Goa climbed and twisted briefly, then levelled into elongated curves, flanked by fields just waking up to light. Mist clung low over the scattered patches of water; distant hills wore a faint blue halo. Trucks and buses, heavy with overnight journeys, trundled toward them in the opposite lane, windshields painted with gods and slogans: BLOW HORN, USE DIPPER AT NIGHT, MAA KA ASHIRWAAD.

Adil eased the Claasic into second gear, feeling the familiar resistance as the machine found its stride. It was smoother than the desperate grind of his ride from Mumbai to Goa, when

every shift had felt grudging, the engine dragging the weight of his dread. This was different. Still noisy, still straining, but with less of the raw heaviness - like his mind had released one of the many hands pulling it down.

Up ahead, Jojo hunched into the wind, kurta flapping, backpack bouncing lightly with each pothole. His riding posture was easy, almost lazy - no aggressive weaving, no macho displays. He hugged his side of the road, occasionally raising two fingers off the handlebar in greeting to passing bikers, or bowing his head in mock reverence when an elaborately decorated truck lumbered past.

They didn't talk for a long time. Helmets trapped their individual weather systems; the wind rushed past, a constant roar in their ears. The rhythm settled in: throttle, gear, glance in mirrors, shift weight around slower vehicles, feel the vibrations climb through their thighs and spines.

An hour in, Adil realised something simple but startling: he felt lighter riding with Jojo nearby.

His trip from Mumbai to Goa had been a test of endurance. The road had stretched like an accusation back then. Every kilometer only reinforced how alone he was with his thoughts, his mistakes, his memories. The bike had carried him, but with every break at some lonely petrol pump or miserable highway café, he'd felt exposed - a man without an anchor, pretending the road itself was enough.

Now, as he rode, he found himself checking the mirror less often to confirm he existed. Every time he looked ahead and saw Jojo's silhouette, small but steady, cutting through the haze, something in him loosened. It wasn't that Jojo was leading the way, exactly. They both knew the highways would be a mixture

of Google Maps, asking directions, and stubborn guesswork. It was just the fact that when he was overtaking a truck, someone else was also breathing in the same exhaust. When the wind slammed unexpectedly against the side of the bike, making the handlebar wobble, someone else caught the same sudden gust.

They stopped first at a roadside tea stall that announced itself with a bold, hand-painted sign: "PURE VEG- RAJASTHANI DHABA HOTEL." The name "hotel" was generous. It was a long, low building with cracked plastic chairs, a counter stacked with steel tumblers, and a fly-buzzed glass display of biscuits and fried snacks. A faded poster of some decades-old movie heroine smiled down at them from one wall.

Jojo swung off his Bullet with a satisfied sigh. "This is it," he declared. "This is the real country. Places where the plate costs thirty rupees and the chai tastes like cardamom and petrol fumes."

Adil removed his helmet and glasses, squinting as the sudden brightness hit his eyes. His hair stuck up in strange, flattened patterns; his neck felt damp. He rolled his shoulders, letting blood flow back into muscles that had gone slightly numb.

They claimed a plastic table near the edge of the shade, where they could see their bikes. Jojo ordered like a man who had done this a hundred times: "Do cutting chai, do aloo paratha, extra butter, extra achar. And bhai, no stale oil today, haan? My stomach is a delicate flower."

The waiter snorted. "Your face says otherwise, sir."

Adil ordered plain chai at first, but when the parathas arrived - steaming, thick, with a sinful slab of butter melting and running

down the browned surface - he gave in and asked for one too. The first bite, dipped in spicy pickle, tasted like something close to forgiveness. Not for his past, but for his own body, which he'd been punishing with cold alcohol and forgotten meals.

Jojo ate with absolute focus and enthusiasm, tearing parathas with greasy fingers, talking between mouthfuls to a truck driver at the next table about mileage and road conditions. Within ten minutes, he seemed to know which dhaba ahead had the best dal, which ghat section had the worst potholes, and how many accidents had happened on the next stretch last month.

"You're quiet," Jojo remarked eventually, glancing over as he wiped his fingers on a tissue that immediately dissolved into an oily smear. "You're supposed to be the writer, no? Full of big, big words."

Adil toyed with his steel tumbler, watching the surface of the chai tremble with each passing truck. "Not anymore," he said, the admission slipping out more easily than he expected.

"Arre, nonsense." Jojo leaned back, chair creaking. "Words don't die. They just change gears until you find them again. Sometimes they stop on the side of the road for chai. Sometimes they overtake you and disappear. But they're around."

Adil made a noncommittal sound. Inside, he felt more rust than gears. The book that had once been his great, desperate offering to the world seemed now like the origin of every bad decision that followed. The attention, the flirtations, the late-night readings and messages had all inflated him until he'd burst the only real relationship that mattered, like some overripe balloon.

“You know what I think?” Jojo continued, reaching for his chai. “Silence is also a kind of writing. Highway writing. You’re taking notes with your eyes, not your pen. One day you’ll vomit it all out on paper. People like you can’t help it.”

The image was unflattering but oddly comforting.

They rode on.

The days settled into a rhythm that had nothing to do with city clocks. They woke with the first light, packed quickly, and chased the cool morning hours before the sun turned cruel. Late mornings and early afternoons they spent in motion - engines growling, sweat trickling under jackets, faces turning a shade darker under accumulated dust. Late afternoons were for chai, stretching, checking maps, arguing about routes. Nights were for whatever faded lodge, cheap guesthouse, or roadside cot presented itself.

By the third day, the novelty of simply moving had thinned enough for old thoughts to leak back in.

They were somewhere between Surat’s red-soiled outskirts and the slow, fading sprawl that would eventually give way to Gujrat’s dust. Sugarcane fields lined the highway in stubborn rows, the green leaving streaks of colour against the otherwise brown-and-grey palette of villages and industrial sheds. The road had been monotonous for hours - straight, flat, hypnotic. Words and memories had been bouncing around inside Adil’s helmet like trapped insects, getting louder with no outlet.

At a small turning where the highway bent and a rough track led off toward a cluster of trees and fields, Jojo signalled with his hand, pointing towards a tea stall that was little more than

four plastic chairs under a blue tarpaulin. Adil welcomed the break.

They parked on the gravel shoulder. The stall owner, a lean man with a resigned expression, set water to boil without being asked. A kid in an oversized T-shirt watched them with open curiosity, eyes fixed on the bikes.

They took their glasses of chai and wandered a few steps away, stopping near the edge of a sugarcane field. The canes stood tall and close together, their leaves whispering faintly in the afternoon breeze. Somewhere inside the green maze, someone laughed; a radio played a slow, old song, the melody carrying across the crop like nostalgia itself.

Jojo sipped his tea, eyes half-closed.

Adil stared at the blank stretch of sky above the field, pale and pitiless.

“I messed everything up,” he said.

The words came without preface, as if they had been waiting for a space exactly this size to spill into.

Jojo tilted his head, not looking surprised. “Who doesn’t?” he replied simply.

“No,” Adil said, heat rising in his chest. “Not the usual...messed up. Not the ‘I fought with my parents; I chose the wrong job’ messed up. The...other kind.”

“Ah,” Jojo murmured, lowering his glass. “The love-story kind.”

A bitter smile touched Adil’s lips. “She was with me when I had nothing,” he said, eyes fixed on some point far beyond the cane

tops. “Crappy job. Half-finished manuscript. Panic attacks. She read every page I wrote, even the shitty ones. She showed up at readings where five people came, and three of them were my friends.”

Jojo remained quiet, gaze steady.

“I told myself I’d love her more once I...once things became easier,” Adil continued, words gathering speed. “After the book came out. After I proved myself. After I felt like I deserved her properly. I thought... ‘later.’ Later I’ll be the boyfriend she needs. Later I’ll be the man who doesn’t snap on bad days.”

“Later is a dangerous street,” Jojo said softly. “No speed limits, no streetlights, no hospitals.”

Adil let out a breath that felt like steam. “Then the book...did well. Better than I let myself imagine. Suddenly people gave a shit. Messages, events, drink offers, stupid panel discussions. People calling me ‘brave’ for writing what I wrote, like I’d run into a burning building or something. And somewhere in that noise...I started liking the reflections more than the mirror.”

He swallowed the last of his chai in one quick gulp. The glass clinked against his teeth.

“I cheated on her,” he said, the confession landing heavy between them. “Not once. Not some tragic one-night mistake where you can blame the alcohol. Repeatedly. Because someone liked my book and liked my face and made me feel like I was...‘more’. I told myself it was nothing, just attention. That it didn’t touch the part of me that belonged to her. That line held for, what, a week?”

He laughed once, harshly.

“For what?” His voice cracked on the last word. “For ego. For this stupid...validation I pretended I didn’t need but obviously did. I ruined the one decent...solid thing I had. And the worst part is, I can’t even tell myself a pretty story about it. There was no great love affair. Just...stupidity. Laziness. Cowardice. Now it’s like every time I think of her, I see myself from the outside. And I hate that guy.”

He went silent. The radio in the fields shifted into an advertisement, the cheerful jingle jarring against the heaviness between them.

Jojo took a slow sip of his own chai, unhurried, letting the quiet stretch but not turn cruel.

“And yet,” he said eventually, “here you are.”

Adil frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Means you’re still breathing,” Jojo replied. “You didn’t jump again. You didn’t drink yourself into a coma and stay on that beach forever. You’re standing on the side of some random highway with sticky chai and a headache of guilt. That’s something.”

Adil looked away. “Tell that to her.”

Jojo’s gaze followed the line of the distant field, where a small tractor crawled like an insect.

“You want my honest opinion?” he asked.

Adil almost laughed. “I’d be offended if you gave me the polite one.”

Jojo shifted his weight, the gravel crunching under his slipper. “Forgiveness is just another road,” he said. “People talk about

it like some temple at the end of a pilgrimage. I don't see it like that. It's just...another turning, somewhere off the main highway. Looks narrow from here, looks like a village road with no lights. So, you keep ignoring it, thinking 'later, later I'll take it properly, when I'm ready, when I'm holy enough to walk there.'"

He gestured loosely towards the highway.

"But if you keep circling these big, wide lanes of self-hate and regret, you'll run out of fuel. One day your bike will stop in some godforsaken place, and then what? You'll wish you'd taken the scary turn earlier. At least there - maybe there's a mechanic, or a chai stall, or some old uncle who's seen worse."

Adil's jaw tightened. "You make it sound too simple."

"I didn't say it was simple," Jojo corrected, a faint smile ghosting across his lips. "I said it's another road. Narrow does not mean easy. It just means you can't speed on it."

He tilted his empty glass at Adil, as if toasting something invisible. "Anyway, you think flagellating yourself is more noble? Self-hate is also ego, my friend. You're still starring in your own tragedy."

The words stung - because they were not entirely wrong.

Adil felt the familiar urge to push back, to defend his right to carry this guilt like armour, to argue that absolution felt dishonest. But exhaustion tamped the arguments down. On some level, he knew that repeating the story of how terribly he'd failed was just another way of clinging to the central role in the narrative. It spared him the terrifying requirement of

moving past it, of building a self that wasn't defined only by this mistake.

He stared at the dirt, at the crushed plastic straw near his boot.

"Do you think she should forgive me?" he asked quietly.

"No idea," Jojo said immediately. "I've never met her. And even if I had, I'm not her judge, jury, or therapist. Her forgiveness is her road. I'm talking about yours."

"Mine?" Adil repeated, skeptical.

"You're allowed to forgive yourself for being human," Jojo said.

"Not today, maybe. Not tomorrow. But at some point. Otherwise, what's the point of you not being dead?"

Adil lifted his head, eyes burning. He wanted to laugh, to cry, to punch Jojo and hug him at the same time.

"You talk like some roadside philosopher," he muttered.

Jojo shrugged modestly. "Highway *gyaan*, bro. Buy one chai, get one unwanted insight free."

Cities came and went like passing moods: a cluster of hoardings, a bus stand packed with weary faces, a sudden explosion of shops and honking chaos, then open road again. Names on signboards flickered by - Jamnagar, Morbi, Rajkot, Mehsana - until they became less like destinations and more like markers in a long, continuous sentence.

Their bodies adapted. Their hands grew used to the weight of the grips, their fingers instinctively feathering the clutch before every speed breaker. Their thighs learned the precise angle of

pressure needed to keep the bikes steady when overtaking lumbering trucks. Their backs developed a dull, persistent ache that paradoxically became reassuring - proof that they were in motion.

It started small. One late afternoon, somewhere on a sunburnt stretch between one nondescript town and the next, after too many hours without shade, tempers frayed.

They had pulled over at a pump whose only charm was that it existed. Heat shimmered off the concrete forecourt; the lone attendant moved with the deliberate slowness of someone who had long ago stopped letting urgency rule his life. After filling their tanks, they leaned against the bikes under a meagre scrap of awning, sipping lukewarm bottled water.

"Where do we stop tonight?" Adil asked, wiping sweat from his neck.

Jojo squinted up the road. "Wherever feels right."

"That's not a plan," Adil said.

"Exactly." Jojo grinned, as if this proved his point beautifully.

Exasperation rose in Adil's chest. "Do you even know how far Pushkar is from here?"

"Far." Jojo shrugged. "Close enough. We'll reach when we reach. Why, you have a flight to catch from there?"

"It won't kill you to think two days ahead," Adil snapped. Tiredness put an edge on his words. "Or to at least check where we'll sleep before it's midnight and everything is full or shut."

Jojo's smile faded slightly. "Ah, so now you want *hotel-booking.com* on a Bullet."

"That's not what I -" Adil began, then stopped. He ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "Look, man, I just... I can't afford another situation where I'm stuck in the middle of nowhere with no options. I've had enough of waking up to surprises."

Jojo studied him for a second, something like understanding flickering in his eyes.

"You think you can control the road by planning it to death?" he asked, voice softer. "Storms don't check your itinerary, you know."

"I'm not talking about storms," Adil shot back. "I'm talking about basic - I don't know - respect for the fact that we're not twenty anymore, just crashing on beaches and couches."

The words slipped out before he could check them. They landed between them with a dull thud.

Jojo's eyebrows rose. "I didn't realise you felt like my school principal, bro. Should I start taking attendance also?"

The tension cracked in Adil. He sighed. "I'm not saying we need to plan every kilometer. It's just I'm tired. Really tired. My margin for chaos is...low right now."

For a moment, Jojo looked like he might snap back. Then something in his posture relaxed. He took a deep swig of water and nodded once.

“Fair,” he conceded. “I forget sometimes not everyone has burned their house behind them.” He tilted his head. “Okay. Next town, we find a place before dark. Happy?”

“Relieved,” Adil said. The word felt truer.

Jojo smirked. “Planning is for engines stuck in first gear, but fine. We’ll do half-planning. Second - gear style. We know the direction, and we know we won’t stall. The rest we see.”

Despite his irritation, Adil couldn’t suppress a snort. There was something annoyingly contagious about Jojo’s metaphors.

The days ahead stretched long but less amorphous. They developed small rituals. Morning chai strictly before nine. Fuel top-up before the gauge dropped below half. If they saw a roadside well that looked at least semi-clean, they stopped to wash faces, splash water on their heads, and sometimes just sit with their feet dangling, feeling the underground coolness seep into their bones.

They bathed wherever they could: under hand-pumps in small villages, in shared bathroom cubicles in cheap lodges, at dhabas with attached “guest houses” that offered a bucket of tepid water and a plastic mug as luxury. They rinsed their shirts and boxers in whatever bathroom sink or bucket was available, wrung them out, and hung them across the handlebars or bungeed to the rear of the bikes to dry in the slipstream.

Truckers became their informal guardians of the road. At many chai stalls, one or two would join them, asking the familiar questions: *“Kitna cc?”*, *“Kitna average de deli hai?”*, *“Kahan se aa rabe ho, kahan ja rabe ho?”* They answered with their standard half-truths: *“Bombay se,”* *“Goa ho ke aa rabe,”* *“Rajasthan side jaa rabe.”*

The whole story never made it into these roadside exchanges. They weren't sure they had the right words for it anyway.

Each tiny hotel or lodge they crashed in had its own flavour of ugliness and charm: thin mattresses with suspicious stains, fans that whirled like dying insects, fluorescent bulbs that painted everything sickly. But also: a boy who brought them extra blankets without being asked, an old manager who insisted they lock the bikes inside the gate because *"bahar rakhe to yeh gaonwale ladke sab khol ke dekhne lagenge,"* and a sleepy dog that followed them room to room like unpaid security.

For Adil, the road gradually shifted from being an escape route to becoming a place where he was forced into presence. Sedated in Goa, he had managed to forget himself in sensory overload. On the highway, there was no such luxury. He had to watch the truck ahead, feel the bike's response to every pothole, gauge whether that bus driver drifting towards the centre line had seen him or not.

He couldn't dissolve. Survival demanded alertness. In that alertness, there were moments - brief but unmistakable - when his grief, his guilt, his confusion about Meera and Rhea and everything else receded into the background hum, like another kind of road noise. He would notice the exact shade of orange in a sunset, the way a bunch of kids at a village well pointed and shouted, "Bullet! Bullet!" with glee, or how steam curled off a fresh plate of pakoras, and for a minute, those things filled his whole world.

He didn't yet call it healing. It felt too early, too fragile. But it was movement of another kind.

By the sixth day, the landscape had begun to change. The greens thinned. Browns and yellows took over. Trees became sparser, lower to the ground, bending slightly under the persistent winds that swept across open plains. Distant hills flattened into low, stony ridges. The air grew drier; the sky somehow larger.

They had crossed into Rajasthan without ceremony - one more state-line signboard, one more unnoticed milestone. Now, as the sun slid toward the horizon, the light turned bruised and expansive.

“Let’s not do a lodge tonight,” Jojo shouted during a break, the wind threatening to steal his words. “You up for sleeping under some actual sky?”

Adil hesitated. His back ached, his thighs were sore, and the idea of a bed - even a lumpy, stained one - was tempting. But the thought of yet another anonymous room, another buzzing tube light, another creaking fan also felt suffocating.

“Where?” he asked.

Jojo pointed toward the left, where a faint track led away from the highway, disappearing into scattered shrubs and stones. “I saw an old stepwell on the map near here,” he said. “Might be broken, might be haunted, might be paradise. Only one way to find out.”

Ten minutes later, engines snarling over uneven ground, they found it.

The stepwell sat like a forgotten memory carved into the earth. Flights of stone steps descended on all four sides into a square pit that was now mostly dry - a shallow pool of stagnant water

glinting faintly at the bottom, reflecting the sky in a distorted rectangle. The walls bore faded carvings of male and female figures and lotuses, half-eroded by time and neglect. A few thorny bushes clung to cracks in the stone. No other human presence was visible. Just the distant whistle of a train somewhere and the endless rustle of hot wind.

They parked their bikes near the upper ledge. Jojo walked to the edge, looked down, and let out a low whistle.

"See?" he said. "Abandoned temple for road gods."

Adil peered down, then up. The sky overhead was huge and unbroken, not yet dark enough for stars but already shedding the harshness of the day. He could imagine what it would look like a few hours from now, when full darkness settled and the artificial lights of cities were far away.

Jojo spread out their minimal bedding - thin blanket and a jacket - on the stone platform near the top steps. He rummaged in his too-small backpack and triumphantly produced a plastic bottle of cheap rum and two dented steel tumblers. Adil still wondered which place would have the fewest rocks under his back.

"I thought you said you don't drink much," Adil remarked.

"I don't," Jojo replied. "This isn't for drowning. This is for...seasoning the night."

They sat with their backs against the stepwell's upper wall, legs stretched out, the bikes to their left like two dozing animals. The last streaks of orange gave way to deepening blue overhead. As the light faded, the carvings on the stone deepened into shadow, and a hush that was different from silence settled around them - a kind of listening quiet.

They passed the bottle back and forth, cutting the rum with water, the burn mellowed but still insistent. For a while, neither spoke. Crickets started up, a ragged orchestra tuning itself. Somewhere, a dog barked once, half-heartedly, then gave up.

“What’s your story?” Adil asked eventually, the question emerging from the shared dark.

Jojo laughed softly. “My story? I’m nobody special, bro.”

“That sounds like the beginning of someone very special’s TED talk,” Adil said dryly.

Jojo took a sip, considering. “Used to sell sound systems,” he said at last. “Hyderabad side. Big shops. Home theatres, DJ sets, all that. Spent my days telling people their small room needed a bigger speaker. Spent my nights installing those same speakers at weddings and sangeets, watching aunties dance to the same songs every weekend.”

He gave a small, fond smile at the memory, then shrugged.

“Good job,” he continued. “Safe. Pays EMI. My parents could tell their relatives I ‘did electronics.’ I had proper shirts, ironed. A drawer where all my socks lived. You know, respectable adult stuff.”

“What happened?” Adil asked.

Jojo tipped his head back against the stone, looking up at the darkening sky. “Nothing dramatic, which is the most depressing part. No big tragic break-up, no boss screaming, no epiphany. Just one day, I caught myself selling this huge, expensive system to a guy who clearly just wanted to drown out

his own head. He kept saying, *'Bass zyada chahiye, bhai, aur zyada, sab bilna chahiye.'*"

He mimed the customer's frantic gestures.

"And I realised I'd become a professional volume-increaser," Jojo said. "My entire life was...selling people more noise. And then going home and adding my own by scrolling, drinking, small distractions. I hadn't listened to an actual silence in years."

"So you left?" Adil asked.

"One day I didn't go to the shop," Jojo said simply. "Next day also, I didn't go. Third day, my boss called and shouted. I felt nothing. So, I packed a small bag, sold some junk, bought that Bullet, and left."

"Just like that?" Adil said.

"Just like that," Jojo replied. "Became one more moving dot on Google Maps. Been riding ever since. North, south, back, forth. Sometimes three months on the road, sometimes I stop somewhere, work odd jobs, save, ride again. I'm like a bad radio station drifting in and out of range in different people's lives."

Adil studied his profile in the half-light. The starlight, faint but growing, picked out the edges of Jojo's cheekbones, the line of his nose, the scattered silver in his beard. He looked both older and younger than his actual years - someone who had seen enough to be tired, but not enough to close.

"Don't you ever want...stability?" Adil asked. The word felt clumsy in his mouth, loaded with his own history of failed attempts.

Jojo went quiet for a moment. The rustle of wind in the stepwell's depths filled the gap.

"Sometimes," he admitted. "When I see some friends posting pictures with their kids, their Sunday lunches, their... what you call...routines. Part of me thinks, 'Maybe I took a wrong exit somewhere.'"

He rolled the metal tumbler between his hands.

"But then I remember I was never really good at standing still," he continued. "Even in school, I'd finish a test early and start walking around the class until the teacher shouted. I get...itchy in one place. Like the air thickens if I breathe it too long."

He turned his head slightly. "Families, jobs, marriages - they're all gears too, no? Some people ride them forever. Some people half-clutch, half-brake and burn them out. Me? I just...never shifted into those. I stayed on this open - road gear. For now."

"For now," Adil repeated. "That implies you might change."

Jojo exhaled a short laugh. "Maybe one day I'll meet someone who makes me want to remove my slippers at the door and buy matching pillow covers. Or maybe my knees will give up and I'll open a chai stall like this next to some highway and torture passing bikers with my philosophy."

He looked back up at the sky, where the first dense cluster of stars had fully emerged.

"I've made peace with being a moving dot in other people's memories," he said quietly. "That's enough for me right now. Being the main character in your own life is overrated. I like being the guy they remember while refueling ten years later:

‘Remember that weirdo in khadi who said forgiveness is a road?’ That’s enough immortality.”

Adil followed his gaze. The sky above the stepwell was obscene in its clarity. Stars spilled everywhere, layers upon layers, like someone had taken salt and flung it across black velvet. The universe did not care about his book sales, his betrayal, his failed attempt with Mehul Bhai’s revolver. And somehow, that realisation brought a strange relief.

“I envy you,” he said, surprising himself with the honesty. “You sound like you...know who you are. Even if that person keeps moving.”

Jojo snorted softly. “Arre, please. Don’t make me into some mountain baba. I’m still confused most days. I just got comfortable with the confusion. That’s all.”

Adil turned his head back, letting his skull rest on the cool stone, eyes roaming the vast, glittering dark.

He thought of his study room again, of how small the city had looked from that window, how the air had felt frozen in his lungs. He thought of Meera’s head on his lap, of the way she’d told him to close his eyes as if she had the power to hold back the whirlpool of madness clawing at his mind. He thought of Rhea’s face the last time he’d seen it - not angry, not screaming, just...tired.

He had spent so much time imagining his life as a line leading up to some climax - publication, success, love, then tragedy - that he’d forgotten life was also made of these quiet, in-between places. A forgotten stepwell under a huge sky. A back-and-forth conversation with a stranger who happened to share the road for a few hundred kilometers.

He didn't feel serene. But he felt, for the first time in months, a stillness that wasn't numbness. A pause without panic. A small clearing in the forest.

The seventh day broke cooler than the others.

The desert outskirts softened into something more intricate as they approached Pushkar - less barren, more textured. Low hills rolled in like waves frozen mid-crest, dotted with scrub and small temples clinging to unlikely slopes. The air carried a different mix of smells: dust, cow dung, incense, frying kachoris, and the faint, sweet scent of marigolds.

The highway narrowed as they turned off toward the town, giving way to streets that had clearly been built long before anyone thought of cars. The Classic and the Bullet felt suddenly large and clumsy, squeezing past wandering cows, children in school uniforms, tourists in loose cotton clothes, sadhus wrapped in saffron.

They slowed near the lake without fully meaning to. It drew the eye like a magnet.

Pushkar Lake lay cupped at the town's heart, its waters a muted silver under the mid-morning light. Ghats stepped down all around it in layered stone, like hands reaching to touch the surface. Whitewashed buildings stacked over each other along the banks - temples, guesthouses, small homes with splashes of blue, pink, and yellow where someone had painted a door or a ledge. The reflections doubled everything: sky, buildings, birds, the occasional priest.

Adil cut the engine and coasted the last few metres to a halt under a tree heavy with dusty leaves. The sudden silence after days of constant mechanical vibration rang in his ears.

He removed his helmet slowly, like someone taking off a mask. The air against his sweat-damp hair felt almost intimate.

Jojo pulled up beside him and killed his own engine, patting the Bullet's tank affectionately. "*Bas,*" he said. "We're here. Second gear complete, boss."

Adil swung his leg off the bike and stood, stretching his spine. His legs felt oddly wobbly without the familiar weight of the machine beneath them. He took a few steps forward onto the dusty stone, drawn unconsciously towards the lake.

The town buzzed, but the buzz was softer than Goa's manic shriek. Bells chimed from a distant temple. Somewhere to his left, a flute played a reedy, tentative melody, like someone still learning their way around the instrument. A priest was chanting a mantra softly as he guided an old couple through their ritual at the water's edge. Pigeons erupted now and then from the rooftops, spiralling up before settling again.

A young boy in a grubby shirt approached them with flowers cupped in his hands. "Puja, sir? Special Pushkar aarti. You from where?"

Jojo smiled and waved him off gently. "*Ek minute, beta. Peble hum thud to samajh lein hum kaban hai.*"

The boy shrugged and darted away towards a new arrival - a foreign couple with cameras.

Adil stood at the edge of the ghat, looking at his reflection in the lake. It wobbled with each ripple, features distorting, then

returning. Behind his reflection, he could see the sky, the steps, the faint shadow of the buildings.

Something inside him unclenched. Not vanished, not mended, but eased.

The road had compressed the distance between Mumbai's hospital bed and this holy lake into a continuous memory. No clear dividing lines, no tidy chapters. But standing here, he could feel a slight change in his internal air pressure like he'd climbed enough altitude to notice his own breathing different.

Jojo came to stand beside him, hands in his pockets.

"Well," Jojo said. "Official announcement time. Congratulations. You have survived Mumbai hospital, Goa devils, highway boredom, *dhaba* oil, and my bad singing. You have now reached...Second Gear: Completed."

He said it in a mock game-show host voice, but his eyes were warm.

Adil huffed a soft laugh. "Is there a trophy?"

"Of course," Jojo said, looking around theatrically. He bent briefly, picked up a small white stone from the edge of the steps, and pressed it into Adil's palm. "Limited edition, Pushkar Lake paperweight slash worry stone. Whenever your brain starts eating itself, you hold this and remember you rode all this way instead of trying to shoot yourself again."

The words landed heavy and gentle at once.

Adil closed his fingers around the stone. It was smooth and cool, edges softened by years of water and feet.

"You're really not subtle, you know that?" he said.

“Subtlety is for people who have settled,” Jojo replied. “We’re just passing through.”

They found a cheap guesthouse a few alleys away from the lake, run by a man with tired eyes and a surprisingly sharp sense of humour. Their room was on the rooftop, accessible by a narrow staircase. From there, they could see over the patchwork of flat roofs, satellite dishes, drying clothes, and occasional monkeys stealing fruit. The lake’s shimmer just outside the balcony.

That evening, after they’d washed off layers of dust and changed into whatever passed for clean clothes, they wandered back to the ghats. The sky had begun its transition, moving from harsh blue to something gentler. The air cooled, lifting the tiredness from their shoulders like a patient hand.

They sat on the stone steps, a few feet above the water, shoes left behind respectfully. Around them, life unfolded in small, precise rituals. Women in bright saris poured water over their heads. A group of young men sat in a circle, whispering, occasionally bursting into laughter and then shushing each other when a nearby priest glared. Bells rang as the first evening aartis began in different temples.

A priest approached them, offered a tilak, muttered a blessing that was half formula, half improvisation. Adil bowed his head, not because he suddenly believed in the lake’s promised absolution, but because it felt wrong to stand stubbornly apart. The smear of red on his forehead felt like a small, cool anchoring point.

As the light softened, a more organised aarti began further along the ghat lamps raised and lowered in synchronized arcs, chants cresting and falling. The reflection of the flames in the

lake rippled and multiplied until it looked like the water itself was burning quietly.

Adil watched, letting the rhythmic sound wash over him. He did not ask for forgiveness. He did not offer any dramatic promises to be better. He simply sat and let his breath match the tempo of the chants, in and out, in and out.

Something inside him - a knot he'd carried from Mumbai through Goa and across the highways, loosened a fraction.

"Neutral next?" he asked after a while, his tone light but carrying an undercurrent of genuine curiosity. "Is that how this...gear system of yours works?"

Jojo shook his head, a small smile playing on his lips as he watched the floating lamps being set into the water by children.

"No, boss. Neutral is what you were in Goa. Engine running, not moving. We've already done that. Next is third gear."

He glanced sideways at Adil.

"And that one," Jojo added, "is mostly yours."

"Mine?" Adil echoed.

"Yeah." Jojo stretched his legs out, toes flexing and relaxing.

"Third gear is where you stop just...running from the crash and start actually...rebuilding something. Learning to ride at a steady speed instead of jerking from full throttle to full brake all the time."

Adil considered that. The idea of rebuilding felt both promising and terrifying. It implied a future that hadn't been completely written off.

"And you?" he asked. "Where are you in all this?"

“I’m an old bike with no proper meter,” Jojo said easily. “Sometimes I think I’m in fourth already: sometimes I stall in first like a newbie. It doesn’t matter. For this part, I’m just...pillion on your journey. Even if I’m on my own bike.”

The phrasing struck Adil. A companion who did not demand to be the destination. Someone willing to be a side character. After Rhea, after the Goa crowd, after Meera’s bright, slippery presence, the modesty of Jojo’s role in his life felt strangely precious.

They sat there until the sky turned fully dark and the lake became a sheet of black glass pricked with small, floating lights.

Adil thought of the road that had brought him here. Not just the asphalt, but the invisible one inside: the failed suicide attempt, the hospital escape, the first long ride, the self-destruction in Goa, the sting of being cheated, the shame of calling Mehul bhai for rescue, the unexpected conversation with a stranger in a café, the decision to leave with him, the confessions on random highways, the nights of camping under uncaring stars.

He felt no grand revelation rising. No cinematic swell of violins in his head. What he felt instead was quieter: a sense that he had crossed some kind of internal checkpoint. That second gear - the phase of heavy dragging forward, of stubborn persistence in spite of constant friction - had done its work.

Ahead lay something different. Not easier. Just...different.

The thought scared him. And thrilled him. Both at once.

He looked at Jojo, silhouetted against the lake’s soft light, face relaxed, eyes half-closed.

“You going to stick around?” Adil asked. “In Pushkar?”

“For a bit,” Jojo said. “Then maybe I’ll drift. Some other angry man on some other highway will need unsolicited philosophical advice. Can’t deprive the world.”

Adil smiled, the expression reaching his eyes.

“Selfless service,” he said.

“*Seva*, bro,” Jojo agreed, grinning. “Of the most annoying kind.”

They fell into a comfortable quiet again, the kind that did not demand to be filled.

For the first time since he’d left Mumbai, Adil did not feel like he was running from something. He didn’t even fully feel like he was running towards something. He felt suspended between past and future, between guilt and forgiveness, between collapse and growth - on a sort of invisible plateau.

Second gear had brought him here: To this holy lake, this sprawling little town, this man with a too-light backpack and too-heavy wisdom; To the edge of an inner terrain that he had yet to map.

Third gear waited somewhere ahead.

And for the first time, the thought of engaging it did not terrify him. It felt like a dare the road was throwing at him - gentle but insistent.

He turned the small white stone in his pocket with his fingers and watched the lamps drift across the water, carrying other people’s prayers into the dark.

His own, he decided, could wait. For now, it was enough that he was still here to ride.

3



The morning in Pushkar felt like waking up inside a memory he could not remember making.

Adil surfaced from sleep to the sound of bells - thin, bright notes drifting up from some temple below, striking the quiet room like small stones on glass. For a moment, he didn't know where he was; his body still expected hospital disinfectant, or Goa's stale alcohol haze, or the endless grumble of the highway. Then the air reached him properly - cooler, laced with incense and dust and something faintly floral - and the previous day slid back into place.

Pushkar. The lake. The ghats. Jojo's stupid game-show announcement: *"Second gear complete, boss."*

He turned his head on the flat pillow. The rooftop room was small but open, light seeping in from the balcony door they'd left half-closed. The walls were lime-washed an uneven white, cracked faintly in the corners. Jojo's charpoy across the room

was empty, the bedsheet crumpled in a shape that suggested he'd rolled out of it without ceremony.

Typical. Adil checked the small wall clock. Just past seven.

He sat up slowly, his muscles complaining in that now-familiar way - ache without panic. The road had taught his body a new vocabulary of pain: dull, persistent, but not destructive. He ran a hand over his face, feeling stubble, then swung his legs over the side and stood. Bare feet met the cool of the tiled floor. The sound of the lake was faint, more presence than noise, like breath in another room.

On the small table between the beds sat two glass tumblers and a half-burnt agarbatti stuck in an empty bottle. The room smelled of sandalwood, maybe. On the chair, his jacket hung like molted skin. The last weeks fanned through his head in quick snapshots: Mumbai flat's humid room, hospital sheets, Goa's neon nightmare, Jojo at the café table, the endless highway, that night at the stepwell under thick, obscene stars, and finally the first glimpse of Pushkar Lake cupped like a secret in the town's heart.

He stepped out onto the narrow balcony.

The view hit him in the chest all over again.

Pushkar Lake lay spread out below, a rough oval of muted silver. The morning light was soft, the sun still low, lending everything a gentle blur. Ghats wrapped around the water on all sides, broad steps descending in worn pale stone. Whitewashed buildings climbed up behind them, stacked and leaned into each other - temples with shikharas stabbing the sky, guesthouses with painted signs, small homes with blue doors and strings of drying clothes. The reflections doubled them all, an upside-down town trembling with each ripple.

The air was cool, carrying stray notes of temple bells and distant chanting. Somewhere, a cow mooed in protest. A dog barked once, half-hearted.

Adil wrapped his hands around the balcony railing, leaning into it. A strange nostalgia rolled through him, strong and inexplicable. He had never been to Pushkar before. Yet the worn stone steps, the white walls streaked with time, the way the morning haze folded around the lake - it all felt weirdly familiar. Like something he'd seen in a dream that used to visit often and had stopped without saying goodbye.

A knock sounded behind him. The guesthouse owner's teenage son slipped in with two steel tumblers of chai balanced on a tray.

"Good morning, sir," the boy said. "Uncle went out. He told me to give you chai first."

"Thanks," Adil replied, taking one. The glass warmed his fingers instantly, steam curling up into his face.

The boy peered past him at the lake, as if checking it was still there. "*Aaj subah babut shaant hai*," he said. "*Kal raat kaafi bheed thi*."

Adil nodded, though he'd slept through most of it.

After the boy left, he heard the scrape of slippers and the soft thump of a backpack hitting the floor. Jojo stepped out onto the balcony, hair damp from a quick bucket bath, kurta clinging slightly to his back.

"Ah, look at that," Jojo said, picking up his chai. "Our hero has survived his first Pushkar night without any psychedelic sadhus or German drummers stealing his soul. Good sign."

Adil smirked. "You left early."

"Old habit," Jojo replied. "New places, I like to walk before the crowds wake. Get the...first draft of the town, you know? Before people edit it with their noise."

They drank their chai in companionable silence for a while. Below, a small group of women in bright saris descended the ghat, brass pots in hand. They moved with practiced grace, skirts swaying, anklets chiming, silhouettes reflected in the water like shifting brushstrokes.

"Feels...old," Adil said eventually. "Not just historically. Like my bones remember it."

Jojo glanced sideways. "You get those déjà vu places, huh?"

"Sometimes," Adil admitted. "But this is stronger. I keep feeling like I should know which lane turns where."

"Maybe past life," Jojo said lightly. "You were some sadhu here, writing poetry and refusing to get married."

"Sounds like present life also," Adil said dryly.

They finished their chai and dressed to go out - softer clothes now, no riding gear. As they descended the narrow staircase, the guesthouse owner called out from the reception desk, "Room is okay, sir? Light, fan, water?"

"Sab theek hai," Jojo replied. *"Bas view thoda zyada accha hai. Dil nahi karega yaboo se jaana."*

The man chuckled. *"Yahan aane wala koi jaldi nahi jaata,"* he said. *"Pushkar pakad leta hai."*

Outside, the lanes swallowed them almost immediately.

The road in front of the guesthouse was barely wider than a car, paved in uneven stone. Cows claimed as much right of way as scooters. A tea stall had already gathered a small crowd of men hunched over glasses, discussing politics and weather in equal measure. Shops rolled up their shutters slowly: one selling puja items - incense, small copper lotas, packets of sindoor; another stacked with Rajasthani textiles that spilled colour into the lane; yet another displaying silver jewellery, each piece catching slivers of light.

Adil walked slowly, letting his eyes idle. Doorways with peeling paint revealed dark interiors where grandmothers sat on charpoys, hair wrapped in white cloth, watching the world with uninterested eyes. Children in mismatched uniforms darted around them, schoolbags bouncing, shouting "Good morning!" to no one in particular. The smell of frying kachoris made his stomach ping with both hunger and happiness.

They paused at a corner where the lane forked. Ahead, a sign pointed toward the Brahma Temple.

"Up there," Jojo said. "The famous one. Creator-in-chief's HQ."

Adil nodded. "Let's go."

The climb was short but steep, steps cut into the slope, walls pressing close on either side. Halfway up, they passed a small shrine where a priest sprinkled water on their heads without asking, muttering a mechanical blessing. At the top, the world opened again.

The Brahma Temple wasn't towering like the ones in the big cities. It sat solid and self-contained, its stone structure painted partially in white, partially in red. The shikhara rose modestly,

flanked by smaller spires, each bearing the weight of centuries gently but firmly. Carvings etched along the base showed lotuses, swans, and human figures in devotional postures, worn smooth by weather and fingers.

At the entrance, a priest in a slightly frayed dhoti held a basket of flowers and red threads.

“First time in Pushkar?” the priest asked, eyes settling unerringly on Adil.

“Yeah,” Adil replied.

“Then first take darshan of Brahma ji,” the priest said. “Only proper way.”

They slipped off their shoes, feet meeting cool stone. Inside, the garbhagriha was small and intimate. The four-faced idol of Brahma sat at the center, decorated with fresh flowers and garlands, a brass crown catching the faint light. Oil lamps flickered, and the low murmur of mantras filled the enclosed space like a low, constant tide.

Adil stood in the back, hands unconsciously pressing together. He didn’t ask for anything. He didn’t make deals with the god of creation. He just stood, letting the space lay its age around him.

So much of his life recently had been about destruction - of trust, of relationships, of his own sense of self. Standing before a deity whose job description was creation felt almost confrontational. *What are you building, Adil?* a voice inside him whispered. *Or are you only good at breaking?*

Jojo bowed briefly, then stepped back, giving Adil room he hadn't asked for. After a few moments, they turned and left, returning to the glare of the outside.

Walking back down, Jojo nudged him gently. "How much did you ask for?"

"Nothing," Adil said. "Felt weird to ask."

Jojo smiled. "Good. Gods must be tired of shopping lists."

They spent the rest of the first day as casual explorers. No agenda, no targets. They walked by the lake, watched a group of foreign backpackers attempt synchronized yoga on the ghat and fall into giggles. They ate aloo puri from a vendor whose hands moved like a machine, flipping puris into hot oil with a precision born of repetition, and drank chai that somehow tasted different here - more cardamom, less dust.

Every now and then, Adil felt the dull awareness of the life he'd left behind pushing at the edges of his mind: Rhea's tired eyes; Meera's reckless grin in Goa; his book, now a physical object in the world he no longer wanted to touch. But Pushkar's pace kept pulling him back into the present. The gentle clutter, the rings of bells from overlapping temples, the lake's stillness - it all pressed his thoughts into slower shapes.

By evening, they found themselves back on the ghats, drawn like moths to the water.

They sat a few steps up this time, bare feet resting on warm stone. Around them, the energy shifted gradually as the sun sloped downward. Priests prepared for aartis, arranging plates with lamps and flowers. Pigeons crowded the rooftops like gray punctuation marks. A dog lay sprawled on a step below, tail tapping lazily whenever someone passed.

They didn't talk much. Words seemed too sharp against the lake's surface.

A priest came by with a tray, applied tilak on their foreheads, muttered a blessing. Adil bowed his head without arguing with his own skepticism. The cool smear of red at his brow felt strangely grounding, a physical acknowledgment of being here, now, among these people and their ancient routines.

As lamps were lit and chants rose in layered waves, Adil's breath fell into rhythm. In. Out. In. Out. He didn't feel absolved. The lake didn't suddenly swallow his guilt and spit out a brand-new man. But something inside that had been coiled tight from Mumbai through Goa through the endless highway loosened another fraction.

Next gear, he knew, did not mean sudden speed. It meant a different kind of movement.

He didn't yet know that the morning would sound like a flute.

The second morning announced itself not with bells, but with a flute.

Adil drifted awake to a pure, clear note sliding through the air like a silver thread. It hovered at the edge of his consciousness at first, weaving around a dream, then pulled him fully out of sleep. He lay still for a moment, listening. The melody was simple but not childish - unhurried phrases, repeated and slightly altered, rising and dipping like someone talking softly to the lake.

He turned his head.

Jojo's bed was empty again, sheets tangled. No sign of him. No scribbled note, no sarcastic comment about "sleeping beauty". Just absence.

The flute continued, steady and insistent.

Adil swung his legs off the bed, slipped into his jeans and a thin shirt, and stepped out onto the balcony. The lake below was already awake. A few pilgrims bathed at the far ghat, their silhouettes small. A group of boys sat on a lower step, engaged in an argument punctuated by hand gestures. But the sound that sharpened everything came from slightly to the right, near the water's edge.

A small stone canopy stood on one of the ghats, nothing elaborate - just four stone pillars and a beautiful stone chhatra resting on top of them. Under it sat a woman.

She was cross-legged on a woven mat, flute lifted to her lips, body utterly still except for her fingers. Even from this distance, Adil could sense something unusual about her. Foreigners weren't rare in Pushkar, but this one seemed to belong to the scene in a way most didn't. No camera, no restless scanning of surroundings. Just a stillness that seemed to expand around her.

Curiosity tugged. He grabbed his sandals, slipped them on, and headed down.

From close, she was even more striking.

Her skin was pale, the kind that seemed almost translucent in the morning light, a cool contrast to the browns and reds of the ghats. Her hair was a tumble of dreadlocks, thick ropes falling around her shoulders and down her back, mostly black but streaked with dark brown that caught the sun in irregular lines. A long U-shaped tilak of sandalwood paste curved down

her forehead in the Vaishnava style - two straight lines starting near her hairline, sweeping down between her brows, meeting in a delicate point at the bridge of her nose. It was the same kind of tilak he had seen on Krishna devotees in photos from Vrindavan.

She wore a simple green blouse, the cotton soft and slightly faded, sleeves ending just above her elbows. Wrapped around her was a beige cotton saree, draped not in the crisp, urban style he was used to, but loosely, comfortably, as if she'd learned the wrap by living in it rather than watching videos. Three or four green glass bangles clinked lightly on each thin wrist as her fingers moved on the flute. Around both ankles, thick silver kadas hugged her skin - solid, ornate, catching the light with each almost invisible shift of position.

Her face, calm, lips gently pursed against the flute's mouthpiece, eyes half-closed, looked like something out of an old temple frieze. Bliss radiated quietly from it, not the loud, performative kind he'd seen on Goa's trance-dazed faces, but a settled, deep contentment. She didn't fidget, didn't twitch. The only movement he could see was the subtle rise and fall of her chest as she breathed into the flute, and the delicate dance of her fingers over the instrument's holes, guiding the airflow into rhythm.

He sat down a little to her side, not too close, waiting for the piece to finish.

The last note hung in the air a heartbeat longer than sound should, then dissolved. She lowered the flute, resting it on her lap. Her eyes opened slowly.

They were brown - dark, clear, and startlingly present.

"That was..." Adil started, then stopped, embarrassed by the inadequacy of every word that came to mind.

"Good morning," she said instead, her voice softly accented, vowels rounded in a way that suggested somewhere in Europe - maybe Germany, maybe Poland, he couldn't tell. Her Hindi, he would later learn, was strangely fluent. For now, she used English.

"You can sit closer," she added, smiling faintly. "The lake won't mind."

He shifted a little nearer, the stone cool under his thighs. "I'm Adil."

"Radha," she said.

The name fit her in a way that made him almost laugh. "Of course it is," he said, then immediately worried he sounded mocking.

But she seemed amused. "Yes," she said. "Of course it is. Everyone says that. It wasn't my name before. But here, it became my name."

"You live here?" he asked.

"Sometimes," she said, lifting one shoulder. "I live in many places. But Pushkar is...anchor." She knuckled the flute lightly. "And you?"

"Just arrived yesterday," he said. "Road trip. From Mumbai. Goa in between. With a friend."

“The tall one with the backpack and the bad slippers,” she said. “He walked past during mangal aarti, humming some filmi song.”

Adil blinked. “That sounds accurate.”

She smiled again, eyes crinkling. “You looked tired yesterday,” she said. “At the aarti. Heavy on the inside.”

He felt suddenly naked. “You...noticed?”

“The lake noticed,” she said simply. “I listen.”

They fell into conversation as naturally as if it had been waiting since yesterday.

“What are you playing?” Adil asked, nodding at the flute.

“Just a simple raga,” she said. “Morning scale. Nothing fancy. But in the morning, you don’t need complicated things.”

“That’s the opposite of my life,” he said. “Complicated first thing, then it gets messier.”

She tilted her head. “And you confuse this with living,” she said, not unkindly.

Adil frowned. “Don’t tell me you’re one of those ‘leave everything and meditate’ people.”

Radha laughed, a clear, unforced sound. “No,” she said. “I tried that. I stayed in an ashram for almost one year. My mind made more noise there than in Berlin. Silence outside, chaos inside. Very disappointing.”

“Berlin,” he repeated. “You’re German?”

“Mostly,” she said. “Mother is German. Father is...complicated.” She waved a hand, as if brushing the detail aside. “But bliss is not an ashram. Or a city. Or a boyfriend. Or a high. It is what is left when you stop doing the things that block it.”

He blinked. “That sounds like Jojo.”

“Your friend?” she asked.

“Highway philosopher,” he said. “Talks in gear metaphors. Says I’ve finished second gear.”

“And now?” she asked.

“Third,” he said, then hesitated. “Whatever that means.”

She looked at the lake, then back at him. “Third gear is good,” she said. “You can go faster, but not so fast that you forget you are moving.”

They stood and walked, her flute tucked into a simple cloth bag. She set a slow pace along the ghat, bare feet sure on the stone. Adil watched the way she moved: unhurried, as if time obeyed her.

They talked of bliss.

“In the West,” she said, “we think we must *do* something to feel good. Yoga, therapy, travel, sex, drinking, long lists of ‘self-care’ activities. Here,” she gestured around them, “I see people doing almost nothing, and sometimes they glow. Old women sitting, just sitting, looking at water. A sadhu staring at a wall all day. They have less, but in their eyes, sometimes more.”

"You think poverty is bliss?" Adil asked, a faint edge to his voice.

"No," she said immediately, the smile dropping. "Poverty is lack. And lack can crush. But attachment is different. Rich or poor, we cling to things, to people, to ideas. We say, 'My job, my lover, my sadness, my story.' You cling very tightly to your sadness, I think."

He bristled. "You met me yesterday."

She tapped her temple lightly. "Bliss is not something we chase," she said. "It is background. It is always here. But we build so many noisy structures on top of it - anxieties, stories, blame, games. Then we say, 'I cannot find bliss. It must be hiding.'" She shook her head. "It is not hiding. We are."

They stopped at a spot where a small temple jutted into the water, its steps green with moss. Bells hung from its doorway, dull brass polished only by occasional touch.

"So what do we do?" Adil asked. "Just...drop everything?"

"Not everything," she said. "You do not need to start anything to feel bliss. You need to stop some things. Stop believing every thought. Stop checking your wounds every five minutes to see if they are still there. Stop making a home in your own suffering."

He leaned against a pillar, the stone cool against his back. "Easier said than done," he muttered.

"Yes," she said. "Very much so. That is why people make apps for meditation. They want shortcuts to stopping. But we cannot outsource that. It is very boring soul-work - sitting with

yourself and refusing to pick up every distraction when it passes.”

Her words hit deeper than they should have from someone he'd just met. Jojo had thrown philosophy at him like parables. Radha's words felt less like ideas and more like gentle reprimands.

He found himself talking.

He talked about Goa, in condensed form. The spiral into pills and parties, Meera's bright recklessness, the humiliation of waking up robbed. He talked about Rhea without naming her, the woman who'd held his panic with her bare hands and then had to carry the weight of his betrayal. He admitted the suicide attempt flatly, like a fact that had happened to someone else.

Radha listened without interruption, her gaze steady, occasionally inspecting a passing detail - a child's laugh, the way the light folded on the water - as if to remind him there was still a world outside his narrative.

“You speak of Jojo with respect,” she said when he paused. “He pulled you out from the darkest part of the city.”

“He did,” Adil said. “He also irritates me. His...lightness. His refusal to plan. Sometimes I feel like he's...riding my transformation. Enjoying being the wise stranger in my story.”

“And you?” she asked. “Do you enjoy being the broken protagonist?”

He faltered. “I don't...”

“Maybe,” she said, not unkindly. “We all enjoy our roles. The savior. The victim. The philosopher. The muse. Hard to step out.”

“Where does that leave bliss then?” he asked.

“In the space between roles,” she said. “When you stop performing for a moment. When you look at the lake without saying, ‘Ah, this lake is healing me.’ It is just a lake, you are just you, and yet there is a calm. That calm is closer to bliss than any story about it.”

They walked past a line of stalls selling malas and beads. One vendor waved a handful of rudraksha at them. “Special meditation mala, sir. Imported from Nepal. Instant peace.”

Radha smiled at the man. “Peace is always instant,” she told Adil quietly as they moved on. “It is the decision that is slow.”

Her intuition unnerved him. The way she seemed to sense not just what he said, but what hung behind it. There were moments when he wanted to snap at her, to tell her she didn’t know him, that she hadn’t seen him at his worst. But another part of him recognised the same thing he’d recognised in Jojo on that first café day: a person who had wrestled with their own shadows long enough to speak plainly.

Their conversations over the next two days became a kind of gentle excavation. Mornings by the lake, Radha playing the flute until the sun grew too high, then talking. Afternoons wandering the twisting alleys, looking at Pushkar through her eyes. She pointed out the way old houses leaned into each other - “like old couples who no longer stand straight alone”. She showed him a small, almost-hidden shrine where someone had placed a cracked mirror instead of an idol. “We worship ourselves even when we pretend we do not,” she said.

Adil found himself looking forward to these hours more than he had looked forward to anything in months. When she left - disappearing into some ashram, or up to one of the hilltop temples, or simply to her own quiet - he felt the absence physically, like air thinning.

He still saw Jojo in the evenings. They would sit on the rooftop, sharing cheap food and occasional rum, talking about road, about nothing. Jojo made jokes about the “foreign Radha” and her flute, but his eyes watched Adil closely, measuring some invisible shift.

Between the two of them, Adil felt like someone being pulled between two teachings of the same subject.

He didn’t realize how much he had come to rely on the tension until the morning Jojo vanished.

On the seventh morning in Pushkar, he woke again to the flute, a comfort now. The room was washed in the soft light that came just before the day shook itself fully awake. He rolled onto his side automatically, expecting to see Jojo’s familiar outline - limbs sprawled, mouth slightly open, notebook fallen off the bed.

Instead, he saw an absence.

The charpoy was empty, the bedsheet roughly folded. On the pillow, a folded paper.

Adil sat up, heart tightening, though he wasn’t sure why. He reached for the note, recognising Jojo’s sprawling handwriting even before he unfolded it.

Adil,

Third gear's yours now, boss.

Keep the clutch light. Don't ride with the handbrake of guilt on all the time.

You don't need a philosopher on the next stretch. You need your own stupid mistakes and your own small victories.

Ride safe. If the road is kind, we'll cross again somewhere between a bad dhaba and a good sunset.

— Jojo

P.S. Forgiveness is not a destination. It's the road itself. You're already on it, like it or not.

No long goodbye. No discussion. No argument about routes or hotel planning.

Just gone.

A familiar mix of emotions surged: irritation, sadness, relief, and something like fear. Jojo had become a strange kind of safety net, annoying but reliable. Bolt loose and steady at once. The idea of moving forward without his off-key humming and badly timed wisdom felt like being pushed onto a highway alone again.

Adil read the note twice, then folded it carefully, slipping it into the pocket where the white lake stone already lay. Two talismans now: one from Jojo, one from the water.

He washed his face quickly, the tin bucket's water shockingly cold, and went downstairs.

Radha was already at the ghat, under her canopy, flute resting in her lap instead of at her lips. As he approached, she looked up, eyes going straight to his.

“He left,” she said.

He stopped. “You...knew?”

She nodded. “The air felt...emptier,” she said. “Some people carry noise even when they are quiet. Your friend was like that. This morning, the space felt cleaner, but also a little sad.”

Adil sat beside her, exhaling in a long, thin stream. “He didn’t wait. Just a note.”

She held out her hand silently. He gave her the folded paper.

She read, eyes moving quickly, then handed it back. “This is kind,” she said. “He is not abandoning you. He is...stepping out of your story at the right time.”

“It doesn’t feel right,” Adil said. “I thought after everything we’d at least decide when to move on. Together.”

Radha tilted her head. “You met him on the road, yes? You did not schedule that meeting. Why should the goodbye be scheduled?”

He barked out a short laugh, devoid of humor. “You sound like him.”

“Maybe he infected me,” she said lightly. “Or maybe some truths are simple enough that strangers can see them from different angles.”

For the next two days, Jojo became a ghost that hovered at the edges of Adil’s experience of Pushkar.

He found himself mentally turning to make a comment about a particularly loud Israeli group bargaining for lesser rates on camel rides, about a priest scolding a foreigner for stepping into

the water with shoes on, and then remembering there was no Jojo beside him to share it with. The absence was a shape, present even when unmentioned.

Radha seemed to understand without prying. She didn't try to fill Jojo's space. She just occupied her own.

They continued their morning routine: flute, walk, talk. Only now, Adil's words reached deeper.

He told her, for the first time in any detail, about Rhea. About the slow erosion of the relationship, not just the sharp break at the end. How he'd begun to resent the very stability she offered, even as he depended on it. How the book's success had felt like permission to become someone else, and how that someone else had turned out to be a version of him he could barely look at now.

"She was with me when I was nobody," he said one afternoon, sitting on a bench overlooking the lake. "When the book was just a messy Word document and a bad habit. She read every draft. She believed in it more than I did. And as soon as the world started agreeing with her, I decided I needed...more. More attention, more admiration, more...whatever. I kept telling myself I'd be a better partner once I'd arrived. But I never decided what 'arrived' meant. I just kept moving the goalpost."

Radha listened; arms folded loosely around her knees.

"I told myself the...affairs," he said, the word tasting sour, "were just...nothing. 'Just physical'. 'Harmless'. Lies that sounded sophisticated. I thought I could keep my heart ring-fenced for her and still...pick up validation like snacks."

“Did she know?” Radha asked.

“In the end, yes,” Adil said. “She found out. Not because I confessed. Because...people talk. Screenshots travel. She didn’t shout. That’s what killed me. She just...looked at me like she was seeing a stranger. And she said, ‘I don’t recognize who you’ve become.’”

He swallowed. The memory alone could still tighten his throat.

“I tried to win her back,” he continued. “Flowers, apologies, therapy appointments. All the standard...redemption script. But it was like punching a code into a lock that had already been melted. The door was just gone.”

Silence settled between them for a few breaths.

“You admire Jojo because he left his life before he turned into someone he hated,” Radha said eventually. “You hate yourself because you waited until after.”

Adil nodded, staring at his hands. “Something like that.”

“You also admire him because he doesn’t ask to be forgiven,” she added. “He accepts his confusion. He has made peace with being unfinished.”

“And you?” he asked. “You talk like someone who’s done the homework.”

She laughed. “I have failed many exams,” she said. “Drugs, unhealthy relationships, hiding from myself in spiritual clothes. I came to India to ‘find myself’ when I was twenty-one. You know what I found? My own ego, but now dressed in mala beads and chanting Sanskrit. It took me years to see that my desire to be ‘special’ just changed costume.”

“So what changed?” he asked.

“Nothing big,” she said. “Just...stopping. I stopped trying so hard to be awakened. I stopped demanding that every experience transform me. I started doing boring things with full attention. Washing my clothes by hand. Listening to old people talk about their knees. Playing one scale on this flute for one hour without checking my phone. It is not glamorous.” She smiled. “But slowly, small spaces opened inside where my thoughts used to scream. In those spaces, I tasted something...bliss-like.”

“And now you just...sit by the lake and float in bliss?” he asked, half-skeptical.

“No,” she replied. “Sometimes I still get angry. Jealous. Lonely. I still want things. A partner, some days. A real bathroom, other days. I am not beyond it all. But I do not...worship my suffering anymore. When the sadness comes, I do not build a temple for it in my head. I let it visit, then go.”

He thought of his own internal temple, dedicated almost entirely to guilt.

“What about attachments to people?” he asked quietly. “To someone like Jojo. Or like you.”

She looked at him directly. “We will leave,” she said. “I will leave. You will leave. Maybe tomorrow, maybe in a week. That is the rule here. The lake stays. We pass.”

“That’s comforting,” he said dryly.

“It is,” she insisted. “Because it means you do not have to hold us like lifelines. We are just...boats that crossed your path at the right time. You can be grateful without clinging.”

He didn’t realise until that moment how much he had begun to dread the idea of leaving Pushkar. Not just the town, but the configuration of it: Jojo somewhere in its lanes, Radha at the ghat, himself perched between his past and his future, not quite required to choose.

On the tenth morning, the sky over Pushkar wore a clearer blue, as if someone had washed it during the night.

Adil sat on the balcony with his chai, watching sunlight catch on the ripples of the lake, turning them to shards of gold. Below, pilgrims moved with more urgency than usual; the town hummed in a slightly higher key. Maybe there was a special festival. Maybe it was just his perception sharpening because of the decision forming inside him.

It came not as a thunderbolt, but as a gentle internal nudge that refused to be ignored: it was time.

Time to leave this plateau. Time to stop hovering between gears. Time to move.

His bag lay open on the bed behind him. There wasn’t much to pack - some clothes, a notebook he still hadn’t touched, the toiletries purchased in random towns. He moved slowly, folding each item not out of neatness, but out of reluctant respect for the moment. The room that had been witness to his quietest days in months would be given to another traveler soon. His presence here would become just a faint memory in the guesthouse ledger.

He slipped Jojo's note and the white stone into his jeans pocket. They sat together with the room key for a moment, three small symbols of passage.

At the ghat, Radha was playing already, the notes more lively this morning. Children clapped along off-beat; a dog sat at her feet, head tilted.

She saw him approaching before he spoke. The melody softened, then came to a gentle close.

"You packed," she said, without question.

He nodded. "Yeah. I...think it's time. If I stay longer, I'll turn Pushkar into one more hiding place. Third gear isn't meant to be a parking spot, right?"

She smiled, a mix of pride and something like sadness. "You listen better than you think."

"I'm going to miss this," he said, gesturing vaguely: the lake, the canopy, her presence, the strange pocket of peace he'd found here.

"You will miss an idea of this," she corrected. "The real thing does not go. You take it in your nervous system." She pointed lightly toward his chest. "Your body now remembers how it feels to sit still and not die from your thoughts. You cannot unlearn that easily."

He laughed softly. "That's...a reassuringly low bar."

"You will miss me too," she said, unapologetically.

"Yeah," he admitted. "A lot."

She didn't say anything for a moment. The dog at her feet stretched, then flopped back down. A breeze picked up, carrying the smell of incense and frying pakoras.

"Then miss me," she said. "But do not make a shrine. Let the missing be light. Like the ache you feel after good exercise. A reminder that something moved inside you."

"I suppose you're not coming with me," he said, half-joking but hopeful.

"No," she said simply. "My road here is not yet complete. There are still things in me that need this lake. You...you have to go somewhere else now. Maybe not a grand destiny. Just...somewhere that is not here."

He wanted to ask where she would be in a month, in a year. Whether he could find her again if he wanted to. Instead, he held out his hand.

"Thank you, Radha," he said. "For the flute. For the...surgical honesty."

She took his hand, grip firm and warm. Then, on impulse, he stepped forward and hugged her.

For a second, she stiffened in surprise. Then she relaxed, arms wrapping around his back, cheek resting briefly against his shoulder. He became acutely aware of the weight of her silver ankle kadas against his shin, the faint scent of sandalwood and sweat and cotton.

When they stepped apart, her eyes looked brighter.

“Go,” she said, gesturing toward where his bike was parked. “Before you start saying dramatic things. You are a writer. It will happen.”

He smiled, caught. “Occupational hazard.”

He walked back through the lanes one last time, noticing everything with that heightened clarity departure brings - the exact curve of a rooftop, the sound of a shopkeeper calling out, “*Aao bhai, ek baar dekh lo,*” the smell of fresh jalebis spiraling in hot oil. Each detail seemed to attach itself to him lightly, like dust.

In the guesthouse courtyard, his Classic waited, dusty but ready. He strapped his bag onto the rear seat, tightening the bungee cord with hands that had done it enough times to remember, even when his mind was elsewhere.

He paused before swinging his leg over, looking back up at the balcony. The railing framed a patch of sky. No one stood there. Good. If someone had, the leaving would have felt theatrical.

He kicked the starter. The engine caught after a moment, the familiar heavy thump filling the narrow lane. A few people turned to look, then returned to their mornings. Bikes left Pushkar all the time. He was not the first, not the last.

As he rolled slowly through the maze of streets, he felt for the white stone in his pocket, pressing it between thumb and forefinger. Smooth, cool, worn. The lake’s small gift, under it, Jojo’s note crinkled each time his leg moved.

At a bend where the lane offered one last glimpse of the water, he stopped briefly. From here, the lake was just a slice of silver, framed by two buildings. On the ghat, under her canopy,

Radha's green blouse was a tiny splash of color. He could not hear the flute over the engine, but he knew she was playing.

He raised a hand in a half-wave she probably couldn't see, then eased the clutch and moved on.

As the town slipped behind him and the road unfurled ahead, Adil became aware of a different sensation from the one that had driven him out of Mumbai, or Goa.

He was not running away now. Not from the cliff, not from his shame, not from his ghosts. He was carrying them, yes, but they no longer felt like lead weights. More like...passengers he had stopped shouting at.

Fourth gear waited somewhere ahead - not as a promise of freedom, but as a dare of responsibility. To rebuild, not just escape. To ride at a steady speed instead of jerking wildly between extremes.

He shifted up, feeling the motorcycle respond, the engine notes deepening. The wind picked up, tugging at his shirt, drying the faint dampness near his eyes that he refused to name.

Pushkar disappeared from his mirrors, but the town remained, coded into his muscles, his breath, the new spaces in his mind where bliss had left its quiet fingerprint.

He did not know the destination yet. For the first time, that ignorance did not terrify him.

It just felt like the honest beginning of fourth gear.

4



For once, that uncertainty didn't scratch at his nerves.

On the hill's last bend, the lake appeared again - just a thin band of water between buildings, a temple spire catching the sun. He didn't slow, but his hand went instinctively to his pocket, fingers closing briefly around the small white stone from Jojo. In the same pocket, the folded note rustled. In the other, the faint memory of Radha's chandan scent seemed to hang, as if the saree's cotton still brushed his skin.

He smiled into his helmet visor.

"Fourth gear, boss," he murmured.

The road greeted him with nothing grand. No sudden valley, no cinematic vista. Just dry air and a strip of tarmac stretching ahead, flanked by fall vegetation that rattled quietly in the breeze. It was enough.

The first hours passed in a rhythm so smooth it was almost background music.

Fourth gear held steady, the Classic's thump settling into his bones. The bike felt lighter than it had in weeks, not because the load had changed, but because he had. His body leaned into curves without overthinking; hands relaxed on the grips. He no longer mistook constant vigilance for constant panic. He knew the difference now. The road still demanded attention - a truck veering, a sudden pothole - but the fear had unwound.

The air grew drier as he drew away from Pushkar's arms. The little bursts of green near the town thinned, giving way to scrub: low, stubborn shrubs with dusty leaves, trees hunched against the wind, their branches almost bare. Fall in this part of Rajasthan wasn't a riot of colour. It was a slow surrender to beige and brown.

Fine grains hung invisible until they hit his face shield, collecting in a pale film. When he cracked the visor for air, they slipped in, stinging his eyes and lining his nose. Every breath tasted faintly of earth. He pulled the bandana on his neck higher around his face, but some of it always found a way. It wasn't unbearable. It was just part of the day's texture, like the constant low warmth radiating from the engine into his right calf. Heat that licked through denim every time he paused in traffic or eased past a slower vehicle - a reminder that something alive and burning carried him forward.

A few times, a truck's wake slapped sideways at the bike, sending a gust of dust and hot air that blurred his vision. He didn't tense the way he once would have. He shifted his weight, adjusted, let the wobble pass through instead of fighting it with his whole body. Somewhere, in the back of his mind, Jojo clapped approvingly.

“See?” the imaginary Jojo said. “You can ride with the wind now. Earlier, you were trying to punch it.”

The land flattened further, opening into broad plains where the horizon sat far and thin. He passed dried lakes that looked like the skeletons of water - wide depressions ringed by cracked mud, traces of last monsoon’s boundary still visible in a faint, pale line. A few stubborn birds pecked around in the shallows of nothing, as if refusing to accept the water was gone.

Rustic houses stood at lazy intervals, each with its own quiet story. Mud walls patched with cow dung, low roofs topped with bundles of dry grass, metal trunks stacked near narrow doorways. Some had neem trees shading a charpai or two; others had tractors parked like weary animals. Children waved as he passed, shouting “Hallo!” and “Bullet!” even when their accents made the words wobble.

Cattle wandered along the roadside in small herds; horns painted occasionally in faded colours from a forgotten festival. Their eyes were slow, almost bored. Every now and then, a shadow taller than the others moved in the distance: camels, long-legged and disdainful, their outlines cartoonish against the sky. Some pulled carts loaded with sacks; others carried no more than the weight of their own aloofness.

There were stretches where the road felt deserted in a way that reminded him a little too much of his first ride out of Mumbai - empty, exposing. But the emptiness no longer felt like judgement. It felt like spaciousness. Sometimes he became aware of a strange illusion: the sense that he was still, suspended in one spot, and that everything else was sliding past him - tractors crawling backwards, trees drifting away, the far

hills gliding to his rearview. Like he'd become the stationary centre of a moving strip of film.

In another mood, maybe he would have spun that into a metaphor for life. Right now, he only watched it, mildly curious, then let it go.

By the time he saw the first signboard for Haldighati, a dull ache had crept into his shoulders. The sun had climbed high enough to bleach colour out of the sky. The air hitting his face whenever he lifted his visor felt like opening an oven door.

He turned off at the small junction almost without thinking.

Haldighati wasn't dramatic - a few shops, a parking area, a dusty stretch of history turned into small businesses and faded posters of Maharana Pratap. The "ghati" itself turned into a narrow road, a cleft between low hills where someone had fought someone centuries ago. He remembered textbook phrases: "courageous resistance," "guerrilla warfare," a horse with metal shoes to confuse the enemy. The details were smudged. He didn't feel like walking among plaques.

What he wanted was food and shade.

A dhaba sat a little off the main strip, its tin roof throwing shade over plastic chairs. The signboard declared in ambitious letters: "RAJPUTANA FAMILY HOTEL – PURE VEG" A neem tree leaned above it, leaves rustling half-heartedly in the hot wind.

He pulled in and killed the engine. The sudden silence made his ears ring, the absence of vibration almost disorienting. For a moment, he just sat there, swinging a leg off slowly, letting blood rediscover his knees.

Dust clung to him. When he removed his helmet, a small cloud lifted from his hair and collar. His eyes burned when he blinked, the grit having worked its way past his bandana. He rubbed them gently with the back of his hand. It just moved the dust around. He splashed some water into his eyes and on his face and felt a bit better.

Inside the dhaba, the air was marginally cooler. A ceiling fan whirred grimly, moving heat from one place to another. A radio crackled old film songs, punctuated occasionally by an ad about mobile recharges.

"Bhaiya, khaane ko kya la dun?" the owner asked, appearing from behind a steel counter. He was wiry, moustache drooping, eyes sharp and bored at the same time.

"Jo fresh hai, wahi de do," Adil said. *"Paratha? Sabzi?"*

"Gobhi paratha, aloo paratha, dono hai," the man said. *"Dahi, achar, chai."*

"Ek aloo paratha, ek gobhi," Adil said. *"Aur chai."*

He chose a table near the entrance, where he could see the bike and the thin strip of road beyond. As he sat, his body gave a small sigh all on its own. The chair creaked but held.

Dust had found its way into the folds of his shirt, the hinge of his elbows, the fine line where helmet padding met skin. He felt coated from the inside out. Yet, underneath that discomfort, there was an odd ease. He didn't resent the dust. It was exactly where it was supposed to be - on the way between one place and another.

He poured water from the jug into a steel tumbler and drank. It tasted faintly of metal and earth, but it was cold. It went

down in one long swallow, settling into the hollow ache of his stomach.

As he waited, his mind drifted - not to Mumbai flat, not to Goa's shame - but to Pushkar's morning balcony, Radha's still back as she watched the lake, and Jojo's offhand salute with the white stone. For once, the reflections didn't come wrapped in longing. They arrived like quiet check-ins.

You're still moving, Jojo said in his head, voice light. *That's the main thing. The rest we improvise.*

Stop checking the wound every five minutes, Radha added. *The skin knows how to knit.*

His parathas arrived, thick and browned, butter melting into soft craters. The smell alone made him close his eyes briefly. He tore off a piece with fingers that remembered dhaba breakfasts from earlier rides - before the book, before Rhea, before he pulled the trigger - and dipped it into the mixed pickle.

The first bite was hot enough to sting his tongue, spice and butter and salt crashing together. He chewed slowly, letting his body register the gift of simple food eaten in a simple place. Heat from the engine had been one kind of flame. This was another. Both kept him alive.

After chai - strong, over-boiled, perfect - he stepped out again.

The sun had climbed higher. Heat radiated off the road in visible waves. The bike's engine, though cooled a bit, was still warm under his palm as he checked the fuel cap, the bungee cord on his bag, the familiar touchpoints that reassured him.

He swung a leg over and settled onto the seat. This time, when he kicked the starter, the engine caught on the second try. An

earlier version of him would have cursed the first missed attempt, taken it as an omen. Now he just listened to the motor find its rhythm and rolled out, Haldighati's dust a fine film on his jacket.

By early afternoon, a pale line of pink rose on the horizon.

Jaipur announced itself in layers: first in the heavy traffic - trucks, buses, tractors, cars all jostling for space - then in hoardings advertising jewellery and coaching classes, and finally in walls the colour of faded terracotta, crenellated and imposing, closing in around his lane.

The shift from empty plains to crowded city should have jarred him. It used to. The sudden onslaught of horns, colours, smells often felt like a personal attack after hours of solitary road. Today, though, he floated through it with an unexpected smoothness. His body adjusted automatically to the new rhythm: braking earlier, reading gaps between vehicles, letting autos cut in without taking it as insult.

Fourth gear gave way to third and second in stretches, but internally he stayed in that easy glide.

He found a small restaurant off the main chaos of MG Road - a place with a shabby signboard promising "Pure Veg Meals" and an illustrated thali that looked bigger than any real plate could be. He ducked inside, the temperature dropping a few precious degrees.

The thali they brought him was classic Rajasthani hospitality on metal: *dal*, *kadhi*, a couple of *sabzis*, *rotis*, little mounds of rice. He ate methodically, not rushed, every few minutes glancing up at the TV mounted high in a corner, where a cricket

match played with the sound off. The clatter of plates and voices filled in commentary.

Near his table, three young men shared a bench, bodies turned inward in the easy intimacy of long friendship. They looked like software engineers on leave - faded jeans, branded T-shirts, one with glasses perpetually sliding down his nose.

“Arre, I’m telling you, Rishikesh is something else,” the one with glasses said, gesturing with a piece of roti. “You think Ganga is nice in Haridwar? Go up. There, she’s wild. Not this slowed-down cousin.”

“White - water rafting, bhai,” the guy in a black T-shirt said, eyes bright. “Level three rapids. You’re in the raft, chilled water smashing into your face, and for a moment you forget every stupid bill and boss and break-up. Then you’re just...there. Adrenaline and cold.”

The third, quieter one nodded. “I thought I’d freeze and die,” he said. “First splash, I screamed like a child. Then I started laughing. Don’t know why. My body just started laughing.”

The one in black T-shirt took over, warming to his own story. “Imagine this, yaar. Morning air, mountains all around, Ganga this insane, glittering beast, and you’re on this inflatable toy thinking you’re in control. Then one big rapid comes, and you realise, ‘Nope, she’s driving.’ Best feeling. Surrender, but fun.”

Adil found himself eating slower, his attention drifting more to their words than to his own plate.

Rishikesh.

The name wasn’t new. It had been there at the edge of his India-map fantasies for years - ashrams, yoga retreats,

foreigners in loose pants pretending enlightenment, the Beatles' grainy black-and-white photos by the river. It had always seemed a bit too on-the-nose: failed urban writer goes to Rishikesh to find himself.

But the way these boys spoke about it, Gangaji wasn't just a spiritual concept. She also was cold, force, adventure - but fun.

He thought of Pushkar's lake - contained, reflective. Thought of the dried basins he had crossed this morning - emptied-out reminders. A river in full throat sounded like another kind of medicine. Not to erase anything. Just to see if his body remembered what it felt like to meet something stronger and not be afraid.

The decision didn't arrive with fanfare. It slid in sideways, like a small, clear note under the restaurant noise.

He wiped his fingers, finished the last of his *kadhi-chawal* and asked for the bill.

As he stepped back into the heat, Jaipur's pink slowly diluted again into outskirts and then into highway. The thought of Rishikesh rode pillion quietly, not demanding, just there.

"North, then," he said aloud as he merged back into traffic, using his boot to nudge the gear lever up. "Let's see what the old river looks like before she dissolves everyone's sins."

He didn't call Meera or Rhea to tell them his plan. He didn't text anyone a location or a selfie with a plate, proof of life. The habit of broadcasting each turn of his journey had loosened. It felt good.

By the time the sun began to tilt down, the light had shifted from harsh white to something softer, more forgiving. The air stayed hot, but its edges rounded. Shadows stretched long across the road, trees and milestones lengthening into angular fingers that reached toward him.

He had been riding for hours again, with only short breaks - fuel at a pump, a chai at a shack where a Punjabi song blared loudly from someone's phone. The motorcycle kept pace, the engine note settled. His body felt tired, but not in the old, hopeless way. It was the fatigue of having done something, not the exhaustion of having barely survived himself.

The landscape at the edge of Rajasthan had its own personality. Villages grew sparse. Open fields gave way to scrubby expanses dotted with low thorn bushes. Here and there, small clusters of houses huddled behind mud walls, smoke thin from cooking fires. The sky turned a deeper orange, then edged toward bruised purple.

As dusk thickened, he began to scan the road for a place to stop.

A lodge, a dhaba with rooms, somewhere he could park the bike inside a gate and not worry. But the highway here seemed to prefer being between places rather than near them. Signboards promised towns in twenty kilometres, thirty kilometres, always just a little too far.

Then he saw it: a cluster of men sitting in a circle beside the road, a short distance off the tarmac. The glow of coals shone in the middle, smoke curling upward in lazy spirals. A traditional hukkah stood at the centre like a small, squat idol - clay base, long stem, pipes trailing outward like vines.

For a moment, the sight triggered a memory of a different circle: strangers around a table in Goa, powder lines, bottles, bad ideas disguised as freedom. His stomach tightened briefly.

But this was different, he told himself. Old men, village vibes, rustic hookah. A break, some conversation, ask about a place to stay. What could it hurt?

“Last time you said ‘what could it hurt,’ you woke up with a bill in lakhs,” a small internal voice remarked.

He overrode it.

He pulled the motorcycle onto the dusty verge and cut the engine. The men turned their heads slowly, sizing him up without rush. They wore dhotis and kurtas in faded whites and browns, headcloths wrapped against the cooling air.

“*Ram ram,*” Adil said, forcing an easy smile. “*Thoda rest karna tha. Raat tak koi dhaba milega kya?*”

One of the older men, his face lined like baked earth, gestured to an empty spot in the circle. “*Baith ja, beta. Raat lambi hai. Dhaba bhi mil jayega, ya ghar bhi.*”

The hookah gurgled softly as someone drew on it, the coal glowing brighter with each inhale. The smell reached him - tobacco thickened with something sweeter.

“*Bahar ka lagta hai,*” another man said, peering at the bike. “*Number dekho toh Bambai.*”

“*Bombay ka tha,*” Adil replied, sitting cross-legged and brushing dust off his knees. “*Abhi toh...road ka hoon.*”

They laughed at that, a short, approving chuckle.

The hukka came to him eventually, the pipe turned towards him extended in silent offer. Supervised by their gaze, his earlier hesitation seemed childish. He took it carefully, put the pipe to his lips, and drew in.

The first pull was harsh, smoke hot in his throat, making his eyes water more than the dust had. There was a sweetness under the burn - molasses, maybe, or something herbal - but it rode on top of a stronger base. His chest expanded, then he let the smoke out in a slow stream, trying not to cough.

"Zordaar hai," he managed.

They laughed again.

"Thoda maal mila diya," the old man next to him said, scratching his nose. *"Raat ko neend aa jati hai. Dimaag halka, shareer halka."*

Adil's head felt the shift faster than he expected.

The second pull blurred the edges of the men's faces, softening their outlines. The orange sky deepened faster than the sun could account for. The road's distant hum slowed, as if someone had turned the world's speed down a notch.

Within a few more minutes, the bad side of the high kicked in.

His head began to spin - not the gentle, floaty kind, but a disorienting tilt, as if his skull had come unmoored and was rolling on its own axis. His heart rate, instead of calming, picked up. Sounds stretched: a dog barking somewhere became an echo that didn't know when to stop.

He closed his eyes, opened them again. The men around him looked the same, but the space between them seemed larger, darker.

"*Sab theek?*" the old man with the lined face asked, watching him.

"*Thoda...light headed,*" Adil admitted. "*Long day also. Zyada ho gaya shayad.*"

The man nodded, like he'd expected this. "*Pehli baar hai na, is taraf ka?*" he said. "*Koi baat nahi. Idhar reh ja aaj raat. Ghar paas hi hai mera. Bullet bhi andar rakh lena. Subah fresh ho ke nikal jana.*"

Old instincts told him to say no. To apologise, to get back on the bike, to find a lodge, to endure a miserable, spinning ride rather than impose on strangers.

New instincts - fourth- gear instincts - said something else. They reminded him that part of letting life be easier was occasionally allowing himself to accept help without an elaborate mental review. Not every outstretched hand was a trap.

He met the old man's eyes. There was nothing predatory there. Just a kind of practiced hospitality, edged with boredom.

"*Pukka?*" Adil asked.

"*Aur kya,*" the man said, pushing himself to his feet with a small grunt. "*Waise bhi, agar abhi bullet chalayega, to seedha khet mein kisi ke bhains ke de maarna hai. Chal.*"

They moved slowly.

The house - or rather, the haveli - was not visible from the road. A narrow dirt lane led away from the hukkah spot, flanked by low, thorny bushes. His head swam a little as he rode with the old man behind him, the ground seeming to tilt. He rode the motorcycle too cautiously and to reach it took ages. The old

man sat behind him, unhurried, hands grabbing the seat behind his back.

After a few minutes, a wall rose out of the dusk.

It was around six feet high, made of old stone and plaster, mottled with age. A metal gate stood in the middle, its paint mostly peeled. The old man pushed it open. It creaked like in bad horror films, but nothing jumped out.

Inside, the space opened wide.

A courtyard stretched out, mostly bare earth, with patches of stubborn grass clinging here and there. On the left, under a rough shed roof, a few buffaloes stood tethered in a row, their hulking bodies shifting slowly, tails flicking away flies. The smell of dung and animal warmth rolled at him, tangling oddly with the remnants of the hukkah in his nose.

On the right, near the wall, stood a cluster of heavy stone and clay structures: massive grinding stones, one stacked over another, with grooves worn deep by decades of grind. A wooden frame with a long arm suggested some old manual mechanism, something that once crushed wheat or spices in quantities large enough for this family and probably half the village.

Straight ahead, across the open space, the haveli itself rose.

Two storeys, at least. The ground floor was solid and square, its exterior walls thick. From the ceiling line of the first level, arches lifted, elegant even in decay. They rose all the way to the roof, framing what had once been balconies, now mostly bare, shadows gathering within. The plaster that had once covered the facade had peeled in many places, revealing the rough stone bones underneath. Faint traces of painted patterns clung in

patches floral borders, hints of old fresco scenes, now mostly ghosts.

The building looked tired, but not abandoned. Lights glowed faintly from a few windows. Somewhere inside, a metal pot clanged.

"Chal," the old man said. *"Bullet yabin side mein rakh de."*

Adil parked the motorcycle near the wall, away from where the buffaloes might kick it. Habit made him check the lock on the handle, the bungee on his bag, even though a part of his woozy mind whispered that this wasn't exactly theft central. The high lurked at the edges, but the presence of solid things the gate, the animals, the stone gave him something to anchor to.

Inside, the house was cool.

He stepped into a small foyer where the floor was made of large, uneven stone slabs. The walls were thick enough that the evening heat stopped short at the threshold. An oil lamp burned on a niche shelf, throwing a soft, uneven light.

A woman in a faded sari, head covered with the end of it, appeared silently. Her face was seamed, but her eyes were alert. Behind her, a younger woman hovered, also veiled, her bangles chiming softly as she adjusted her dupatta.

"Yeh hamara mehmaan hai," the old man said. *"Raat ko yabin rukega. Guest room khol do."*

The older woman nodded, glanced once at Adil with a mixture of curiosity and the no-nonsense efficiency of someone who had been told to house strangers before. She gestured for him to follow.

The guest room was bigger than his Mumbai flat had been.

A wide, high-ceilinged space with a small window near the top of one wall, and two large ones on the adjacent walls, letting in a thin slice of fading light. The floor was plain stone, cool to the touch under his bare feet. Against one wall stood a charpai a rope cot with a simple wooden frame, sagging slightly in the middle, topped by a thin cotton mattress. Near it sat a low stool and a small table with a jug of water and a steel glass.

That was it. No decorations, no photos, no clutter. Just emptiness that somehow felt generous, not barren.

"Khama ghani, the athbay aaram karo," the woman said. *"Aa thodi der main Khano bhejun."* She spoke in the local Rajasthani dialect.

"Babut shukriya," Adil replied. *"Aapko takleef ho gayi."* With folded hands

She made the classic Indian gesture of batted-away gratitude.

"Aapan mhara beta jyaasa ho, hu thari jon si bhi madat kar saku, mane asbirvaad parapt ho jayega. Mehmaan ho. Bhagwan ka roop. Takleef kaisi."

He washed his face and hands with water from a bucket at a basin down the hall, splashing water on eyes that still carried a trace of spin. The cold shocked him back into clearer lines. When he looked up at the tiny mirror nailed to the wall above the tap, a dusty, tired, but undeniably alive man looked back.

He grinned at his own reflection, both mocking and genuine.

"Not bad for someone who tried to swallow lead," he said under his breath.

Dinner came on a brass plate, brought by the younger woman with downcast eyes.

Thick rotis, almost the size of his face, dark from the *chulha*, edges slightly charred. Vegetables with gobi, some sort of leaves and potato. A medium-sized onion, peeled and cut into four, raw and sharp-smelling. A big brass glass of chass (butter milk), frothy at the top, flecked with green coriander and black salt.

He sat cross-legged on the floor, plate in front of him, back resting against the cool wall. The charpai could wait.

He tore a piece of roti, dipped it in the small pool gravy of the generous serving of vegetables, served in a brass bowl they had thoughtfully placed at the edge of the plate, and bit into it with a piece of onion. The flavours were simple and blunt, no hint of restaurant finesse, but his body almost shuddered in gratitude.

The chass washed it all down in a thick, tangy wave, coating his throat, cooling his insides that had been blasted by dry air and hukkah smoke.

People used to serve him canapés and delicate starters with his book launches. He had eaten amuse-bouchées under soft lighting, nodding at compliments. None of it had ever hit him like this roti and onion did in this bare room.

It wasn't that he preferred poverty. He wasn't romanticising hardship. He was just...aware, finally, of his own aliveness in ordinary settings, hovered with gratitude. That was new.

As he lay on the charpai later, looking up at the cracked ceiling that carried faint hints of some old painted motif - maybe a flower, maybe a faded star - his head no longer spun. The bad high had drained away, leaving a manageable tiredness. Outside, somewhere in the courtyard, a buffalo shuffled, a metal bucket clanged, someone muttered a prayer before bed.

The Classic rested behind a boundary wall. The old man he had met a few hours ago slept under the same roof. A woman had cooked food and sent it to his room without asking for payment first. A younger woman had carried it without rolling her eyes at his city shoes.

Radha's voice floated in again: You do not have to be the main character everywhere. Sometimes you can just be the guest.

He smiled in the dark.

Fourth gear, he realised, wasn't just a metaphor for emotional pace. It was this too: the ability to let the world hold him a little, without assuming it would always drop him. Use the momentum without worrying too much.

Sleep came quickly.

Light entered his room not through the small window but through sound.

The courtyard woke up early. Buffaloes snorted, hooves shifting on earth. Someone clapped metal vessels together. Female voices murmured in the sing-song of morning routines - water, tea, tasks divvied up. Somewhere, a radio crackled to life with a bhajan.

Adil blinked awake, the *charpai's* ropes having left faint grid impressions on his arms. For a moment, he didn't remember where he was. Then the smell of damp stone and fresh dung mingled in his nose, and the arches he had glimpsed last night arranged themselves in his memory.

He sat up slowly. His body felt...good. No pounding head, no sour taste, no anxiety spike. Just the kind of stiffness that came from a long ride and a firm bed.

Outside, the sky was still a soft, pale blue. The worst of the day's heat was a few hours away.

A knock sounded. Before he could respond, the older woman's voice floated through the door. *"Khana taiyar hai, beta. Bahar aaja. Aangan mein baith ja."*

The idea of eating in the word "*aangan*" made him smile. From what he'd seen, it was mostly earth and patches of green. But there was a spaciousness to it that deserved the word.

He washed quickly, splashing water on his face until he felt the last webs of sleep shake loose. Then he stepped outside.

The courtyard looked different in daylight.

The buffaloes on the left were clearly visible now, their black hides gleaming where the early sun hit them. Flies hovered, tails swung, a young calf nudged its mother's flank impatiently. The grinding stones on the right seemed even more massive, their grooves ancient signatures of labour. A tiny boy, probably a neighbour's kid, ran around them, tracing fingers along the carved edges.

The haveli's facade, under full sun, showed its wear more honestly. Cracks spidered up the walls, plaster flaked off in scabs. But the arches retained their dignity. They framed empty balconies in a way that made them look like theatre boxes waiting for an audience.

In the middle, on a woven mat laid directly on the hard-packed earth, a brass plate and a tumbler waited.

The younger woman sat a few feet away, eyes on the doorway. When he emerged, she rose, adjusted her sari's pallu, and gestured for him to sit.

Two aloo parathas steamed on the plate, slightly irregular in shape but beautifully browned. The *chass* in the glass had a layer of foam that reminded him of cloud.

He sat cross-legged, the earth cool under his ankles.

The first bite of paratha made his eyes close almost involuntarily. The filling was generous, mashed potato spiced with cumin and chillies and something he couldn't place. The dough had that perfect balance between crisp and soft. The *chass* that followed was colder than last night's, the tang fresher, maybe because it hadn't sat. It carried coriander, mint, and the faint slap of black salt.

He ate slower this time, not out of politeness but because he wanted to prolong the moment.

The lawn, patchy as it was, spread before him in a way no city cafe's outdoor seating ever had. Sunlight fell in wide, uncompromised sheets. A just-awake world moved gently around him. A chicken scratched at a corner. The older woman sat on the threshold, supervising chores with an ease that came from decades of repetition. The old man, Bhanwarlal, as he'd introduced himself the night before, walked across with a small stool and sat down next to Adil, facing the buffaloes.

"Kaisi kati raat?" the old man asked.

"Babut acchi," Adil said honestly. *"Aapka ghar...bada sukoon hai."*

Bhanwar snorted softly. *"Sukoon?"* he said. *"Bus aadat ho gayi humein. Tum log sheher wale toh do din mein bore ho jao yahan."*

"Lagta nahi," Adil said. *"Bore hone se pehle hi kuch seekh jaunga."*

“Seekhna hai toh Ganga jao,” Bhanwarlal said, nodding toward some indistinct north. *“Rishikesh, Haridwar. Pahadon pe. Ye sab mitti ka gyaan hai. Wahan pani ka gyaan milta hai.”*

Adil smiled. *“Wahin ja raha hoon,”* he said. *“Kal decide kiya.”*

Bhanwar’s eyebrows rose. *“Achha? Fir toh thik jagah ruk gaye,”* he said. *“Ganga ka naam leke nikaloge yahan se, toh rasta bhi aasan ho jayega.”*

They sat in comfortable silence for a while, Adil finishing his parathas, Bhanwar occasionally commenting on a buffalo’s temperament like he was discussing neighbours. The younger woman retreated inside at some point, her work never fully visible, but its results everywhere.

Radha’s words floated back, perfectly timed: You can’t keep yourself lost in your own world. Everything outside is just so beautiful.

Back in Mumbai, he’d treated “the outside” mostly as a backdrop to his own crisis. Cafes, bars, even the occasional road trip were just stages on which his personal drama played. Here, in a half-ruined haveli with buffaloes, he felt the opposite: that his story was a small, almost polite footnote in a much larger, ongoing text. And instead of making him feel insignificant, that sense shrank his anxieties down to size.

He didn’t need to earn the right to sit on this lawn with *parathas* and *chass*. The morning didn’t require a justification. It just was. And he just was.

When breakfast was done, he stood, brushed crumbs off his hands, and turned to Bhanwarlal. *“Chalta hoon ab,”* he said. *“Bahut bada ehsaan hai aapka.”*

Bhanwar waved the word away, same as his wife had. *"Bas yaad rakhna ke kabhi idhar se guzre toh ruk jana,"* he said. *"Hukeka peena hai toh pehle bata dena. Thoda kum maal daalenge."*

They laughed together at that.

The younger woman came out again, carrying a small steel dabba. *"Thoda sa achar le jao,"* she said shyly, avoiding his eyes. *"Raste mein kaam aayega."* The size of steel dabba suggested few things more than achar resided in it.

He took it carefully, feeling its unexpected weight. *"Dhanyawaad,"* he said, genuineness in the syllables.

He wheeled the Enfield out of the gate while Bhanwarlal shooed a chicken out of the way. The engine started easily this time, as if the night in the haveli had done it good too. As he rolled out, he glanced back once.

From this angle, the arches of the haveli framed slices of sky in neat compartments. They looked like windows into different moods of blue.

He raised a hand, catching both Bhanwar and his wife in the gesture. The younger one stood half-hidden behind the door, but he glimpsed her bangles flash as she lifted her hand too.

Then the gate closed, the wall receded, and the road took him.

The ride to Rishikesh took most of the day.

He rode north, the sun tracking its arc from right to left in the sky. The air slowly changed character. The dry, chalky taste of Rajasthan gave way to something more humid, heavier. Trees

grew taller, greener. Fields turned from scrub to patchwork - mustard, wheat, vegetables - each section its own shade.

The traffic thickened as he entered the Uttar Pradesh stretches: tractors piled with impossibly high loads of sugarcane, buses with people hanging out of doors, bikes like his carrying whole families without helmets, cars taking liberties with lane markings.

Fourth gear had its moments of interruption - slowing for cattle, for sudden speed breakers, for indifferent pedestrians - but internally that smoothness remained. He no longer felt insulted by every unpredictable driver. He just adjusted, gave way, overtook when it made sense. The earlier version of him, who believed the road owed him fairness, had mellowed.

At tea stalls, he lingered just a little longer than enough. No desperate scrolling through his phone to fill silence. Sometimes he just watched other people's hands as they broke biscuits into chai, listened to fragments of argument about politics, cricket scores, diesel prices. When someone asked where he was headed and he said "Rishikesh," he was surprised at how normal it sounded.

"Yoga?" one man asked with a grin, stretching the word.

"*Nahi*," Adil said. "*Gangaji*."

They nodded like that made perfect sense.

As the day wore on, the horizon shifted. The line of the land, which had been flat and indifferent since Pushkar, began to buckle faintly. Hints of ridges appeared, blue-gray in the distance. The air cooled by a degree or two. The sun, though still hot, felt less oppressive.

By late afternoon, the road started to curve more often. Signboards mentioned Haridwar and Rishikesh in decreasing numbers of kilometres. Trucks grew rarer; pilgrim buses more common. The occasional ashram sign appeared: “Ananda Yog Dham,” “Ganga Bliss Retreat,” their fonts competing for serenity.

His back ached, his shoulders complained, but under all that, there was an unmistakable line of excitement. Not the frantic, edge-of-panic thrill he’d felt on Goa’s party nights, but a steadier hum. Ganga had been a concept for so long in his life, something other people posted pictures of. Today, she was becoming an actual destination his body would reach.

The river announced her presence before he saw her.

There was a shift in the air, a moisture, a faint roar underneath the usual road noise. The temperature dropped a little more. A gust of wind carried a smell that was not sea-salt, not rain, but something in between - mineral, wild.

Then the road curved, climbed a bit, and suddenly she was there.

Maa Ganga.

Wide and fast and fiercely alive, cutting through the small city with a presence that dwarfed every building on its banks. The water was a churned mix of blues and greens and whites, rushing around large, smooth boulders that jutted out like the backs of some submerged animals. Iron suspension bridges spanned her at two points, slim and busy - Ram Jhula, Laxman Jhula - thin threads connecting the hills.

Adil felt his breath hitch.

He pulled the motorcycle into a lane leading down toward a cluster of guesthouses and cafes near one of the bridges. The road here was narrow, crowded with yoga pants and beads, foreign accents and sadhus, chai stalls and boards advertising “Sound Healing Tonight” and “Ayurvedic Cooking Class.”

In another mood, he might have rolled his eyes. Today, it was just part of the river’s entourage.

He found a small guesthouse after some trial and a brief argument with a receptionist who wanted to charge more for “view.” Adil settled for “partial view,” a room whose small balcony offered a side slice of water between two buildings.

The room was basic: bed, table, attached bathroom with a reluctant geyser. White walls, slightly stained. A framed picture of Shiva above the bed, Ganga pouring from his matted hair.

He showered first.

The water was lukewarm, but it felt like luxury after days of bucket baths and roadside splashes. Dust and diesel and hukkah smoke and haveli smells ran off his body in rivulets, circling the drain. When he stepped out, wrapped in a thin, slightly scratchy towel, he felt both stripped and reskinned.

He dressed in clean clothes - one of the last fresh T-shirts, jeans less dust-stiffened than the others - and stepped out again, pulled toward the river.

The descent to the bank involved a narrow lane lined with stalls selling everything from *rudraksha* beads to organic chocolate. A cow blocked his way at one point, chewing thoughtfully on a cardboard box. He sidestepped her with a muttered “*Maaf karna, didi.*”

At the water's edge, the world narrowed and widened at the same time.

He found a flat rock a little away from the main ghat steps and sat down, cross-legged. The stone was still warm from the day's heat, but the air around it was cool, the river's evaporating breath washing over his face. He took his hands out of his pockets, where they had automatically reached for the white stone and Jojo's note, and rested them on his knees.

The Ganga didn't care that he was sitting there.

She roared, unselfconscious, churning around rocks, slapping the bank in small splashes. The current was strong enough that, if he stepped in, he knew instinctively it would tug hard. This wasn't Pushkar's still water, reflective and contained. This was movement, constant, unbothered by human labels of holiness.

He watched the surface, how it broke and rejoined countless times a minute. Foam patterns formed and disappeared in seconds. Bits of wood rushed past, carried by a logic they had no say in. Rafts floated by occasionally, loaded with orange life jackets and shouting tourists, guides barking instructions over the roar. Laughter rode above fear in their voices.

Geographically, he thought, he was here: in a town at the foot of Himalayas, on the banks of a river that people had been singing about for longer than language could track. Somewhere upriver, there were glaciers. Somewhere downriver, there was Varanasi, Allahabad, Sagar - cities where people surrendered the ashes of loved ones into this same water.

Emotionally...where was he?

Fourth gear.

Not the dramatic ascent of first, not the grinding drag of second, not the cautious, new balance of third. Fourth felt like this rock under him - solid, unremarkable, perfectly placed to watch the rush without being swallowed by it.

He wasn't in crisis. The thought struck him with more force than he expected. For months, that had been his default setting; even Goa's numbness had been another shade of crisis. Here, now, he was tired, curious, a little uncertain, but not in immediate danger from himself or anyone else.

"Is it time for fifth?" he murmured, barely audible under the river's voice.

Was fifth some kind of higher spiritual gear? Total surrender? Falling in love again? Writing again? Or was he already in it without knowing the name?

He thought of Jojo's note, crinkling in his pocket: Forgiveness is not a destination. It's the road itself.

He thought of Radha's simple assertion: Bliss is what is left when you stop blocking it.

He didn't feel blissful exactly. But he felt...less blocked.

Maybe fifth gear wasn't a mystical state waiting somewhere ahead. Maybe it was just more of learning to live with more ease, less gripping. Letting the bike do its work on the road. Letting the river be a river without demanding it wash him clean on cue.

A small wooden boat sailed by, close enough that he could see the goosebumps on a boy's forearms as he held his paddle. Cold water splashed up, drenching him all. The boy screamed, then doubled over laughing, head thrown back.

Adil smiled.

“Tomorrow,” he said out loud, to the river, to himself. “We’ll see how cold you really are.”

For now, it was enough to sit on the rock, feel the spray on his face, and know that he had brought himself here in one piece. Not because someone had dragged him, not because he was running from a direct threat, but because he had simply chosen a direction over lunch in the desert and followed through.

Fourth gear.

Effortless to travel in. Easier to live in.

He dug the white Pushkar stone out of his pocket, rolled it between his fingers for a moment, then set it gently on the rock beside him. It looked small and unafraid next to the roaring river.

“What’s next?” he asked, not expecting an answer.

The Ganga roared on, indifferent and welcoming at once.

5



Adil woke to bells and river.

Soft chimes threaded through the thin walls of the guesthouse, mixing with the low, constant roar of the Ganga below. Someone, somewhere, chanted aarti verses into a crackling loudspeaker - too distant to make out the words, close enough that the rise and fall of the melody reached his bed as a gentle wave. He opened his eyes, and for the first time in a very long time, his first conscious thought was not a weight.

His shoulders felt light, as if some invisible hand had finally taken its grip off them during the night.

He lay there a moment longer, listening. The city side of Rishikesh was waking up: a scooter honked, a steel plate clanged, a dog barked at nothing. Under it all, Ganga kept up her endless monologue against rock. The air coming in from the half-open balcony door was cool and clean, with a faint tang of damp stone and woodsmoke.

Fifth gear, he thought.

Not a new place, exactly. More like a familiar road finally clearing enough that he could see the sky while riding it.

He swung his legs off the bed, flexed his toes against the cold floor. His body carried the pleasant ache of yesterday's long ride from Jaipur down to this town, fatigue that came from using muscles, not from wrestling ghosts. He sat up, checked his phone. Just after seven.

Downstairs, at the reception desk, the man in a faded sweater and a name tag reading "Raju" looked up as Adil approached.

"*Namaste*, sir," Raju said. "Sleep okay?"

"Perfect," Adil said. "Bells and all. Hey, rafting...you guys can book?"

Raju's face brightened. "Yes, yes, of course. White-water rafting. Half-day, sixteen kilometre. Pick-up from here. Which batch you want?"

"As soon as possible," Adil said. "Today."

Raju checked a handwritten register, the pages curling at the edges. "There is a ten o'clock pick-up," he said. "Marine Drive to Rishikesh stretch. Good rapids, not too dangerous. Fifteen hundred rupees, including transport."

Adil nodded. "Done."

Raju took his name and a small deposit, then handed him a flimsy paper slip with the rafting company's logo stamped in blue. "They will pick you here at ten," he said. "Bolero camper. You wait outside only."

With more than two hours to kill, Adil stepped out into the thin morning.

The lanes near the guesthouse were still rubbing sleep from their eyes. Many of the shops along the main road had their shutters halfway up - enough to let in their first customers, not enough to commit fully to the day. A temple bell rang somewhere to his right; a jogger in synthetic tracks and an “OM” T-shirt trotted past, earbuds in.

He walked with no agenda, letting his body find its own pace. This was new too. Earlier in his life, free hours had been something to fill aggressively with scrolling, with noise, with someone else’s drama. Now, he let them stretch.

He passed a German bakery that would later be full of people trying to feel spiritual over lattes, a yoga centre with a whiteboard listing class timings, a travel agency offering “Char Dham Packages” and “Beatles Ashram Tours.” For now, they were just signboards, colours.

At a corner, a small stall had already set up: aluminium pots steaming, a stack of puris under a fly-net dome, a man in a woollen cap moving between burners. The smell of frying dough and cumin-flecked aloo caught his attention like a hand on his sleeve.

“*Puri-sabzi milega?*” he asked, stepping closer.

The man nodded, already fishing out a plate. “*Baith jaiye*”, he said, indicating a low wooden bench. “*Abhi garam garam nikaalte hain.*”

Adil sat, tucking his knees, watching as the man pressed discs of dough into hot oil. They puffed, turned golden, joined the

stack. A boy, probably the man's son, lined up steel plates with small mounds of dry potato sabzi and pickle. The world here was small and busy: ladle clanging, oil hissing, people's hands reaching with steel plates.

He ate without hurry. The puris were crisp and soft at once, the sabzi just spicy enough to wake his mouth. A glass of sweet chai completed the picture.

When he was done, he walked down toward the river.

The ghats were quieter in the morning than they had been during last evening's aarti. A few sadhus sat cross-legged on the steps, facing the water with loose spines. A couple of tourists, cameras hanging idle around their necks, whispered to each other as if loud voices might offend the current.

Adil found a spot a little off to the side and sat, elbows on his knees, hands folded loosely. He watched the river, the bridges, the rafts further downstream from yesterday, his mind not empty, but not crowded either.

At ten fifteen, his phone vibrated. Unknown number.

"Hello?" he answered.

"Adil ji?" a male voice asked, background noise of an engine and people talking. *"Rafting male bol rahe hain. Hum aapke hotel ke bahar hain. Safed Bolero camper."*

"Coming," Adil said. "Two minutes."

He jogged back up the steps, cutting through a group of school kids in uniform. Outside the guesthouse, a white Bolero camper idled, the back open, benches whose paint had seen better days bolted along both sides.

Four men already sat there, jackets zipped, life jackets piled on the floor between them. They looked like office colleagues on a break - late twenties, early thirties - the kind of camaraderie that came from shared complaints about managers and deadlines.

“Adil?” one of them called as he approached.

“That’s me,” Adil said, climbing into the back, gripping the metal frame as the truck rocked slightly.

“Bas yahi rahega group,” the driver said over his shoulder.
“Chalein?”

The four men shuffled to make space. *“Aao bhai, idhar baitho,”* one said, patting the bench near him.

Adil sat, back braced against the cold metal, feet planted wide. The truck lurched into motion, pulling away from the river and out of town.

“First time rafting?” the guy next to him asked.

“Yeah,” Adil said. “You guys?”

“Second,” the enthusiastic one said - the kind whose voice did the job of two. He wore a bright blue windcheater and smiled like he’d been waiting for someone to ask. “We did a small stretch last year. Today, bigger one. More rapids. More fun, you know?”

The other one rolled his eyes fondly. Names were exchanged. They were from Delhi, on a long weekend escape. One was about to get married; the others would not let that fact leave the conversation alone.

As the Bolero climbed along the river road, hugging the hillside, the valley widened. Ganga, in her upper stretch, looked different - wilder, less hemmed in by buildings, flanked instead by rocks and trees. The air grew colder with every kilometre. Adil zipped his jacket up, breath clouding faintly.

He felt...excited.

Not manic excited. Not trying-to-drown-something excited. Just ready. His earlier adventures had often been attempts to bury his head under experiences until his thoughts shut up. Today, as the camper bounced over potholes, he wanted to feel every bump.

The drive took maybe thirty minutes, climbing, turning, then dipping slightly. Finally, the camper pulled into a clearing near the river where other rafts and people were already gathered. A few bright blue and yellow boats lay half-inflated on the pebbly shore. Men in wetsuits and helmets moved among them, checking gear.

Their guide introduced himself in quick, confident Hindi, name lost in the mix but presence clear. He had the easy authority of someone who had pulled dozens of idiots out of water and lived to tell the tale.

"Sab log idhar aao," he called, waving them in with an authoritative tone. *"Life jacket pehno. Helmet pehno. Instructions dhyaan se suno. Rafting mazak nahi hai."*

They were handed orange life jackets and blue helmets. Adil strapped his on, fingers feeling the worn straps, the cold metal of the buckles. The life jacket smelled of damp fabric and sun.

They gathered around the guide near the raft.

“Dekho,” the guide said, tapping the inflated side. “Yeh boat tumhara ghar hai abhi ke liye. Uske andar tumhare haath-pair, baaki sab paani ka. Pebble basic baatein samajh lo.”

He showed them how to sit on the inflated outer edges; feet tucked into the gaps between the floor and the side tubes. *“Pair yahan atka ke rakhna,”* he said. *“Taaki jab rapid aayega, tum upar neeche hiloge, par boat se bahar nahi giroge.”* He demonstrated stretching his whole body out of the boat; still, his feet kept him in place. Then he pointed to the safety rope running along the raft’s rim. *“Yeh line tumhara best friend hai. Isko pakad ke rakhna. Aur jab main bolo ‘high-side’, matlab tum sab ko ek side pe jump karna hai. Bobot maza aayega. Kabhi-kabhi toh tumhara saath main bhi girta boon.”*

There was nervous laughter.

He walked them through what to do if they fell in. *“Ghabrana nahi,”* he said, eyes sweeping over each face. *“Seedha baath pair nahi maarna. Paani tumko khud surface pe le aayega. Bas sir ko upar rakho. Life jacket is not fashion item - yeh kaam karega. Boat ke paas aaye toh yeh rope pakad ke ruk jao. Main nikal loonga.”*

Adil listened carefully. The old him would have half-tuned out, trusting vague bravado. Today, there was no shame in respecting the river.

They carried the raft down to the water, the pebbles shifting under their bare feet. The Ganga here was colder even to the air; his exposed fingers prickled when he touched a wet patch on the side of the boat.

They pushed off.

The first few minutes were deceptive - water relatively calm, the raft floating gently, everyone still getting the feel of paddles and timing. The guide called out commands.

“Forward!” they paddled.

“Back!” they corrected.

He laughed occasionally when someone’s stroke splashed their neighbour more than the water.

The first rapid came with a grin.

From a distance, it looked like a minor disturbance in the river’s surface, a bit of white froth dancing. As they approached, the noise grew - a focused tumbling sound. The boat tipped slightly, then dropped and rose, water slapping the front.

Everyone whooped, half from joy, half from the release of nerves.

The second rapid was bigger.

Waves rose higher, crashing against the sides. The guide’s voice sharpened. “Forward, forward, forward!” Their paddles bit into the water, arms burning with the effort. The raft tilted, front dipping into a wall of water that slapped up, drenching Adil from chest down. The cold hit like a slap. He shouted, not from fear, but from shock, then laughed.

The third rapid, the guide warned them, was “*thoda* tough.”

From above, it looked like the river had decided to argue with itself. Water twisted around submerged rocks, creating standing waves that curled over themselves.

As they entered it, the world constricted to noise and spray. The raft jerked left, then right. In that moment, Adil should have

been terrified. Two of the Delhi guys were already squealing, curses and prayers mixing as they clung to the rope.

Adil...laughed.

A deep, full laugh that came from somewhere below his ribs shook his chest and refused to be controlled. The water thundered, slapped his face, stung his eyes, numbed his fingers. His feet stayed wedged; his hands gripped the paddle. He did not feel like something was trying to kill him. He felt like the river was tossing him around the way a dog shakes a toy, not out of malice, but because that's its nature.

They made it through.

As the raft slid into relatively calmer water, everyone exhaled a collective breath, some louder than others. One of the guys muttered, "*Bhagwan bachaye*," in a tone that suggested he'd been seriously bargaining with God. Another just kept shaking his head.

Adil wiped water from his eyes, still grinning.

"*Yeh bhi kya rapid tha*," he blurted, the words out before he could filter them. "*Koi gira bhi nahi. Life jacket ka kya kaam aaya?*" It was a joke, his tone playful, a leftover from his old habit of deflecting intensity with humour.

The guide's eyes flicked to him.

Something in his expression changed - not anger exactly, but a kind of mischief sharpened. Without a word, he steered the raft in a wide arc.

Before anyone quite realized what was happening, they were heading back toward the tail of the rapid they'd just cleared, approaching it from an angle.

“Ab dekhna life jacket ka kaam,” the guide said, half-smiling.

The boat hit the turbulent water again, this time sideways. The impact was immediate and decisive.

One moment they were all perched on the raft; the next, the world turned into icy, roaring chaos.

Cold swallowed him.

The first shock was total - Ganga wrapping around his body like a liquid fist, seizing all breath. For a second, there was no up or down, just pressure, motion, bubbles. The life jacket tugged, thrusting him upward, feet kicking reflexively.

His head broke the surface. He coughed, spluttered, eyes burning, the world now a hectic mix of grey sky, white spray, and the flailing limbs of his companions.

The water was cold. Not just ‘chilled tap water’ cold. It was deep, glacier-fed bite, a cold that seemed to go straight to bone. His teeth wanted to chatter, but adrenaline overstayed them.

He felt, rather than saw, the raft nearby - a big, dark shape bobbing close. Instinct, or training (the few minutes of it), kicked in. He reached out, hands sweeping, fingers finding rough rope. He grabbed it, held on, feet still dangling uselessly in the racing water.

Two of the Delhi guys had been thrown further away. Their shouts rose sharp and high. The guide was already yelling instructions, voice cutting through the noise, tossing safety ropes toward them, commanding them to “Feet up! Feet up!”

Adil tightened his grip, and even then, even with water strong enough to yank at his body, he found himself laughing again. The absurdity of it - the way his offhand comment had been

answered by the river and the guide in the most literal way - tickled some nerve that had been frozen too long.

The guys who had been the most scared on the earlier rapid were now cursing between gasps as they were hauled back in, their faces masks of outrage and relieved terror.

"Pagal ho kya, bhai?" one shouted at Adil as he flopped back into the boat, his lips blue. *"Tere chutiye mazak ki wajah se hum sab paani mein doob gaye."*

"Sorry, sorry," Adil said, teeth chattering now, hands numbed. *"Mera fault hai. Main hi bol raha tha. But yaar"* He broke off, laughing again, almost involuntarily.

He couldn't help it. The whole thing felt like a prank pulled by the universe. The part of him that once wanted to jump off a building to shut everything up was now dunked by a river because he'd complained about safety gear.

Eventually, everyone was back in the raft. The guide smirked, unrepentant. *"Ab samjha life jacket ka kaam?"* he asked.

"Perfectly," Adil said, still smiling. *"Dhanyawaad, sir."*

As they floated on, the cold settled deeper. His limbs shook uncontrollably. The life jacket felt heavier now, sodden. The sun had started its descent behind the hills, and shadows crept longer on the water.

They reached the usual stopping point where rafts pulled in for a break. A broad rock jutted from the bank, its flat top already crowded with people. Some stood on the edge, psyching themselves up to jump into the river below. Others sat huddled around small fires, steam rising from their clothes.

Adil stumbled out of the raft, legs unsteady. His body felt as if someone had rung it like a bell.

He gravitated instinctively toward warmth.

There were sticks scattered at the edge of the river. His hands, though shaking, remembered what Jojo had shown him one night somewhere in Gujarat: how to build a small, efficient fire - dry twigs at the centre, slightly thicker ones arranged like a tent, the importance of leaving space for air.

He gathered what he could, fingers stiff, nails dirt-caked. With borrowed matches and some stubborn breath, the pile caught. Flames licked, then settled into a small, steady blaze.

The two guys who had been cursing him earlier wandered over, drawn by the heat.

"Abhi bhi has raba hai?" one asked, but his voice lacked real anger now. He held his hands toward the fire, palms cupping the warmth.

"Abhi toh basi hi bachi hai," Adil said. *"Nabi toh thand se mar jaayenge."*

One of them bought a couple of plates of Maggi from the vendor who had smartly set up shop nearby. The noodles came in flimsy plastic bowls, steam curling in the cold air. They passed them around without worrying about who had paid, forks scraping the bottom for the last strands.

"So where all have you been?" the calmer of the lot asked between slurps. "You ride solo, na?"

Adil told them, in the shorthand that had become easier over the last weeks: Mumbai, Goa, Jojo, Pushkar, Radha by the lake, Rajasthan haveli, and the dust on the roads.

“Dodital *ja*,” one of them said suddenly, eyes lighting up.
“Uttarkashi side. Hill lake. *Bobot mast hai. Par bike nahi le jaa payega. Gaadi kabhi chhodni padegi.*”

“Walk?” Adil asked.

“Trek,” the man said. “20-22 kilometre ka. Jungle se. Sangam Chatti se start hota hai. Lake ke paas chhota sa mandir hai Ganpati ji ka. Water is like glass. Fish aise dikhte hain jaise hawa mein tair rahe ho.”

The idea of leaving his bike behind pinched something old in Adil, some reluctance to let go of the one constant that had been with him since Mumbai.

But the pinch didn’t grow into panic.

He filed the thought away, like a new road spotted from a highway: noted, not yet taken, but no longer unthinkable.

By the time they were driven back to town, the sun had almost vanished. The air had that post-river chill that clung even after changing clothes. Back in his room, he peeled off the damp garments, hung them from any available hook and rod, then pulled on his warmest T-shirt and the least dirty jeans.

His body buzzed with a tired aliveness. The cold had sunk into his bones and left behind a clarity.

He stepped out for dinner, pulled inevitably again toward the river.

This time, he crossed Laxman Jhula.

The suspension bridge swayed slightly under the combined weight of human and motorcycle traffic. Lights twinkled along its length, reflecting in the dark water below. On the far side,

the riverbank seemed livelier - cafes, dhabas, little shops, music spilling softly from open doors.

He found himself drawn up a narrow staircase advertised with a hand-painted sign: "Cafe Shiva – World Food, River View."

The balcony - really just a slab with a metal railing and a couple of tables - faced the Ganga directly. He took a seat at the edge, the river's dark surface moving silently below. Lanterns hung in a row, their light amber.

He ordered Mexican chilli from the menu, more out of curiosity than craving, and a basket of bread.

When the food came, he had to smile.

"Rajma"

Beans in a thick, tomato-heavy gravy, seasoned with paprika and some herbs in a way that tried to pretend it was something else but couldn't quite hide its North Indian soul. The bread was sliced baguette, warmed and drizzled with what was probably the cheapest olive oil on the market.

He ate slowly, looking at the river, chewing, tasting this odd blend of global branding and local reality.

Would Jojo have approved?

Probably not, he thought. Jojo would have made a speech about tourist traps, about paying extra for an "authentic experience" when the real thing was at some dhaba with cracked plates and fluorescent lighting.

But he could imagine another version of Jojo, leaning back in this chair, slippers kicked off, complaining loudly about the price while still soaking in the view. Needling Adil about becoming "Cafe Baba" in Rishikesh.

He wondered where Jojo was now. Somewhere on a highway, probably. Or on a different riverbank. Advising some other lost idiot. Smoking with truckers. The thought didn't make him miss Jojo. It warmed. The missing had changed texture.

He thought of Radha. Did she eat dinner at some ashram dining hall, sitting cross-legged in silence? Or at that little stall near Pushkar's ghat? Did she still play the flute every morning, or had she moved on to another town, another lake?

His mind moved to Rhea, almost automatically.

Earlier, every thought of her had been a blade. Tonight, she came to mind like someone from an old photograph: precious, distant, unchanged in his memory even as he knew she must have changed in real life.

Was she okay? Had she slept well last night? Was she seeing someone? Did she still have that habit of tucking her hair behind her left ear when she was concentrating? Did she miss him at all?

The questions were the same as ever. The emotions behind them...weren't.

There was sadness, yes. Real, deep sorrow for what he had done, for the way he had torched something solid. But the self-hatred had thinned. In its place was something like acceptance: of his capacity to harm, of his capacity to change.

He didn't feel entitled to her forgiveness anymore. He just hoped she had found a way to forgive life enough to be happy.

He took another bite of rajma-in-disguise, looked at the river's surface, and let the thought pass without chasing it down side alleys of guilt.

Fifth gear, he realised, might be this: being able to think of his past without getting stuck in it like a tyre in mud.

He finished his meal, paid, stepped back onto the swaying bridge, and returned to his room, where the Ganga's roar hummed under occasional barks from the dogs outside.

Sleep came quickly, carrying with it the faint scent of river and paprika.

He left Rishikesh the next morning, bidding goodbye to Raju and thanking him for arranging the rafting experience.

His bag was packed, clothes rolled instead of folded, everything pared down to essentials. He strapped it to the motorcycle with movements that had become automatic - bungee cord hooking, tug to test tightness. The bike started on the first try.

He had no destination in mind.

That used to be terrifying. For most of his life, "no plan" had been a hidden synonym for "failure." A successful person had goals, timelines, preferred outcomes. Now, as he rolled out of town, leaving the yoga banners and rafting posters behind, the lack of a fixed point ahead felt like an invitation, not an indictment.

Misty morning light softened everything. The road out of Rishikesh sloped gently, the Ganga a silver snake glimpsed between buildings, then between trees, then gone.

A few kilometres out, the fuel indicator light flicked on.

Orange glow. Small, insistent.

He scanned ahead. A petrol pump appeared near a fork in the road, its canopy sheltering two pumps and a bored-looking attendant.

He pulled in, waited in line behind a truck and a scooter. The fork's two roads extended beyond the pump like options in a choose-your-own-adventure book.

Left: toward Haridwar and beyond - the plains, heat, more cities. Right: a road that climbed as it left the fork, curling up into the hills, disappearing around a shoulder of rock.

He could almost hear a younger version of himself arguing inside his own head: pros and cons, practicality versus romance.

His mind stayed quiet.

The truck moved, the scooter rolled forward, his turn came. He told the attendant, "Full tank," and watched the digits spin.

As the pump clicked off, he glanced up at the two roads again.

Before he could think his way into a preference, his hands and feet made the decision. He paid, nodded at the attendant's half-smile, swung his leg over, and pointed the bike toward the right - the climbing road.

The road narrowed as it left the plains behind, trading straightforward stretches for curves - some gentle, some sharp, none advertised with the neat predictability of expressways. Trees thickened along the edges, tall pines and broad-leafed creepers, their roots gripping rock. The motorcycle settled into second, third, back to second.

He moved slowly, not out of fear, but out of respect. Hill roads punished arrogance more quickly than plains.

Within an hour, he was inside the clouds.

They weren't fluffy cotton balls like in cartoons. They were moving veils of fine, wet air that wrapped the road in sudden white whenever they drifted through. Visibility shrank to a few metres, then cleared, then shrank again.

Sometimes he could see the valley spread out below, tiles of green and brown and grey. Sometimes he saw nothing but the immediate curve of asphalt and the faint silhouette of a guardrail.

The air cooled noticeably. The sweat that had been a constant companion on the plains now dried. A shiver ran through him that had nothing to do with nerves.

He hadn't planned for cold quite this soon. His jacket was decent, but his gloves were thin. The tips of his fingers stung.

Somewhere near a bend where a cluster of tin-roofed buildings clung to the hillside, a hand-painted board promised "Chai, Biscuit, Maggie." He pulled over.

The shop was little more than a shack: a counter, a couple of benches, a gas cylinder, a small stove. A man in a woolen cap, wiping a glass absent-mindedly.

"Ek chai," Adil said. *"Aur...thoda garam kya mil sakta hai?"*

"Chai hi sabse garam boti hai bhaiji," the man said. *"Kahan ja rahe ho?"*

"Pata nahi," Adil said truthfully. *"Road jahan le jaye. Ye road kahan jati hai?"*

"Uttarkashi," the man said. *"Wahan se aage bobot kuch. Gangotri, Yamunotri, Dodital..."*

The last name pinged.

Dodital. The boys from the rafting break had said it almost reverently. A lake in the hills. Origin story of Ganesha's birth.

"Dodital," Adil repeated. *"Kaise jaana hota hai?"*

"Aage Uttarkashi jao," the man said, pouring hot tea into a steel glass. *"Wahan se Sangam Chatti. Wahan se trek hai. Bike, gaadi sab wahan chhodna padta hai. Aage sirf paidal."*

Adil sipped the tea, its heat burning his tongue in the best way. The idea of leaving the bike behind no longer felt like an insult. It felt like a graduation test: trusting that he wasn't his machine.

The uncertainty that once used to chew at him now coexisted with a quiet curiosity.

He finished the tea, wiped his mouth, and smiled. *"Aage dekhte hain,"* he said. *"Shukriya."*

Back on the road, his mind went empty in the best way.

He crossed a couple of sites where bridges were under construction. At each, the main road broke off into a rough diversion of packed earth and stones, dipping down to a temporary crossing, then climbing up again. His tyres slid a little on the loose gravel, but his hands didn't panic. He stood on the footpegs, let the bike roll, trusted its weight.

He didn't think of Meera. He didn't think of Rhea. He didn't think of Radha or Jojo - not because he was avoiding them, but because the road and the forest and the air had a stronger claim on his attention in those hours.

His brain, for once, wasn't chewing on stories. It was simply receiving.

The trees on either side dense, trunks rising straight, branches interlocking overhead in places. Patches of sunlight dappled the broken tarmac. The sound of his engine bounced back from rock walls, an echo that made him feel less alone.

By four in the afternoon, he rolled into ‘Sangam Chatti’.

It was more a cluster of shops and houses than a town - some tin roofs, a couple of cement structures, a broad trunk of fallen tree used as a bridge over a river swollen by rock. The river rushed in the valley below, chalky pale green, throwing up white where it hit boulders.

He parked near the only shop, a small place selling biscuits, tea, Maggi, packets of chips - the usual pilgrim fare.

“*Namaste,*” Adil said. “*Dodital jana hai. Kaise jaana hoga?*”

The shopkeeper, a man in his forties with sun-darkened skin and a woollen cap pulled down, pointed across the river.

“*Udhar se,*” he said.

Adil followed his gesture.

At first, he saw only the river, then the opposite bank, then a narrow, makeshift bridge: a single large tree trunk laid across the water, its bark shaved off, its surface barely flattened. No railings, no ropes. Just a log bridging the gap.

“*Udhar?*” Adil said, incredulous. “*Log wahan se cross karte hain?*”

The shopkeeper shrugged, as if gravity had less say in here.

“*Roz karte hain,*” he said. “*Yehi rasta hai. Bike aur bag yahan chhod do. Main sambhal lunga. Roz ke saan rupaye lagenge*”. Adil looked at the log again.

His legs tingled at the thought of walking across, the river roaring underneath, each misstep potentially a very cold, very painful lesson. Yet the idea of turning back seemed more absurd than this improvised bridge.

The fear was there. It just didn't have the final vote anymore.

He nodded. "*Theek hai*," he said.

He unloaded the bike, stripping it down to a daypack - torch, water bottle, a few clothes, basics. He left the main bag and the bike keys with the shopkeeper, who wrote his name in a small register and tucked the keys into a drawer that looked older than Adil.

"*Chalo, main paar kara deta hoon*," the man said, sensing Adil's reluctance.

They walked down to the riverbank together. Up close, the log looked both sturdier and more precarious - sturdy in its thickness, precarious in its lack of anything to hold onto. The water below shouted itself hoarse against rocks.

"*Bas idhar pair rakho, seedha dekhna*," the shopkeeper said. Without hesitation, he stepped onto the log and walked halfway, then turned to Adil, arm outstretched. "*Mera haath pakad lo*."

Adil stepped onto the wood.

It shifted slightly under his weight. His boot sole found patches on the rough surface. His body swayed.

He took the man's hand, fingers gripping his palm, and placed his other foot ahead. The shopkeeper guided him step by step, their joined hands like a temporary railing.

Halfway across, he looked down briefly. The river below was a blur of white and green, moving faster than his eye could track. For a second, the old panic surged - the sense of being one misstep away from catastrophe.

He took a deep breath.

Fourth gear behind him. Fifth just starting. He let his body adjust without feeding the fear.

In what felt like a very long minute and a very short one at the same time, they reached the other side.

"Bas," the shopkeeper said, releasing his hand. "Aage ka rasta hai upar. Bass yeh pagdandi pe chalte Jana"

Adil looked up.

The path was not a road. It was a series of dusty, worn-out patches on the hillside, zigzagging up through trees - a network of hairpin turns steep enough that his calf muscles tensed just imagining them.

"Kitna door hai?" he asked.

"Pehla gaon aayega Agora," the man said. "Phir aage. Lake tak 15-16 kilometre hoga wahan se lagbhag. Aaj raat tak kisi gaon ke kamre mein ruk jana"

Adil thanked him. The man waved it off like something too heavy to hold.

Then the climb began.

The path bent back on itself repeatedly, carved by years of feet - villagers, porters, trekkers, pilgrims. The earth underfoot was compacted, the edges crumbling into the vegetation. In places, stones served as steps; in others, roots.

The rain from a few days ago had left the ground damp in patches. A few turns were slick, forcing him to use both hands and feet, palms pressing into cold earth. His breath came faster. The air thinned subtly but unmistakably.

Darkness fell quicker in the mountains.

He had been walking for more than a couple of hours; the light had drained from the sky. The tree trunks turned to silhouettes. The path was still there, but its edges blurred.

He sat on a rock, lungs heaving, legs complaining. He dug into his pocket for cigarettes and matches - an indulgence he had almost abandoned, today resurrected as small comforts. The flare of the match briefly painted the trees in orange, then went out as he lit, inhaled.

The smoke tasted rough, but grounding.

He looked up.

The sky was clearer than any he had seen since that night at the stepwell with Jojo. Stars littered the black in numbers his city-bred eyes still struggled to process. A chill breeze brushed his sweaty face, cooling quickly.

He searched for the moon and couldn't find it.

"New moon, maybe," he muttered.

He took a few sips from his water bottle, feeling the coolness run into his chest, then stood, shoulders protesting. He flicked on his torch.

The beam carved a small, usable tunnel of light through the dark. It found the path again, the scuffs of countless shoes, the occasional dropped wrapper gleaming.

He walked.

An hour passed, maybe more. Time in the mountains at night didn't move in normal lines. The world shrank to torchlight, breath, heartbeats, the crunch of earth and stones under his boots.

Then he saw it.

At first, just a faint dot ahead - too steady to be a star, too still. A yellow pinprick.

A light.

He kept it in his sight, afraid that if he looked away it might relocate like some mischievous will-o'-the-wisp. Turn after turn, switchback after switchback, the dot grew into a bulb hanging outside a structure.

He reached a set of stone steps.

Three houses sat hugging the slope - one in the middle with the light above the door, one on each side, dark for now. Smoke trickled from one chimney. It was fully night.

He checked his watch. Eight p.m.

He hesitated only a second. The cold and fatigue made the decision for him.

Before he could choose which door to knock on, one opened.

A man stepped out into the light. Thick sweater, woollen cap, the kind of wary curiosity that came from living off a path where strangers arrived not in cars, but on foot, breathless.

"Rukne ke liye jagah chahiye?" the man asked straightaway.

Adil nodded, the relief almost physical. *"Haan,"* he said. *"Aaj yabhi tak hi aa paya. Aage lake hai na?"*

"Lake toh aur upar hai," the man said. "Kal subah niklo. Abhi ke liye room hai. Chalo."

He stepped aside, gesturing Adil in.

The stairway inside was narrow, wooden, running up along the side of the wall. It creaked under their combined weight as they ascended. At the top, a small landing opened into two doors. He opened the first and clicked on a switch.

The room was tiny.

A wooden bed made of planks occupied most of the space, a thin mattress rolled at the foot. A simple wooden table stood by the wall, with a glass placed upside down, and beside it, a candle and a box of matches. The walls were rough, lime-washed in a blue that might once have been brighter. Beams of thick wood held up a roof lined with clay tiles. The single window was shut; cold leaked in around its frame.

"Bathroom bagal mein hai," the man said. "Tap nahi hai. Bucket se kaam chalana padega. Thodi der mein bedsheets aur kambal de deta hoon. Khana ho jayega toh bula dunga aapko, aap fresh ho lo tab tak."

It sounded like heaven.

"Bahut shukriya," Adil said.

He went out to see the bathroom - a small room, barely wide enough to turn, with a squat toilet and a couple of plastic buckets and mugs arranged like soldiers on the floor. No tap, just a drum of water in the corner. It was clean enough.

He splashed his face and hands, the cold water making him gasp. For a second, he thought of the Ganga dunk earlier. His body had gone from hot to frozen to sweating again in less than twenty-four hours. It was adapting.

Back in the room, he sat on the edge of the wooden bed and looked around.

The blue of the walls, the dark beams, the rough floor - they all felt honest. Nothing here tried to be anything other than what it was. He could have rewritten the scene in some metaphor about peeling away his own layers, but he was too tired to chase symbols.

He just let his weight sink into the planks.

A knock came. The man handed him a folded bedsheet and two heavy blankets, then told him dinner was ready.

The kitchen was downstairs, to the left of the stairs - a room with a low ceiling, smoke-darkened beams, and a chulha in one corner. Two bulbs hung from the ceiling, their wires tangled. A woman sat near the wooden stoves, sari pallu over her head, a brown woollen sweater hugging her frame. Her feet were bare on the cold floor. Her hands moved with quiet efficiency, flipping rotis, stirring a pot.

A child sat right next to her, head bent over a notebook, pencil clutched. The boy glanced up when Adil entered, eyes wide, then returned to his work when his mother gave a small nod.

"Baiith jaiye," the woman said, pushing a small wooden stool woven with green nylon rope toward him.

He sat, chin resting briefly on his knees, feeling the warmth of the fire reach his face.

"What's your name?" he asked the boy.

The boy looked at him, then at his mother, then back down at his notebook, saying nothing. The shyness wasn't hostile. It was just careful.

Silence settled. It wasn't heavy. It was the kind of quiet that had space in it.

The woman placed a steel plate before him: a heap of leafy greens cooked with spices, a mound of potato sabzi, a quarter of an onion, a green chilli, a pinch of salt. She handed him the first roti - thick, browned in spots, imperfectly round.

He pulled the plate closer, instinctively picking it up with his left hand to bring it nearer his lap while he ate with his right. The posture was a little awkward on the low stool, but his hunger made quick work of those concerns.

The first bite filled his mouth with flavours grown and cooked within a radius he couldn't define but somehow felt. The greens were slightly bitter, the potatoes comforting. The roti was chewy, satisfying.

By the time he was halfway through his third roti, the man came in, his sweater damp from some outside chore.

"Sab theek?" he asked.

Adil nodded, mouth too full to answer. He swallowed. *"Bobot accha,"* he said.

The man asked his wife for some milk. Then, turning back to Adil, he said, *"Aap bhi piyenge? Kal lamba raasta hai."*

Adil hesitated a second, then nodded. *"Bilkul,"* he said. The weather was too cold to say no to such a warm drink.

A steel tumbler arrived a few minutes later, filled to near the brim with hot milk. A thick layer of ghee floated on top.

Adil's city brain, trained on skim and low-fat and cholesterol warnings, raised its eyebrows. The mountain in his bones overruled it.

"Pi lijiye," the man said. *"Kal zarurat padegi."*

Adil blew gently, then took a sip. The milk was rich, almost obscenely so. The ghee coated his lips, his tongue, sliding warmth all the way down into his belly.

He thanked them both again, then climbed back up to his room.

He came up and found the mattress unrolled, bedsheet neatly tucked, and a couple of blankets laid neatly over each other. When he lay down, the weight of the double layer pinned him in place in the best way. The cold in the room retreated to the corners.

Sleep came less like a fall and more like a gentle switch-off.

It was just after six when Adil's eyes opened. The faint light seeping in around the window frame had a blue tint. From downstairs came the clatter of utensils, the low murmur of voices. A child cried briefly, then was hushed.

He lay there, fully awake, and let his body scan itself.

No alarms went off. His legs ached, yes, but in a satisfying, used way. His back had a slight protest the planks hadn't quite absorbed, but nothing screamed. His mind was clear.

He considered bathing, then laughed quietly at his own ambition. With no change of clothes beyond the one layer he'd kept, it seemed an exercise in masochism. He decided soap could wait for Dodital's air and the return to Sangam Chatti.

Downstairs, the kitchen was already warm. The woman sat near at the stove again, this time shaping aloo parathas on a wooden board.

“Chai?” she asked as soon as he appeared in the doorway.

“Bilkul,” Adil said.

She poured hot tea into a steel glass. The first sip woke every nerve.

“Baith jaiye,” she said, nodding toward the stool.

He watched her roll out the parathas - small balls of dough coaxed into circles, stuffed with spiced potato, sealed, then flattened again. Onto the tawa they went, one, two, three, puffing slowly, browning at the edges.

Breakfast was heavy in the best way. Aloo parathas fried with more ghee than he would ever have used for himself, pickles on the side, another glass of chai. He knew he’d need the calories.

“Kitne baje tak lake pahuch jaunga?” he asked the man later, as he adjusted the small daypack on his shoulders.

“Aaram se chalo, toh dopahar tak pobonch jaoge,” the man said. “Jaise aath baje nikloge, waise teen-chaar baje tak aaram se. Rasta bobot sundar hai. Bas dhyaan se chalna. Pathar phisalne wale hain ek-do jagah.”

There was no map, no GPS, just a direction and trust in the worn path.

He started walking.

The trail wound through a world that felt both ancient and indifferent. The earth was packed where countless feet had

passed, soft where moss reclaimed its rights. In some stretches, the path narrowed to a strip barely wider than his boots, hugging a slope that dropped into a forested valley. In others, it widened near terraces where villagers had coaxed crops out of stubborn land.

He passed small clusters of houses here and there - stones piled into walls, roofs held down with rocks. Dogs barked half-heartedly as he approached, then lost interest. Women in bright shawls carried bundles of wood. Men sat on ledges, hands wrapped around steaming cups, watching the day unfold with no obvious anxiety about deadlines.

They smiled at him as he passed, nodding. Occasionally someone asked "*Kahan se?*" and he'd answer, "Mumbai," and they'd raise eyebrows in a mix of surprise and a little pity, as if city life was some disease he was convalescing from.

He fell into a rhythm that had nothing to do with his old life's rhythms.

Step, breath. Step, breath. The world narrowed to the few metres ahead, then widened again when he looked up and saw a snow flecked ridge far in the distance, or a valley opening like a bowl below him.

Just before noon, he fell in with a group of porters.

They carried unbelievable loads on their backs - gas cylinders strapped into metal frames, sacks of rice, boxes. Each man's burden towered above his head, yet their pace was steady, their footing sure. They spoke in a local dialect he didn't fully follow, but the laughter was easy.

One of them lit a beedi and passed it, then another rolled a small joint, thin and efficient. He raised it in silent offer.

"Chalega?" he asked Adil.

Adil weighed it for half a second.

He had bad history with substances, a whole chapter of his life written in their handwriting. But this was nothing like Goa's greed, where he had tried to disappear. This was something shared, small, amidst work.

He took it, drew in lightly, felt the smoke scratch his throat. The effect was mild, more a softening of edges than any spin. Trees looked a little greener, the air a little crisper, but his feet remained grounded.

They walked together for a while, sharing silence and slopes, then the porters pulled ahead, their fitness superior, their loads seemingly irrelevant.

Around two in the afternoon, he reached Bherwa village - it felt like a pause button.

A row of empty shops faced an open *kacha* road. A couple of men sat in front of one, chatting. Goats wandered. The air had that peculiar stillness of places on non-market days - no trading, no noise, just waiting.

One shop was open.

Maggi.

The yellow packets lined the shelves like a promise.

He ordered a plate and watched the noodles boil, the powdered masala turning the water a familiar orange. It was an odd comfort, this manufactured taste in such an organic setting, but it made sense. Mountains used what they could get.

He ate outside, sitting on a low wall, legs dangling, eyes on a distant snowcap peeking through clouds. The rest of the shops remained closed, covered by trees too tall and the calm, slow wind.

Soon he was walking again.

He refilled his water bottle from little streams that seeped out of cracks between rocks - thin lines of clear water, cold and sweet. He remembered the shopkeeper's warning that there were long stretches without sources, so he drank when he could, stopped when his legs suggested, and kept going.

At some point, he realised he should have accepted the walking stick one of the porters had tried to hand him earlier. His knees and ankles would have appreciated the extra support. But he was here now, unassisted. It would do.

The forest thickened as he climbed. Pine needles formed a soft carpet in places, muffling his footsteps. Birds called, unseen. The air was thinner, cleaner. The world of traffic and chaos felt like a different planet.

He didn't know how far he had come. He had stopped counting hours. Sometimes he hummed snippets of songs under his breath without knowing what they were. Sometimes he walked in complete silence, his mind blissfully blank.

When he turned a certain corner on the trail - no different looking from the last few, just another bend between trees - everything changed.

The path opened into a clearing.

Beyond it lay a lake.

Dodital.

It sat in a bowl of slopes, encircled by forested hills. The water was so still that the surrounding trees leaned over and looked at themselves for long minutes without distortion. The surface, a deep, clear green, mirrored the sky and the darker greens of the pines.

Adil stopped.

The fatigue in his legs fell silent.

He walked slowly toward the shore, as if afraid to disturb the scene. A couple of low huts stood a little back from the water, smoke rising from one. A small shop displayed biscuits, Maggi, and packets of chips, just like in every mountain way-station. To the left, a modest temple sat - white walls, red flag flapping lazily. A simple sign identified it as a Ganesha temple.

He remembered the stories he had half-heard, half-read: that this was the birthplace of Sri Ganesha, that Maa Parvati had created him from the turmeric paste she scraped off her body while bathing here, that Lord Shiva had famously, disastrously beheaded him here before giving him the elephant head.

The lake had seen decapitation, rebirth, everything in between. Today, it was just...calm.

He walked closer until he stood at the edge, where stones met water. Someone had told him along the way that touching the water wasn't allowed, that it was considered disrespectful. Fair enough. He didn't feel the need to test the rule. Being allowed to sit here felt like enough of a gift.

He found a rock a little to the side and sat.

The sun leaned toward the horizon, casting a soft, slanted light across the lake. The water caught it, turning sections into liquid gold. In other spots, shadows deepened it into ink.

As his eyes adjusted, he saw movement under the surface.

Fishes.

Himalayan trout, the locals called them “dodi,” from which the lake took its name. They moved in small groups, flashes of blue, yellow, and orange, weaving patterns. They glided between shade and light, between visible and invisible. It looked like someone had dropped pieces of sky, sun, and marigold into the water and they had learned to swim.

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, hands clasped.

His reflection floated near the surface - faint, but there. His face was thinner than the one from his book-launch photos, beard rougher, hair flattened under days of helmets. His eyes looked...different.

Less haunted.

The guilt was still there, like a scar visible if you looked - a little raised, occasionally itchy. But it no longer pulsed like an open wound. It had integrated.

He thought of Rhea.

Here, the thought felt...blessed, almost. Not in a religious sense, but in the sense that the place refused drama. Dodital had no patience for flailing. It was too still.

He thought of Jojo, somewhere on another road. Of Radha, somewhere near another body of water, maybe. Of Meera, wherever she had flown to next. Of the apartment in Mumbai that he had once tried to call home.

Fifth gear, for him, was this:

Sitting by a lake named for rebirth, for a god who had once lost his head and then been given a different one. Knowing that he had been cut in some spiritual way, that he had done cuttings of his own. Knowing he couldn't go back to the exact man he'd been before any of it. Knowing that was okay.

He didn't feel the need to make promises to this lake. No vows, no bargains. If there was any prayer in him, it was wordless: a simple, quiet thank you for still being here to sit and watch water hold light and fish hold their swoops.

He stayed there until the sun dipped so low that the colours in the water became harder to see. Only then did he stand, legs a little stiff, and turn toward the small hut where he could ask for a place to sleep.

Tomorrow, he would walk back down to Sangam Chatti, cross the log again, swing his leg over his motorcycle, and ride toward whatever came next.

There would be more roads, more mistakes, more small rescues. There would be days when the gears ground, when he stalled, when he slipped back into old patterns. There would be days when fifth gear felt like a rumor.

But tonight, at this lake that felt like the earth's quiet eye, Adil knew something simple and profound:

He had moved through his own rapids and not been drowned.

He had learned to ride not just the bike, but his days, with a lighter hand on the clutch.

He had let other people's wisdom infect him in the best way, until it had become partly his own.

He was flowing now, not fighting the river, not trying to own the road, but moving with both. Not restricting himself, not closed to what might appear around the next bend.

He watched his reflection tremble once more on the surface of Dodital, then smiled at the man in the water like you smile at someone you're finally starting to forgive.

The trouts flickered around the ghost of his face, blue and yellow and orange, carrying on, unaware, in their own bright fifth gear.

Epilogue



Almost a year had passed since Adil first kicked Mehul bhai's Classic alive outside his farmhouse in Lonavala, the engine's throaty rumble echoing his tentative resolve to outrun the shadows clinging to him. That raw morning, fresh from the hospital bed where a self-inflicted bullet had passed his neck instead of ending him, marked the true start - not just of the ride, but of a jagged reconstruction. Now, he sat behind a small wooden desk in a softly lit bookstore in Bandra West, Mumbai, the air thick with the comforting musk of aged paper, fresh-ground coffee beans, and faint anticipation. Fifty-odd chairs faced him, a mix of eager faces settling in: young riders in faded jackets, literature enthusiasts clutching notebooks, a few curious locals murmuring about the "suicide writer's comeback." Phones buzzed to silent, programs tucked away. Behind Adil, a simple banner hung: *One Down Four Up – A Ride Through Rock Bottom.*

His fingers, hidden under the table, traced the screen of his phone for the tenth time that evening, pulling up Rhea's message from three weeks ago. *I was not angry at you myself, I was just heartbroken on how everything turned out to be. maybe we just grew apart and had separate journeys ahead of us. you don't need me or anyone. you just need yourself to be truthful to you.* The words no longer

sliced; they settled like old gravel under tires - rough but navigable. Rhea was in London now, curating at a small art gallery in Shoreditch, the hipster heart of East London, where street art bloomed on brick walls and coffee cost a fortune. It was the dream she'd whispered about during late nights in their Mumbai flat, back when Adil's manuscript was a chaotic Word file and his panic attacks left him curled on the floor. She'd chased it alone after the betrayal - his repeated affairs, the ego-fuelled drift post-book success - shattered their shared road. No rage in her goodbye, just quiet divergence: two paths forking under a relentless sky.

Adil pocketed the phone as the last chair scraped into place. His gaze swept the room, landing on Mehul Bhai in the third row, arms folded across his broad chest, feigning casualness in a crisp kurta. Their eyes met briefly; Mehul offered the smallest nod - the same one from the hospital vigil, when he'd muttered, "*Tu bhi na...*" after the surgeons confirmed the bullet missed the jugular by millimeters. Mehul, the agent-brother who'd turned *The Angel of My Nightmares* into a bestseller, bailed Adil from emotional wreckage time and again. That night, his Mercedes had screeched into Crescent Towers amid flashing police lights, finding Adil bleeding on the study floor, Salvador Dalí's poster mocking from the wall. Mehul had shouldered the chaos - police statements, media whispers, the quiet fury of a man who'd glimpsed his protégé's abyss. Tonight's nod carried layers: pride, relief, a silent "You've shifted gears."

In the front row, a young woman sat poised, a single peacock feather laid before her on the white paper like an offering - its iridescent blue-green eye staring skyward. Adil's breath caught. Radha. Not the ethereal flutist from Pushkar's ghats, but her echo: the German-Indian wanderer who'd anchored him in third gear, teaching stillness amid the lake's ripples. In Pushkar,

her morning ragas had drawn him from Jojo's absence, her words dissecting his guilt like a surgeon's blade. "Bliss is background," she'd said, bare feet on mossy steps, "not chased but uncovered when you stop building temples to suffering." They'd walked alleys where old houses leaned like confidants, her silver anklets chiming softly. She'd listened to his confessions - Rhea's quiet devastation, Meera's Goa scam, the suicide's botched poetry - without absolution, only presence. As he prepared to leave, she'd hugged him briefly, sandalwood lingering: "Miss lightly, like post-exercise ache." He wondered where true Radha was now - perhaps another ghat, flute to lips, wind stronger in some Himalayan fold. The feather felt like her nod across distances.

Across the room, Jojo's absence hummed too. The khadi-kurta philosopher had vanished from Pushkar with a note: "Third gear's yours... Forgiveness is the road itself." Jojo, met in Goa's humiliating hotel lobby post-Meera binge, had ridden shotgun through highways, stepwells, and sugarcane confessions. Last voice note, crackling from Meghalaya's hills near Shillong: "Teaching music to local kids... might stay 'for now.'" With Jojo, "for now" stretched like Rajasthan plains - eternal or ephemeral. Adil smiled faintly; Jojo embodied the ride's lesson, drifting without anchors, his Bullet's thump a counterpoint to Adil's heavier Classic.

Meera, it turned out, hadn't scammed with malice - just a free spirit's opportunism. In Anjuna's haze of pills, trance beats, and tangled sheets, her "Close your eyes" had pierced hallucinations, her body a fleeting harbour. But dawn brought the bill: one lakh twenty-seven thousand, her group's tab dumped on Adil's ID. She'd woven beads in her locks, dusky skin glowing under neon, septum ring glinting as she licked his beard playfully. Realization dawned later, pieced from hotel

logs and gutted wallet: wind-blown opportunist, not heartbreaker. It stung less than expected; some illusions dissolved gently, like mist off a ghat's morning.

The room hushed as Adil cleared his throat, no tremor in his voice now. He opened the marked book - his own, *One Down Four Up* - the cover evoking Enfield gears, rock bottom's metaphor. "Life is no less than a motorcycle ride," he began, words flowing steady. "Just as you cannot predict the terrain—be it slippery or dry, ascend or descend, or maybe just a fork on the road that keeps you wondering which one to choose - life throws events as unpredictable. And just as you keep adjusting the gears, be it first or fifth, you need to keep adjusting your attitude and outlook towards everything as it evolves. The best part? It all shifts. Be it gear or your attitude, you can always adjust to whatever suits the terrain. Because if you try to ride through life in just one gear... life gets very, very hard."

He paused, eyes lifting. Silence blanketed the room, broken only by the ceiling fan's soft whir, coffee steam curling lazily. Memories flooded: the ghat crash pinning his leg under 180kg of iron, strangers lifting him gratis; Goa's whirlpool shadows dissolving in Meera's whisper; Pushkar's lake mirroring his fractured self, Radha's flute stitching calm; highways where Jojo's silhouette steadied overtakes, confessions spilling at chai stalls. The scar on his neck caught the light - a puckered crescent from the Colt's graze, the bullet's through-and-through mercy. No longer hidden under long hair or collars, it stood as testament: survival's ragged signature.

Adil closed the book gently. "One down," he said quietly, voice carrying the weight of gears shifted—from suicide's stall,

through Goa's first-gear skid, Pushkar's third-gear cruise, to this fourth-gear peace.

The audience answered instinctively, voices blending warm and sure: "Four up."

The reading's echo lingered as hands rose, questions tumbling: "How did the crash change you?" "Radha - real or muse?" Adil fielded them with honesty honed by a year of raw miles. The young woman with the feather approached last, eyes bright. "Radha sends this - from the wind," she said, voice laced with faint accent. Not *the* Radha, but a fan? Messenger? Her smile mirrored ghat mornings. Adil accepted the feather, throat tight. Connections rippled outward, unscripted.

Post-event, Mehul clapped his shoulder outside, Mumbai's night alive with horns and neon. "Bookstore suits you better than farmhouses," he grinned. "Proud, bhai." No more nods needed; words sufficed now. They shared black coffee at a nearby stall, dissecting sales projections, film queries - practical anchors amid Adil's new drift. Mehul's farmhouse had birthed the ride; this night birthed its chronicle.

Rhea's London life unfolded in Adil's mind via sparse social glimpses: Shoreditch walls tagged with her curated exhibits, her posts of foggy Thames walks. Separate journeys, yes - hers ascending professionally, his through ink and tarmac. No reconciliation fantasies; truthfulness to self-barred pretense.

Meera? Whispers from the Goa grapevine suggested she surfaced in Palolem, weaving beads for tourists, free as ever. No malice recalled; just a chapter's close.

Jojo's Shillong voice note painted misty hills, kids strumming guitars under his kurta-clad watch. "For now" meant roots tentative, ever-ready for the next highway.

Radha - true Radha - perhaps Rishikesh now, flute echoing along the Ganges. Her feather symbolized impermanence: miss lightly, carry deeply.

That Enfield kickstart symbolized one down: aimless movement towards Goa, treacherous, gruelling, and exhausting. Four up: gears of growth. Neutral: Goa's skid into excess. Second: highways with Jojo, confessions amid dust. Third: Pushkar stillness, Radha's bliss. Fourth: unpredictable life's terrain - ghats treacherous, plains hypnotic - but adjustable. Only thing permanent was him. Fifth: forgiving oneself. No single gear endures; shift or stall. Adil smiled - small, tired, utterly at peace. The road continued, engine humming eternal.