

BIAS IS NOT BORN; IT IS PROGRAMMED

PREJUDICE.exe

CAN YOU LET GO OF WHAT SHAPED YOU
WITHOUT YOUR KNOWLEDGE ?

THARUN REDDY K



BlueRoseONE^{.com}
Stories Matter

New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

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BlueRose ONE
Stories Matter
New Delhi • London

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ISBN: 978-93-7310-294-8

Cover Design: Shivam

Typesetting: Sagar

First Edition: December 2025

*To my family - my forever "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" -
thank you for being my safe space, my laughter, my home.*

*To all the people I've met,
the ones who stayed, the ones who passed by,
thank you for your presence - loud or silent, brief or forever.
You've all added color to these pages in ways you may never know.*

*And to you, holding this book - thank you for stepping into this journey.
Let's question, feel, laugh, and grow together.*

About the Author

Tharun K, works as a technical engineer in the cybersecurity space, solving structured problems by day... and collecting unstructured feelings by night.

If his profession teaches him logic, life constantly teaches him heart and somewhere between those two, this book was born.

Tharun has always been the kind of person who notices things: the tone behind a sentence, the hesitation in someone's smile, the weight behind a casual comment. Words stay with him - the kind that heal and the kind that hurt and that sensitivity quietly shaped the stories you're holding now.

He loves to cook, not just for the taste, but for the conversations that start when food is shared. Ask him about recipes, and he'll talk like he's describing memories.

Evenings at cafes are his soft place to land; he sits with a warm cup, watching people, wondering about their worlds, imagining their stories. That's where many of these chapters took shape - one sip, one thought, one quiet realization at a time.

He writes because he believes small moments teach big lessons. That kindness can be ordinary. That healing is slow. That noticing someone is the purest form of love.

And that all of us, no matter where we come from, are just trying to be understood a little better.

"Preface"

I didn't plan to write this book. I just started noticing things. Little things.

A friend saying "He's smart for his background."

A cab driver being ignored because of his broken English.

A girl silenced in class because her voice didn't sound "refined."

And one day, it hit me - we weren't evil.

Just... programmed.

We laugh at jokes without realizing they hurt someone.

We give compliments that carry quiet insults.

This book isn't here to guilt-trip anyone.

It's a walk. A chat. A chai stall conversation - between two people: Tharun and Tara.

Sometimes we agree, sometimes we fight, sometimes we laugh until one of us snorts.

But in every page, we try to understand how bias works. Not the loud kind you see on the news. The soft kind. The everyday kind. The kind that hides in praise, in pity, in preferences we never questioned.

You may not relate to everything. But I promise, at least once you'll whisper to yourself, "Damn. I've done that too."

And that's where unlearning begins. Welcome to Prejudice.exe - Where bias isn't deleted. Just slowly... debugged.

The Cafe Reset

Rain has a way of making everything look softer, even your own reflection on the glass. I sat by the window, my black shirt soaking up the dim golden lights of the cafe, watching raindrops race each other down the pane.

Each droplet felt like a sentence left unfinished, maybe because my thoughts were exactly that. Unfinished. For years. Her name kept humming in the back of my mind like a song that refuses to leave. The one person who could roast me like a marshmallow and still make me feel like the fire was worth it.

I wasn't supposed to be here, not like this half-smiling at the rain like a hopeless poet. But then my phone buzzed. A single notification that had the audacity to rewrite my evening, maybe my week, maybe everything.

She had texted: "Coffee?" Two letters and a question mark. That was all it took to rewind everything. And now, as I stood near the glass door, adjusting my shirt like it mattered, I realized I wasn't nervous. Or maybe I was. **Nervousness has a funny way of pretending to be excitement when you want to impress someone.**

And then the door opened. She walked in a black suede dress, subtle elegance, like rain decided to turn into a person. Her hair framed her face like an unfinished painting.

She saw me before I could wave. We didn't speak. We just walked toward each other like the universe was tired of watching us text and decided to hit "unpause"

When my arms wrapped around her, my chin rested lightly on her shoulder, and for a moment, the cafe, the rain, the noise all of it faded. It was just us, exhaling years of unsaid things into a single breath.

And then, mid-laughter, she tilted her head, looking at me like she had just found a piece of an old puzzle.

“You know, talking to you still feels the same. Like... some kind of code I never really unlearned.”

“That’s because some codes never change Tara. They just... run quietly in the background.”

She narrowed her eyes playfully. “And what are you running in the background these days?”

“Thoughts,” I said, stirring my coffee slowly, “about why we are the way we are. Why the world writes these invisible codes for us... and we don’t even realize we’re running them.”

Her brows arched, “Oh no,” she teased, “you’re about to get all deep on me, aren’t you?”

“Maybe,” I smiled, “but only because you asked for coffee.”

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Chapter 1

Boys Don't Cry, Girls Don't Lead

It wasn't said with malice. It was... casual. Like the weather. Like an old family rule. My uncle said it when I scraped my knee playing cricket. My relatives said it when my cousin cried over a broken toy.

And just like that, the **code** was written:

Crying = Weakness.

Weakness = Feminine.

Feminine = Bad for Boys.

Years later, I saw the other side of the same coin. A girl in my college - brilliant, sharp, confident was elected as the cultural head. On the very first day of her term, someone whispered,

"She's too bossy."

When a boy gives orders, he's a leader. When a girl does the same, she's bossy.

It's strange, isn't it? How two sentences - one for boys, one for girls shape entire lives. One teaches boys to bury feelings until they rot inside. The other teaches girls to dim their light, shrink their voice, and smile through injustice.

Every generation has passwords - not for phones, but for behavior. Ours began early, before we could even spell the word “emotion.”

The first time I heard the password, I was crying because a street dog chased me and I fell. My father didn't hug me or scold me. He simply said, “Come on, boys don't cry.” He said it like basic physics. No drama. No meaning explained. Just a rule dropped from the sky.

Later I heard the same line everywhere - playground, tuition, cousins' birthday parties. It started sounding less like advice and more like a warning: Crying is not for your gender. Crying is for them. Not for you. When you're young, you don't challenge rules. You install them. I downloaded that line into my brain without even checking storage.



**Crying doesn't make you
weak. Hiding does...**

It took me years to realize what that one sentence was really doing. It wasn't stopping tears. It was stopping honesty. It was teaching boys to treat their own emotions like illegal items. Hide them. Delete them.

And then one random day in college, I watched the reverse version of this rule hit someone else just as casually, just as unfairly. That's when the puzzle clicked. Boys are punished for feeling. Girls are punished for leading. **Both lose. Society wins.**

These aren't rules. They're traps. And the worst part? They sound harmless.

Tara: "You know what's funny? I've actually said 'boys don't cry' myself once. To my cousin. He was bawling over a broken toy, and I thought I was... toughening him up. God, I feel terrible now."

Tharun: "Exactly. That's how it works. It doesn't come from hatred. It comes from love, care, habit. We think we're protecting them, but really, we're locking them in."

Tara: "And about girls leading... ugh. Don't even get me started. Remember in school how they'd pick boys as 'class leaders' even when the girls were topping the exams?"

Tharun: "Oh, yes. I remember. And the girls got made 'note monitors' or 'blackboard cleaners' instead."

Tara: "It's like we were rehearsing gender roles without even knowing it."

Tharun: "That's the scary part, Tara. We don't need explicit rules. The practice itself becomes the teacher."

Tara: "So what's the fix? Tell boys to cry at every chance? Tell girls to grab the mic even if they're not ready?"

Tharun: “Not force. Just freedom. Let the boy cry without shame. Let the girl lead without being doubted. The world won’t collapse. In fact, it might finally breathe.”

Tara: “You know, sometimes you sound like a WhatsApp quote. But other times... you sound like someone I wish was running this world.”

Tharun: “Careful. If I ever run the world, dessert will be free and mandatory after every meal.”

Tara: “Okay, okay...I’ll admit this one hit me. Boys don’t cry. Girls don’t lead. Damn. We’ve all played along, haven’t we?”

Tharun: “That’s the thing, Tara. We didn’t write the rule-book. But we sure as hell keep reading from it.”

If someone asks, “What’s the fix?” the easy answer is:

Let boys cry.

Let girls lead.

But the real problem is deeper. It’s not about forcing people to do the opposite. **It’s about giving them the freedom to choose without judgment.**

Imagine a boy crying without someone calling him “weak.” Imagine a girl speaking confidently without anyone labeling her “bossy.”

That alone would change half the world’s emotional weight.

Maybe that’s the whole point of this - not to preach, not to lecture. Just to remind us that stereotypes don’t disappear on their own. Someone has to break the loop.

And maybe that ‘someone’ starts with you. The next time a boy cries, let him. The next time a girl leads, don’t act shocked. That’s how you edit the invisible rule-book, one small moment at a time.

Chapter 2

The Classroom Label - How a Single Word Shapes a Lifetime

Some words lift you. Some words linger like shadows.

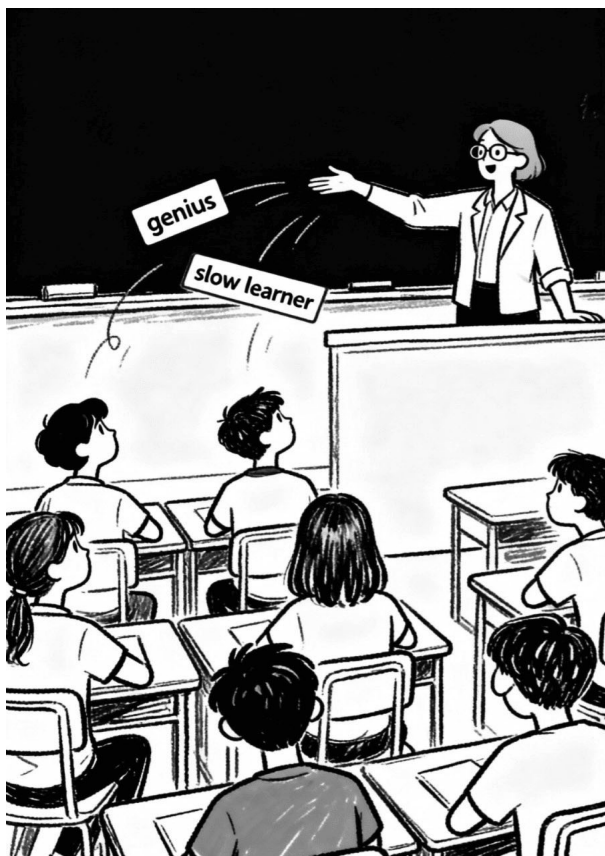
It starts small. A teacher points at a child in class and says, “Slow learner.” Laughter follows. The child’s hands tighten around the pencil, their eyes drop. That one word carries more weight than anyone can see. It follows them home, into homework, into every test, and even into friendships. A word is never just a word - it is a shape, a shadow, a lens through which the world will see them.

At the same time, another child hears “genius.” The teacher praises every answer, every drawing, every question asked. The world seems to sparkle for them. But slowly, the sparkle becomes a cage. Every mistake, every doubt, feels like betrayal. Even praise can hurt when it comes with invisible strings. Some labels lift children, but others bind them.

Home is where the weight grows heavier, often in silence. “Be good,” “Don’t cry,” “Make your parents proud.” These are words spoken with love, but they carry expectations. Children learn to hide frustration, fear, sadness, and even joy that doesn’t fit. They try to please silently, believing that mistakes or strong emotions might make them unworthy of love. Some children never know what it feels like to be fully accepted just as they are.

Even labels that seem harmless leave their marks. “Shy,” “talkative,” “messy,” “obedient,” “lazy.” Each becomes a script. The shy child learns to stay quiet even when they have ideas. The talkative child begins to filter words to avoid judgment. The obedient child hesitates to question authority. And the “lazy” child starts doubting themselves, even when they are capable.

School labels are just the beginning. Society, extended family, friends - all add layers. Some words are meant to guide, some to warn, some to compliment. But when they are repeated, reinforced, or never questioned, they become invisible prisons. And children, with their fragile sense of self, rarely know they have a choice in how they internalize them.



It started the same way for me. In school, I was labeled “the one who freezes on stage.” Every presentation, every morning assembly, my heart would pound like a drum, my hands would shake, and my voice would disappear. Classmates giggled, sometimes kindly, sometimes cruelly. That label followed me for years. I believed it, even when no one said it aloud anymore. The fear became part of me - a silent companion.

But then came college. Events, competitions, and thousands of people watching, it felt impossible at first. Every microphone, every spotlight reminded me of the “stage-frozen” boy I was. And yet, slowly, the label lost its power. Each event, each small success, chipped away at it. I learned that labels aren’t permanent. I could rewrite the story, step by step, with courage, practice, and support. Now, when I stand on stage, I smile. That child inside me, the scared one - is still there, but he’s no longer in charge.

Even after I overcame the “stage-freezer” label, life didn’t stop handing me new ones. Now, when I speak in front of hundreds of people at college events, competitions, or workshops, someone whispers, “Too confident,” or “Arrogant,” The words are different, the weight is lighter than before, but they still arrive. Labels never really disappear - they just evolve. And that’s life.

The trick isn’t to escape them; it’s to choose which labels you allow on your table. Some can guide you, like “creative,” “dedicated,” “curious.” Others are heavy and limiting, like “nervous,” “slow,” “too much.” The choice is yours. Every label you accept becomes part of your story, every label you refuse gives you space to grow. Over time, you realize: the world will always speak, but your inner voice decides which words shape you.

I’ve seen this in friends too. Some never get a second chance. A friend labeled “too emotional” as a child still hides tears, still hesitates to express love. Another, called “dreamer who can’t achieve,” avoids taking risks even as an adult. Yet, a few manage to rewrite their stories, slowly, patiently, with small victories and supportive voices around them. Hope

isn't easy, but it exists. That's what makes this book important - so anyone reading it can see that labels are not destiny. There is space to reclaim yourself, even when life hands you new words to carry.

And that's the heart of it: life will keep giving labels, some whispered, some loud, some even well-intentioned. I've seen the same thing happen with friends. Children labeled as "too sensitive," "too shy," "troublemakers," or even "dreamers who can't achieve" carry scars into adulthood. Some lose belief in themselves. Some learn to hide emotions because the world told them their feelings were wrong. The labels didn't just shape behavior - they shaped trust, self-worth, and even how they let others love them. Seeing that, I realized: these invisible marks can last a lifetime if we don't notice them.

And that's why conversations matter. Talking, reflecting, and even joking about these labels gives them a different weight. It reminds us that the world's words are not rules etched in stone. They are codes we can debug. It's not about erasing the past, but understanding it. And maybe helping others - children, friends, siblings to see that a label is never a verdict.

Tara: "So even after all this, when you're speaking to hundreds, new labels still show up?"

Tharun: "Yes. Always. Someone will say, 'too confident,' or 'show-off.' The words keep coming. But I've learned to choose. Not every label gets a seat at my table. I decide which ones shape me and which ones I let go."

Tara: "That's... powerful. And hopeful. Because it shows it's not about being perfect, or having no labels - it's about awareness, right?"

Tharun: "Exactly. Awareness and choice. Life will always assign words to you. But your voice, your actions, your reflections-those decide which labels matter. That's the freedom I want readers to see. That even if they feel trapped now, they can reclaim themselves."

Tara: (smiling) “So, even childhood scars, even old fears-they don’t define us forever. We can rewrite the script, one small step at a time.”

Tharun: “Yes. And when we notice a friend, a sibling, a child, or even ourselves carrying a label, we can help them pause, reflect, and choose too. That’s hope. That’s change.”

Tara: “I like that. Deep, but not preachy. Honest. Real. And it gives a reader courage.”

Tharun: “That’s the goal. Awareness, reflection, and hope. And a little laughter along the way doesn’t hurt either.”

Tara: (grinning warmly) “We’ve spent hours on chai, talking labels and life, and I actually feel lighter. Like I can see my own labels, decide what to carry.”

Tharun: “Good. That’s the reset we’re offering. One thought at a time. One word at a time. And when we leave this cafe, maybe we leave our invisible weight a little lighter too.”

Tara: (standing up) “Then let’s go. We’re stepping out lighter than when we came in.”

Tharun: “Exactly. And ready for the next labels, knowing which ones we’ll let in-and which ones we won’t. Not yet, Tara. Sit. Let’s order one more coffee. There’s more to talk about-more labels, more stories, more life waiting in the next chapters.”

Tara: “Alright, I’m listening. But only because I trust your coffee is as strong as your insights.”

Tharun: “Deal. And I promise, by the end of this cup, we’ll have even more to think about, and maybe even laugh at ourselves a little.”

Tara: “Then pour it strong, my friend. I’m ready for the next reset.”

Chapter 3

The Maid and the MBA

Lakshmi wakes up before sunrise. Not because she chooses to, but because the city does. The metro hums outside her one-room rented home, the alarm clock replaced by the noise of buses and vendors setting up. She ties her hair into a bun, wraps her sari tighter, and quietly slips out, careful not to wake her children. By the time Delhi stretches its arms and yawns, Lakshmi has already swept three staircases, filled two buckets, and caught a train that smells of sweat, steel, and dreams pressed too close together.

For the people she works for, mornings mean almond milk, yoga playlists, and protein shakes. For Lakshmi, mornings mean climbing floors with heavy buckets and answering the doorbell before the maid's own breakfast. She isn't bitter. At least, not always. She tells herself, "*Work is work.*" But deep down, she knows she lives in a parallel city - one where her presence is necessary, but her existence is invisible.

One guest, an MBA graduate, compliments her sari but adds, "It's so nice how you people manage with so little." The room laughs, but Lakshmi's smile falters. The chapter explores class prejudice through Lakshmi's day: cleaning homes, overhearing assumptions about her "simplicity," and navigating a world that sees her as less. A real-life incident, a viral 2024 video of a domestic worker being mocked for her "unrefined" manners - inspires the narrative, showing how class stereotypes dehumanize and divide.

Lakshmi kept smiling, but her throat tightened. The sari wasn't "managing with little." It was her sister's gift, bought after skipping two dinners out and saving for months. For her, it was pride stitched in cotton. But in that living room, it shrank into evidence of her "simplicity." Prejudice doesn't always slap; sometimes, it pats your head and tells you're inspiring - for being less.

And here's the trick: the world lets that comment pass as kindness. No one objects. Everyone laughs. But Lakshmi will carry that line home with her, folding it into silence like another sari on the shelf.

And what about us? How many times have we said, "They're happy with what they have," and felt generous, even enlightened? Was it their happiness we were protecting - or our comfort?

And here's where the hypocrisy shows. When an MBA graduate works late, they're called "dedicated." When Lakshmi works three houses in a row, she's "desperate." When a corporate employee negotiates a salary, they're "strategic." When Lakshmi asks for a Diwali bonus, she's "greedy." Same actions, different labels, divided by class.

The gap is not just money. It's language, clothing, even silence. A spilled teacup by a maid becomes a lifelong label: "clumsy." The same accident by a guest becomes "Oh, how silly of me!" The rules bend differently depending on who's holding the cup. And Lakshmi knows it. That's why her hands tremble while serving tea - not because she fears spilling chai, but because she knows one slip might cost her not just her job, but her dignity.

Tara: "Okay, that story about Lakshmi... it stings. Honestly, I've been guilty. I've said things like, 'Wow, she's so resilient.' I thought it was... I don't know, appreciation?"

Tharun: *[nodding slowly]* “It’s the ‘you people’ trap. You know? ‘You’re strong... for your class.’ ‘You’re inspiring... for your background.’ It sounds kind, but it builds a box. A small one.”

Tara: “Ouch. Yeah. I’ve definitely done that. I remember telling my driver once, ‘It’s so sweet how simple your family is.’ He just smiled, but now I wonder if it hurt.”

Tharun: “Exactly. That smile wasn’t agreement. It was survival. He can’t tell you, ‘Madam, that was offensive.’ So he smiles and folds it into his silence.”

Tara: *[leans in]* “But tell me honestly - how do you compliment without sounding like a jerk? I mean, if Lakshmi looks beautiful in her sari, how do I say it without adding... baggage?”

Tharun: *[smiles]* “Simple. Don’t see her as ‘Lakshmi the maid.’ Just see her as Lakshmi. Mom. Woman. Dreamer. Human. And then say it. ‘Nice sari.’ Period. No invisible asterisk.” See? We’re noticing it now. That’s the first step. Not beating ourselves up, but owning it. Like with Lakshmi’s sari-that “you people manage so well” line? It’s us separating ourselves. But if we drop the “you people,” and just see the person... it changes everything.

Tara: True. How do we fix it, though? I want to compliment without the weird vibe. Like, if someone’s outfit looks nice, just say it straight? No backstory assumptions?

Tharun: Spot on. Keep it simple: “Love that color on you.” That’s it. Treat them like you’d treat a friend. Because they are humans juggling life, just like us. No boxes, no labels.

Tara: You’re right. I’ve got some apologizing to do in my head, at least. Next time I see our help, I’ll ask about her day for real. Not as a boss, but as a neighbor. Feels... freeing. You know what? This chapter... it makes

me uncomfortable in the right way. That's good. That's necessary." Like, I'm looking at myself and thinking, "Damn, I've got work to do." That's good. That's necessary.

Tharun: That's the reset button, Tara. Not deleting the program - just debugging it, one thought at a time. Now, pass the sugar before you knock it over again.

Tara: *[laughing]* Oh, shut up. But... deal.

Also Tara, would like to say something...

I was at my friend's house one afternoon, waiting for him to get ready. His maid had brought her little daughter along because no one was home to watch her. Nothing unusual. Kids run around everywhere.

But then lunch time came.

My friend's family sat at the dining table - laughing, talking, passing plates. The maid quickly placed a small steel plate near the kitchen door and made her daughter sit there. On the floor. Not in a chair. Not even near the table.

Just... on the tiles, like she had committed some sin.

The kid didn't complain. Didn't even look upset. She seemed used to it.

And honestly, that disturbed me more.

Because habits like this, sitting on the floor, eating separately, shrinking yourself; don't start at adulthood. They are planted in childhood before the child even knows the world.

THE FLOOR REMEMBERS. SO DO CHILDREN.



The worst part?

People record these things like it's "cute content."

I recently saw a video on social media: A big dining hall, heavily decorated. The bosses and their kids were eating at the grand table... and the maid's children were eating in the corner of the kitchen, with captions like:

"Everyone is family here <3"

Family? Where? Which corner? Which angle?

What scares me is not the video.

It's that people watch it and say,

"Aww so sweet."

No, it's not sweet.

It's sugar-coated humiliation.

And the more these clips go viral, the more households feel justified to repeat the same behaviour:

"See? Everyone does it. So it's normal."

But it's not normal. It's conditioning.

It's programming a child to believe,

"You don't belong where others sit."

"You must stay on the ground."

"You are always second."

No kid deserves that.

Not in any house. Not in any country. Not in any society.

Tara: "People don't realise... kids don't understand 'status.' They only understand space.

Where you let them sit, that's where they think they deserve to be in life."

Tharun: "Exactly. One kid sits at the table and thinks, 'I'm special.'

The other sits on the floor and thinks, 'I'm less.'

Same food. Different worlds."

Tara: "You know what's funny? The same families say things like,

'We treat our maid like family.'

But they don't even let their actual family members sit on the floor."

Tharun: "It's because kindness ends where comfort begins."

Tara: "Say that again."

Tharun: “Kindness ends where comfort begins.

People want to be good... but only until it doesn't shake their sense of superiority.”

“Imagine what that little girl will grow up believing.”

And that's the point that really burns me.

A child doesn't know caste.

Doesn't know class.

Doesn't know categories.

What hurts most is the unnecessary performance:

Why record such scenes?

Why upload them?

Why create a narrative where one child gets full dignity and another is cropped into the corner of the frame?

If you really can't be fair, fine.

We can't force humanity into someone.

But at least don't broadcast inequality proudly and call it “content.”

There's a difference between living with privilege and advertising it.

Chapter 4

Leftover Words - When Casual Comments Leave Permanent Marks

It never starts like an insult.

It starts like... nothing.

Just a sentence someone drops between bites of lunch or during a phone call.

“You’ve gained weight, huh?”

“You’re too sensitive.”

“Relax, I was just joking.”

You laugh it off.

Because that’s what we’re trained to do - laugh it off.

But later, in the shower or at 2 a.m., the sentence echoes back, louder than it was ever spoken.

And you realize, some words don’t disappear.

They just go silent long enough to blend into your self-image.

You start checking mirrors differently.

You start choosing clothes differently.

You start speaking carefully - not because you fear being wrong, but because you fear being laughed at again.

That's the invisible cost of "casual."

It always starts small. Never intentional.

A passing joke, a sarcastic tone, a quick remark between two laughs - that's how it begins. Someone says something you weren't ready to hear, but you're too polite to react. You smile, pretend it's fine. But your heart has already hit a record.

They say "Don't take it personally," like it's a command. But how do you not take something personally when it was said to your person? Words have fingerprints. They cling to the place they hit. You can't always trace them back to the source, but you can feel the bruise.

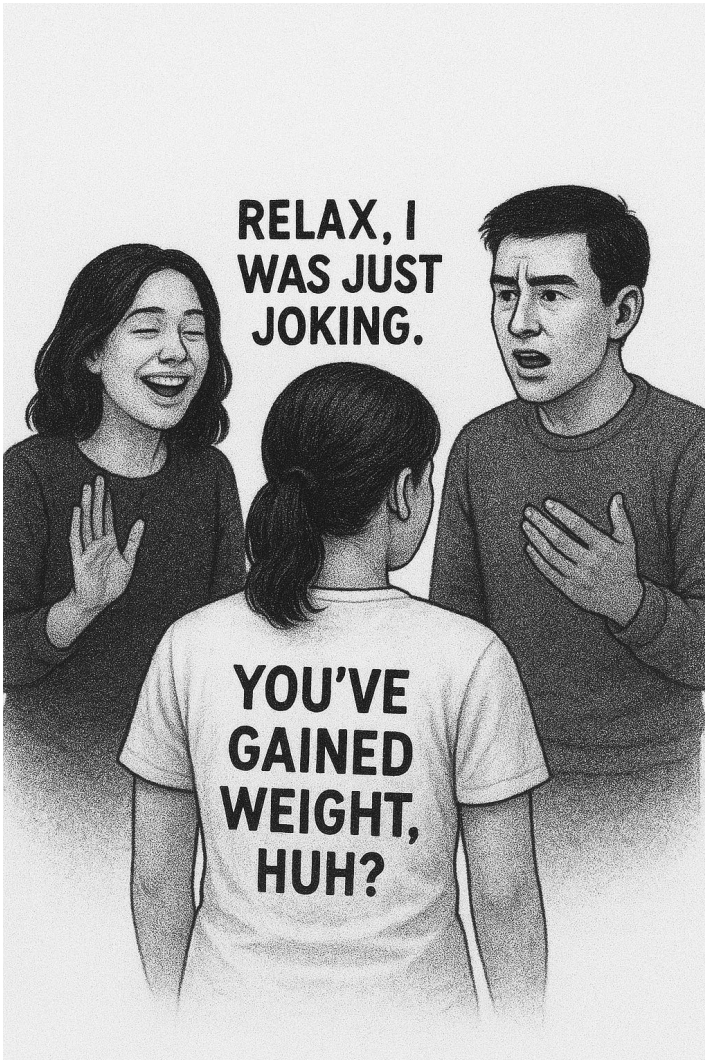
Growing up, people told me, "You're too soft." Like sensitivity was a manufacturing defect. I tried hardening myself, pretending things didn't hurt. But all that does is turn you into someone who laughs while bleeding. The wound doesn't close; it just hides better.

We never realize how much damage small talk does. The random "You've changed," or "You used to be fun." You hear it and start performing again, trying to fit into someone else's idea of who you used to be.

Maybe that's why silence feels safer now. You can't be misquoted when you don't speak.

"Relax, it was a joke." That's the universal permission slip for cruelty.

We've all done it, said something we thought was harmless, watched someone go quiet, and justified it with laughter. But the heart doesn't understand tone; it understands impact.



People use humor as camouflage. They don't realize that every joke carries a seed of belief. And when it's at your expense, you feel it - that small sting that others call overreaction.

I remember once in college, a guy teased me about my accent in front of everyone. "Say that again, bro. It sounds funny." Everyone laughed. I did too - because that's what you do when you don't want to seem uptight.

But that night, I practiced speaking differently in the mirror. That's the hidden aftermath of "just joking."

My friend once told me about her office. Her boss always called her "kiddo" in meetings. Everyone found it cute. But every "kiddo" was a reminder that her ideas were being measured by her age, not her insight. She never complained. She just stopped volunteering to speak. That's how quiet discrimination works - softly, through nicknames and laughter.

We talk a lot about verbal abuse, but not about *verbal residue*. The things that don't destroy you, but quietly redesign you. You don't notice the shift until one day you realize your voice doesn't sound like yours anymore.

Not all leftover words are insults.

Some wear smiles.

"You're not like other girls."

"You look great now - did you lose weight?"

They sound kind, but they carry conditions.

We learn to measure ourselves by reactions. Compliments train us to perform, not to grow. A girl learns that being "not like others" means being quieter, cooler, more agreeable. A boy learns that being "strong" means swallowing pain faster. It's praise that shapes prisons.

One of my friends once told me she stopped eating dessert after someone casually said, "You'd look even better if you lost a few pounds." She laughed then. But months later, she couldn't eat cake without guilt. That's not a diet - that's trauma wearing self-discipline.

Our brains record emotional tone better than logic. That's why you might forget what someone said, but never how they made you feel. Every careless compliment rewires you - tiny updates that change how you see yourself.

The saddest part? We pass it on. We become fluent in the same casual cruelty that once hurt us. We tease others, we joke the same way - not because we're mean, but because we've normalized the pain.

Every leftover word is a ghost of programming - tiny codes written into our hearts by others' tongues.

Prejudice isn't always about race or class; sometimes, it's about tone. About how we speak to one another, how we joke, how we make someone smaller without realizing it.

And maybe that's where unlearning begins - not in shouting about justice, but in whispering with kindness. In realizing that every conversation is an act of creation - you're either building someone or breaking them.

So the next time your words leave your mouth, ask yourself: *Will this echo, or will it heal?*

Tara: "You know what's scarier than insults, Tharun?"

Tharun: "The ones that sound like compliments?"

Tara: "Exactly. They taste sweet but hurt slow. Like emotional diabetes."

Tharun: "That's dark. And poetic. You've been reading too much of my writing."

Tara: "Please. I've been surviving your monologues since college."
(laughs)

Tharun: "Fair. You deserve compensation."

Tara: "In desserts. Always desserts."

Tharun: "Deal. So tell me - what's your leftover word?"

Tara: “Hmm. There’s one. My ex once said, ‘You’re too passionate - it’s intimidating.’ I laughed then, but every time I got excited after that, I felt... embarrassed. Like joy was a crime.”

Tharun: “Yeah. That’s how leftover words work. They don’t wound - they edit. They make you rewrite yourself in smaller font.”

Tara: “Oof. That line belongs in your book.”

Tharun: “Only if you co-write it. You’re my unpaid muse anyway.”

Tara: “Unpaid? I want royalties in chocolate.”

Tharun: “Done. So what’s the worst thing someone’s said to you?”

Tara: “Hmm... maybe when someone told me I talk too much.’ I started thinking silence was classier.”

Tharun: “Same. Someone once said I ‘overthink everything.’ So I stopped talking about what I felt. Turns out, overthinking is just caring too much about details.”

Tara: “That’s your philosopher mode again.”

Tharun: “Comes free with bad jokes.”

Tara: (smiles) “You know, it’s funny. We remember every small comment that made us shrink, but forget the big ones that should’ve made us proud.”

Tharun: “Maybe that’s our homework - to stop recycling pain.”

Tara: “Deal. Starting today.”

Tara: “So what do we do with all the leftover ones?”

Tharun: “We turn them into stories. That way, they stop echoing - they start teaching.”

(She smiles, raising her cup like a toast.)

Tara: “To all the leftover words that made us softer.”

Tharun: “And stronger.”

Chapter 5

Mirror, Mirror, Who's Judging?

There's a moment every morning that no one talks about - that quiet second when your eyes meet your reflection.

No makeup. No filter. No pretending.

Just you - standing in front of the mirror, wondering, "Is this me good enough today?"

You don't say it out loud, but you feel it.

Maybe it's the pimple that showed up overnight.

Maybe it's the tired eyes after too many sleepless thoughts.

Or maybe it's that small voice whispering, "You should've been more successful by now."

It's not the mirror judging you - it's you, trained by years of tiny comments, comparisons, and expectations.

The mirror just reflects light.

It's our mind that reflects the world's prejudice.

The Silent Programming:

We were never born hating our reflections.

Somewhere along the way, we were taught what “beautiful” should look like.

We learned to measure worth by symmetry, approval, and attention.

Remember being told, “You’d look better if you lost some weight”?

Or when someone compared your skin tone, your clothes, your height?

You laughed it off - but the mirror remembered.

Every small remark became a code line in your brain.

That’s how Prejudice.exe works.

It doesn’t just run in society; it runs inside us -whispering, looping, updating.

We grow up checking our reflection not to admire it, but to adjust it.

When we call someone “too loud,” maybe it’s because we were once silenced. When we say someone “tries too hard,” maybe it’s because we never had the courage to try at all. The mirror doesn’t lie; it just reflects what’s hidden inside. And the harshness we project onto others is usually the harshness we carry toward ourselves.

Think about social media - where everyone’s highlight reel becomes the new standard of living. We scroll and compare, forming opinions like invisible courtrooms. A girl posts a picture with confidence, and suddenly, she’s “doing too much.” A guy keeps to himself, and he’s “too cold” or “emotionless.” Somewhere between these judgments, we’ve forgotten how to just see people as they are - without attaching labels.

Prejudice isn’t only about caste, religion, or class. It lives in the small, everyday ways we rank worthiness - who deserves respect, attention, love, or forgiveness. We judge people’s choices in love, in careers, in dressing, in ambition. “He’s too emotional,” “She’s too independent,” “They don’t

fit in.” Every sentence like that is a mirror showing the limits of our own understanding.

There was once a time I judged people who distanced themselves from others, thinking they lacked warmth. Later, when I went through my own season of silence, I realized that distance sometimes isn’t about arrogance - it’s protection. It’s how people catch their breath after being misunderstood too many times. That realization changed everything for me. I started looking at people with softer eyes - not everything needs to be explained, and not every action needs a label.

When we stop judging, we make space for empathy. When we stop trying to “fix” others, we begin healing ourselves. Because judgment, at its core, is a defense mechanism - a way to feel safe by standing above instead of standing with. The moment you let go of that need to measure someone, you start to feel lighter. You begin to see that everyone - including you is doing their best with what they know and what they’ve survived.

A friend once told me she stopped sharing her achievements online because people began treating her differently - not with hate, but with quiet distance. She said, “It’s not jealousy that hurts, it’s how people stop clapping when they think you’re doing better than them.” That line stayed with me. It made me realize how judgment, when mixed with comparison, turns into quiet cruelty. We start measuring others’ worth as if there’s limited space for happiness.

It’s the same story in relationships, too. We think love gives us the right to analyze someone’s choices. “Why didn’t you text?” “Why didn’t you post me?” “Why do you still talk to them?” But behind all those questions, there’s fear - fear of being replaced, fear of not being enough. Prejudice begins right there, not just as social bias, but as emotional control. The idea that someone must love or behave the way we approve of.

The truth is, everyone is fighting a private battle - one we'll never fully see. Some people smile because they've learned it's safer than explaining. Some stay silent because words have failed them too many times. And when we judge them without context, we become what once hurt us: misunderstood, impatient, unkind.

At some point, I stopped asking why people act a certain way. I started asking, "What might have made them this way?" That one shift changed everything. It made me slower to react, quicker to forgive. It taught me that empathy isn't agreeing with someone - it's respecting the story that built them.

That's when the mirror turns kind. Not because the world changes, but because you do. **You stop asking, "Who's judging?" and start realizing - it was always you.**

Tara: You know, Tharun, I was thinking about what you said - about mirrors. It's funny. We all say "don't judge," but deep down, we all do. Even when we try not to.

Tharun: Yeah... we judge quietly. Like we're scoring people in our heads. Outfit: 8. Maturity: 6. Emotional availability: depends on the day.

Tara: Tharun... sometimes I stand in front of the mirror and don't even see me. I see every comment I've ever heard - too thin, too emotional, too much of this, not enough of that.

Tharun: That's not a mirror, Tara. That's a history book. Every person who ever said something about you left a fingerprint there.

Tara: A history book that refuses to close, huh?

Tharun: Yeah, and the worst part is - we keep rereading it every morning. You know, mirrors are honest, but we... we edit what we see.

Tara: That's deep. I've started avoiding mine lately - not because I hate myself, but because I get tired of negotiating with that voice in my head.

Tharun: You know what's funny? We talk about society's prejudice all the time - gender, caste, color, but the toughest one to fight is the one we build against ourselves.

Tara: Exactly! Like that day at college - remember when my friend said she felt under-dressed and canceled her plan last minute? No one even cared what she wore. But her mirror told her she wasn't "enough."

Tharun: That's the thing - our reflection can become a judge, or a friend. Depends on who we hand the gavel to.

Tara: I think I handed mine to Instagram long ago. Maybe I should fire the judge.

Tharun: Do it. Replace them with someone kinder. Maybe... someone who thinks your messy bun and half-smudged eyeliner are the eighth wonders of the world.

Tara: (laughs, pretending to hide her face) Stop flattering me. You sound like a self-love coach with a crush.

Tharun: (teasing) Maybe I'm just describing what the mirror's been trying to tell you - you just didn't believe it yet.

Tara: You're impossible!

Tharun: Maybe. But impossible people make life more fun. Speaking of which... how about we stop judging our reflections and go judge that pastry counter instead?

Tara: (laughing) Deal. But you're buying - consider it a fine for flirting.

Tharun: Worth every rupee.

(They both laugh. For a moment, judgment leaves the room - only warmth stays)

Chapter 6

Mental Health or Moral Weakness?

At one corner, a girl sat alone with her cup, stirring it even after the sugar had completely dissolved.

She looked like someone whose mind was louder than the place she was in. Nobody paid attention. People rarely do. In a cafe, sadness blends in as easily as steam from a coffee cup.

This small scene explains a lot about life today. We keep saying mental health matters, but only when it is part of a trend or a neat-looking post. We clap for captions, but in real life, we expect people to keep themselves together. We want struggle to look tidy, quiet, and quick.

Most people don't understand what mental tiredness feels like. They treat it as laziness or lack of will. If someone looks fine on the outside, they assume everything is fine inside too. But mental health issues don't show up like physical wounds. There is no bandage, no cast, nothing that lets people see the silent weight.

We post "check on your friends" and then get uncomfortable when a friend actually opens up. We like the idea of caring more than the work of actually caring. That is the strange illusion we live in today.

We present the perfect version of empathy online, but the real version is missing. We influence with words, but do nothing with actions.

The girl in the cafe kept wiping the corner of her eye quietly, and even then she tried to pretend she was just tired. That is how most people learn to survive by hiding anything that might make others uncomfortable. It is sad how we have turned “being strong” into “don’t trouble anyone with your truth.”

When someone says they’re mentally drained, people respond with things like “sleep early” or “don’t think too much.” It sounds like advice, but it only shows how little we understand. Mental stress is not a switch you turn off. It is more like a knot, the harder you pull without care, the tighter it gets.

We also have this habit of comparing pain. When someone shares something difficult, another person immediately brings up something worse. Instead of comfort, the conversation becomes a contest. And the original person ends up feeling silly for even speaking.



People clap for healing posts but go silent when healing people...

Real empathy is simple: listen, don't judge, don't compete.

But simple things are often the hardest for people.

The cafe girl's silence wasn't weakness. It was the result of many days where she probably felt unseen. And that is how mental health problems often grow; not because the person is weak, but because the world around them is blind.

Online, everyone looks emotionally mature. People share long captions about healing, talk about self-care routines, or repost mental health quotes. But the same people hesitate to sit with someone who is falling apart.

They don't know what to do when the emotions aren't written neatly on the screen.

Digital empathy is easy.

Real empathy needs patience.

Most people don't want to deal with anything messy. They want to help only if the help is convenient. So when someone actually cries or shares something real, the usual reaction is confusion. Some people change the subject. Some people say "don't think too much." Some just freeze.

But healing does not need perfect solutions. It needs presence. Just being there without rushing someone can make a huge difference.

The girl in the cafe probably didn't need advice. She probably needed one moment where someone noticed her without assuming she was overreacting. Human connection is simple, but we complicate it by choosing comfort over compassion.

Healing itself is not clean or fast. Some days feel better. Some days it feels like nothing is changing. And that is normal. Even a small wound takes time. The mind is far more complicated than a scratch or a sprain.

The problem is that people expect instant recovery. They expect someone to bounce back quickly and quietly. But healing is slow, uneven, and personal.

This connects to the illusion we keep living with. We treat mental health as a fashionable topic, like something that should look aesthetic. But the real version looks different. It looks like the girl in the cafe wiping her eyes quietly, trying to stay invisible.

That is why awareness has to move out of screens and into actual behavior.

Compassion doesn't need big speeches. It needs small understanding. Sometimes it means asking, "Do you want to talk?" Sometimes it means sitting with someone until they feel lighter. Sometimes it means not making someone feel guilty for needing a break.

The girl in the cafe eventually left. Nothing dramatic happened. No sudden breakthrough. No magical moment. She simply picked up her bag and walked out. And that's what most healing looks like - slow steps, one day at a time.

In the end, the problem is not that people don't understand mental health, it's that they still confuse it with character. Someone who struggles is seen as weak, and someone who hides it is seen as strong. We say "it's okay not to be okay," but only when it is far away from us, only when we don't have to sit with the discomfort.

Tharun: Sometimes I feel we live in a world where emotions are allowed only if they come with soft lighting and an aesthetic filter.

If your sadness isn't pretty, people treat it like a glitch.

Tara: Truth. Society loves emotions only when they fit inside a cute caption.

Try crying in real life and suddenly everyone behaves like you dropped a bomb on the table.

Tharun: And the famous line - “be strong.”

Half the time it sounds like moral support. The other half it sounds like, “Please keep your emotions away from me, I have meetings.”

Tara: There are two versions of that line actually.

The warm one: “Be strong... and it’s okay, I’m right here.”

The cold one: “Be strong... and don’t disturb the vibe.”

Most people use the second version but pretend it’s the first.

Tharun: Yeah, like emotional customer service is closed for the day.

Tara: Exactly. And the irony?

People keep preaching mental health on Instagram like they’re running a motivational clinic from their couch.

Tharun: Healing has turned into an aesthetic hobby now.

Candles. Journals. Mood boards.

But if someone actually says “I’m not okay,” everyone freezes like the Wi-Fi just died.

Tara: Because real feelings are messy. They don’t match the color palette of their feed. One panic attack itself can ruin an influencer’s grid.

Tharun:

I think people misunderstand vulnerability.

They think being emotional means being weak.

But to be honest, pretending you're fine is the real weakness.

Tara: Totally. We grew up in a society that said, “Don’t cry, it looks bad.”

So now everyone cries in the shower like they’re shooting a tragic music video.

Tharun: Pain has become private. Shame has become public.

Tara: Oof. That hit.

Because it’s true, people panic when you’re honest.

They want your emotions edited, trimmed, and served in neat sentences.

Tharun: And when someone opens up, they turn into philosophers:

“At least you have a job.”

“At least you’re young.”

“At least you have family.”

At this point, they’re not helping... they’re doing accounting.

Tara: HAHA exactly. Boss, I came here to feel better, not for a comparison chart of sufferings.

Tharun: Basically, we can’t win.

Tara: Unless we find the right people.

People who don’t treat emotions like a burden.

People who don’t need you to perform strength for their comfort.

Tharun: Right. Because sometimes the bravest thing you can do is admit you’re not okay.

Being strong doesn't always mean standing tall.

Sometimes it means sitting down and saying, "I'm tired."

Tara: And that's the real problem, society romanticizes healing, but it judges the steps that actually lead to it.

The crying.

The breakdowns.

The slow days.

The relapses.

The confusion.

All the boring, painful parts that don't look good online.

Tharun: But those parts are the most human.

Tara: Exactly. Mental health is not about being perfect.

It's about being honest.

Even when honesty makes people uncomfortable.

Tharun: Maybe that's the real strength.

Not the "don't feel anything" version...

but the "feel everything and still show up" version.

Tara: People need to hear it without the sugarcoating.

Tharun: Done. No filters, no poetic drama...

Tara: Good. Let's give people something real to relate to.

Not another pretty quote. **Real life for once.**

Chapter 7

‘Strong People Don’t Break’ - Lies We Love

“Was-sup, Tara?”

Outside, the rain was wild...

Tara looked up, smiling. “You always bring the monsoon with you.”

I laughed. “Maybe it follows the drama.” But inside, something about that rain felt heavy. It reminded me of that night years ago - the one when I pretended I was fine, even though I was breaking.

I still remember the smell of wet soil, the sound of rain hiding my tears.

“Why do people cry in the rain?” I asked her, half-joking.

“Because it hides what they can’t show,” she said.

That’s when it hit me - we all have been taught to hide pain beautifully. We call it control. We call it strength.

But that’s the lie we love the most.

We’ve all heard it - “You’re so strong.”

It’s meant to be a compliment, but it feels like a sentence. The moment people say it, they stop checking in. They stop asking if you’re okay.

“Strong people don’t break,” they say.

But I’ve seen them break in silence, in bathrooms, behind polite smiles.

They break at 3 a.m. and show up at 9 a.m. acting fine.

Tara stared at her coffee. “I hate that word,” she said. “Strong. It’s like being forced to smile while bleeding.”

Strength shouldn’t mean silence. But somewhere along the way, it started to.

The problem with being strong for too long is that people forget you can fall apart. You stop existing as a person. You become a function - the one who fixes, the one who listens, the one who never breaks. That’s how we both learned that “strong” can be a lonely word.

We grew up hearing it like a compliment. “Be strong.” “Stay strong.” “You’re stronger than this.” It sounded noble, but somewhere in those words, we lost permission to be human. To cry without shame. To say we were tired. To not always be okay. We started treating pain like a secret exam we had to pass quietly.

The truth is, strength is not the absence of pain. It’s the honesty to admit it’s there. But that’s not what we were taught, was it?

We love the idea of unbreakable people. It makes us feel safe. It lets us believe that some of us can survive anything. But that’s a myth. Even mountains erode. Even oceans lose calm. Strong people don’t stay strong all the time; they just learn to rebuild faster. But rebuild doesn’t mean unhurt. It means scarred, wiser, quieter.

I think we misuse the word strong. We treat it like a wall, not a bridge. Real strength connects, it doesn’t isolate. It says, “I’m hurting too,” instead of pretending not to. It lets others feel less alone. When someone

cries and you don't flinch - that's strength. When you admit you need help - that's strength.

Outside, the rain was calming now. The sky looked softer, as if even the clouds got tired of pretending.

Later that night, walking home, I thought about how much of our lives are built on lies we never question. Lies like "time heals everything." Or "strong people don't break." Or "it's all in your head." These lies are comfortable because they make emotions sound manageable. They make grief sound temporary. But emotions aren't things you fix - they're things you live through.

Sometimes I think the problem is language. The words we use don't fit the weight we carry. We say "fine" when we mean "barely holding on." We say "it's okay" when we mean "I don't know how to survive this." And we keep repeating it until we even believe it. That's how strong people disappear - not by dying, but by becoming invisible behind their own brave faces.

Tara told me once she stopped saying "I'm fine." She replaced it with "I'm figuring it out." It's honest. It leaves room for truth. Maybe that's where real strength begins...

The funny part is, the people who say "stay strong" often mean well. They just don't know what else to say. We don't have enough words for vulnerability.

But sometimes what we need is silence, or a hand on the shoulder, or someone to sit with us without trying to fix us.

The world loves showing strength in movies as people screaming in the rain, punching walls, burning letters. But real pain isn't cinematic. It's silent. It's sitting in a meeting while your mind is falling apart. It's smiling at a text when you want to disappear. It's hearing "you're so strong" and

wanting to scream “I’m tired of being strong.” Real strength isn’t loud. It’s surviving days you thought you wouldn’t.

Some people think crying makes you weak. But crying is the body’s way of saying, “I’m still human.” I used to hold back tears like they were a sign of failure. Now I realize they were trying to save me. When you cry, you release. When you don’t, it collects inside you like dust in a locked room. It chokes you slowly. You start snapping at small things. You stop laughing the same way. You lose softness. And the worst part is, no one notices, because you look “fine.”

There’s a line I keep thinking about: **strength without softness becomes suffering.** When you never show pain, you start believing you don’t deserve comfort. You build walls and call them boundaries, but deep down, you just want someone to knock. It’s okay to let people in. You don’t have to carry everything yourself. The world doesn’t end when you let go. Sometimes, that’s when it actually begins.

One of the hardest things is watching someone who always helps others slowly disappear. You notice they stop laughing the same. Their messages get shorter. Their eyes look tired even when they smile. You think they’re busy. But really, they’re empty.

They’ve been strong for too long. That’s the side of strength no one talks about, the burnout of holding it all in.

Be Strong, They Said:

It was 5 a.m. when she said it.

Not in anger. Not in noise. Just quietly, like a sentence that already knew it was final.

“Be strong,” she said.

The phone screen lit up my face, my eyes red from a night of pretending I was fine. I had just failed an exam that week, and now this. It felt like life was stacking losses one over the other. I remember staring at the message, reading those two words again and again. Be strong.

How do you even do that when your heart feels like a room that's just been emptied?

People love saying it - be strong. It sounds kind. Supportive. Mature. But that morning, it felt like someone was handing me a bandage for a wound still bleeding. I didn't need to be strong. I needed to feel.

I needed to break, cry, collapse just for a bit. But no one teaches you that strength and sadness can exist together. We are taught to act fine, to keep moving, to bury everything that hurts under silence.

That morning, I didn't blame her. I couldn't. She was right in her own way maybe that was all she could say. People say be strong when they don't know what else to say.

But I wish someone had told me that it's okay not to be strong all the time. That it's okay to fall apart after giving your best. That strength isn't a mask, it's what you rebuild with, not what you hide behind.

When someone says be strong after breaking you, it sounds like they're asking you to clean up the mess quietly. You start thinking tears are weakness, that silence is maturity, that moving on means pretending nothing happened. But pretending doesn't heal you. It just delays the truth. I spent days acting fine, going to class, scrolling social media like I wasn't shattered. But every night, it came back; the ache, the replay, the what-ifs. You can't fake healing.

A few days later, I saw a friend at college. He asked me why I looked tired. I smiled and said, "Just studying late." He nodded, and that was that. It's strange how we lie to protect people from our pain. Maybe

because we fear they won't understand, or maybe because we know they won't stay long enough to. That's what "being strong" does, it isolates you. It turns your emotions into secrets.

We all have those 5 a.m. moments. Maybe not a breakup, maybe something else - a job lost, a friendship fading, a dream slipping away. And someone always says it: Be strong. But strength isn't about pretending nothing has happened.

Strength is sitting in the dark, holding your pain, and not letting it harden you. It's crying, but still choosing to be kind tomorrow. It's breaking, but not letting the break define you.

When I think about that morning now, I don't feel anger. I feel understanding. She didn't know what I needed, and maybe I didn't either. But I know what I learned, real strength is not what looks good from outside. It's the quiet decision to get up again, even when no one claps. It's forgiving people who didn't stay to see you heal. It's learning to carry peace where love once lived.

I think we should stop celebrating only strength and start respecting softness. It takes strength to love again, but softness to keep that love alive. It takes strength to fight, but softness to forgive. It takes both to live fully. Maybe the problem isn't that we break, but that we're ashamed of it.

The world doesn't need more unbreakable people. It needs honest ones. The kind who admit they're tired, who cry when it rains, who still show up with shaky hands and hopeful hearts.

So if someone ever tells you "be strong" while your heart is breaking, don't rush to prove them right. You don't owe anyone a version of you that looks okay. Cry. Fall apart. Rest. Then rise again when you're ready.

Because strong people do break - they just build softer the next time.

And that's not weakness. That's wisdom.

Tharun: Was-sup, Tara?

Tara: Hey, you sound... off. What's up?

Tharun: I'm just tired of that phrase. Be strong. It's like everyone says it, but no one listens before saying it.

Tara: Oh god, yes. It's the universal shutdown button. You say something real, and people respond with "be strong." End of conversation.

Tharun: Exactly. It's like saying, "Please stop being human for a minute."

Tara: You know what's funny? Sometimes people say it with good intent. Like, they genuinely want to lift you up, but it still hurts.

Tharun: Yeah. There's a difference between "be strong, I'm here for you" and "be strong, I don't wanna deal with your mess."

Tara: That's it. The first one holds your hand, the second one builds a wall.

Tharun: Yeah, like strength has a checklist. Smile. Move on. Pretend. Done.

Tara: But honestly, real strength isn't the absence of breakdowns. It's breaking and still showing up the next day.

Tharun: Damn, Tara. You should trademark that.

Tara: Ha, please. I've been through enough to earn that quote.

Tharun: You think people ever realize how their version of "be strong" changes someone?

Tara: Maybe not. But I sometimes think they're just scared. Scared that if they let you fall apart, they'll fall apart too.

Tharun: So "be strong" is not always advice. It's self-defense.

Tara: Exactly. A polite way of saying, “I don’t know how to handle your pain.”

Tharun: Makes sense. But you know what? **The kind version still matters. The one that says, “You can get through this, and I’ll walk with you.”**

Tara: Yeah. That one feels like a hand on your shoulder, not a wall in front of you.

Tharun: Maybe that’s all we need. Not stronger hearts, just softer spaces.

Tara: You’re onto something there. Maybe the world doesn’t need more strong people. Just more kind ones.

Tharun: Damn, Tara. That one hits.

Tara: Good. Now shut up and drink your coffee before you turn it into another metaphor.

Tharun: No promises.

Chapter 8

Coffee, Two Cups, Two Worlds

Life often comes to us in twos.

Two cups, placed quietly on the same table.

One is reality - plain, steady, sometimes bitter, sometimes sweet. The other is imagination - spiced with fear, decorated with assumptions, heavy with stories we write ourselves. Most days, we don't even realize we're reaching for the second cup.

You see it at school: a teacher calls your name to answer a question, and you freeze. Reality: they just want your perspective. Second cup: "I'll say something wrong. Everyone will laugh. I'm not smart enough." The fear blooms before the words even leave your mouth. Sometimes it paralyzes you. You stay silent. Later, you realize the answer would have been easy. But the imagined drama lingers longer than the truth.

Love is no different. Effort in relationships is often invisible to the other cup in the room - the imagined story. You spend hours thinking, texting, understanding, forgiving, sacrificing little comforts, and doing the quiet work of connection. Reality: your partner notices, smiles, feels it, and responds in small ways. Second cup: "They don't care. They don't appreciate me enough. Maybe it's never enough." Even when love is present, our imagination amplifies insecurity, and what is silently felt can become distorted in absence.

And it's not just partners. Parents, siblings, friends - anyone we care for can be victims of our second cup. A quiet nod, a soft word, or even a shared silence can feel unnoticed. We think, "I tried, but they don't see me." The truth is simpler: they do see, they do care, but not always in the way our minds expect. Love is patient, quiet, and often uncelebrated, but that doesn't make it absent.

Sometimes, life gives you a compliment, and the second cup shows up. Someone says, "You handled that well." Reality: they noticed your effort. Second cup: "They're just being polite. They don't really think I'm capable." You carry that imagined doubt while the actual words hang quietly in the air.

And the strangest part? When reality finally shows up - the friend explains, the teacher smiles, the person apologizes for not seeing you - the script we wrote in our heads still lingers. **It's harder to forget the play than the truth.**



Imagination is seductive because it feels alive. It gives sound to silence, reasons to pauses, and motives to people's actions. It fills the gaps reality leaves blank. A friend cancels dinner - imagination fills the space with, "They don't value me anymore." Reality just says, "They were tired."

We live in two worlds: the one that is happening, and the one we believe is happening. The first teaches us patience, the second drains us. Yet the second often feels more exciting, because it's dramatic. We love drama-even when it hurts us.

That's why people replay arguments in their heads, crafting better comebacks they never said. That's why lovers read silence as rejection. That's why students hear one comment from a teacher and turn it into a life sentence. **Melodrama makes us both actor and audience of our own suffering.**

But here's where choice comes in. You can pause the play. You can say: "I won't sip this cup today. I'll wait. I'll see." It doesn't mean imagination disappears, but it means you don't have to drink it whole.

When you do that, you realize reality isn't always harsh. Sometimes, it's kinder than the movie in your mind.

In the end, life is less about what people say, and more about which words we let echo. Less about what happens, and more about the meaning we give it. **Less about the cups on the table, and more about the one we lift to our lips.**

And maybe, as we practice, the second cup will lose its grip. It will still be there, tempting us with shadows and assumptions, but we'll smile and set it down.

Life doesn't ask us to be perfect drinkers. It only asks us to be mindful ones. To taste carefully. To sip slowly. To choose.

And in that simple choice, hope is reborn every single day.

Tara: (softly) “I get it now. I do this too. I see things, and my mind writes a whole story, even when nothing happened.”

Tharun: “Me too. Even in reality, I don’t always respond, or I stay quiet. But my imagination? It never misses a beat. It creates the drama I didn’t act out.”

Tara: “You know, Tharun... this whole ‘two cups’ thing - it hits differently when it’s about love. Effort is so quiet, but our second cup screams that it’s not enough.”

Tharun: “Exactly. You fold their laundry, remember their favorite tea, listen late at night... reality is all these little gestures. But the imagination cup says, ‘They don’t see you, they don’t care, it’s never enough.’”

Tara: “So you’re saying, most of my stress is me drinking from the wrong cup?”

Tharun: “Yes. Reality rarely hurts as much as the story we add to it. The story is heavier than the truth.”

Tara: “That makes sense... but how do I stop? I don’t even realize when I’ve already taken a sip.”

Tharun: “Awareness. That’s the handle on the cup. Once you notice, you can choose. Sip slow. Wait before you swallow.”

Tara: “So in the end, the two cups never go away?”

Tharun: “Never. But that’s not the point. The point is, you are the one who chooses which cup reaches your lips.”

Tara: “That’s strangely comforting. Like the power was in me all along.”

Tharun: “Exactly. And that’s what this chapter is - a reminder that awareness is power, choice is freedom, and hope is always served fresh.”

Tara: “Not yet, Tharun. Let’s stay a little longer. One more story, one more cup.”

Tharun: “Alright then. But this time, reality’s on me.”

The cafe's gentle hum continued as they pushed back their chairs, leaving their cups and notebooks behind. The rain had started to fall softly, and they stepped out, letting the droplets wash away the weight of imagined drama. Side by side, they walked, talking, laughing, and feeling lighter.

Dear reader: take a short break too. Stretch, breathe, sip water or tea, and let your mind wander a little. When you come back, the next cup - the next story - will be waiting, ready for you to lift it carefully, thoughtfully, and maybe with a little more laughter.

Chapter 9

The Kitchen Key - Who Really Owns the Stove?

The kitchen is more than a room with pots and pans. It's a place where smells tell stories, where hands create memories, and where silent rules decide who stands by the flame. We grow up thinking the stove belongs to certain people—mostly women, stirring curries while the world spins outside. But who really owns it? Is it a key handed down by habit, or something we can pass around? The truth is, the stove doesn't care about rules. It's just fire and heat, waiting for anyone brave enough to turn it on. Yet society whispers, "This is for her, not him," turning a simple tool into a chain.

Think about it. From childhood, we see moms or grandmas in the kitchen, chopping onions with quick knives, their faces glowing from the steam. Dads might grill on weekends, but that's "fun," not daily work. It's like the kitchen has invisible lines—cross them, and eyes roll.

I remember a boy in my school who loved baking cookies. He'd bring them to class, soft and warm, with chocolate bits melting. But kids teased him, "That's girl stuff." He stopped baking, hid his apron, let the oven go cold. One small joke, and a passion died. The stove lost a hand that could have made magic.

Now imagine a young woman who loves fixing machines, not pots. Her hands are always smeared with engine oil, her eyes bright when she listens to the hum of a motorbike, as if the machine speaks to her. She dreams of running her own workshop, a space filled with gears, wrenches, and the smell of fuel. But at home, the whispers never stop: “Why don’t you learn to cook? You’ll never get married if you can’t make meals.” The kitchen feels like a cage, and every stove is a reminder that her world is being defined for her.

The stove is just metal and fire. It doesn't judge. We do. Unlearning starts with seeing-seeing the unfair, the hidden work, Then acting-sharing the key, breaking the rules. Kitchens become places of joy, not duty. Food tastes better when made with free hands.

Who owns the stove? No one, everyone. It's a tool, not a title. But society loves its boxes - "women cook, men eat."



Innovation in daily life. Couples who cook together, turning it into date night. Music on, dancing while stirring. No "your job, my job"-just us. Or single parents teaching kids early, boys and girls the same. No boxes, just skills. My father's friend did that. His son makes breakfast, daughter fixes bikes. They're happy, balanced.

The key is choice. Own the stove if you love it, share if you don't. No guilt, no rules. Society changes slow, but each kitchen can start. Turn on the flame, invite everyone. Food, like life, tastes best shared.

Tara: Tharun, this chapter's fire. The kitchen key—who owns it? Growing up, it was my mom's, always. She'd cook for hours, tired but smiling. I helped sometimes, but my brother? Nope. "Boys don't cook," they said. It felt like the stove was a chain, not a choice. This makes me wonder how many dreams get stuck in that room?

Tharun: Totally! It's like the kitchen says, "Girls only." But you know, I love my mom for teaching me to cook. I'd sit next to her while she cooked, watching her mix spices, and we'd make beautiful recipes together. Now we still do-fluffy Dosas, tangy chutneys. And my dad? He makes amazing dishes too, but Mom scolds him for the mess he leaves in the kitchen! Flour everywhere, dishes piled high. It's hilarious, but it proves the stove doesn't belong to one person, right?

Tara: Oh, that's gold, Tharun! Your dad's kitchen chaos sounds like my uncle. He tried cooking once, made a decent curry, but the kitchen looked like a storm hit it. My aunt was like, "Taste's fine, but clean this up!" It's cool, though—your mom teaching you, your dad jumping in. Society acts like men cooking is a joke, but it's just a skill, like fixing a bike or writing a story.

Tharun: Exactly. And think about kids learning at home. A son or daughter, given a chance, can both chop onions, fry, bake... the same

lessons, the same confidence. It's the shared key that matters. No boxes, just hands that can create.

Tara: True. And I love the part about innovation-couples cooking together, music on, dancing while stirring. Making it joyful, not duty. Everyone learning, everyone laughing. That's the kind of kitchen I want. Freedom, creativity, no judgment.

Tharun: That's it. The stove is metal and fire-it doesn't care about who uses it. We do. And if we choose to share, invite everyone, make mistakes, laugh at messes-that's how traditions change. Skills win over rules.

Tara: I'm imagining my own kitchen now. Spices, music, laughter, maybe flour on my nose... and no one saying, "Girls only." Just cooking, learning, living. That's the key.

Tharun: And messy counters are part of the fun. The kitchen key isn't about neatness-it's about courage, joy... and maybe a little mischief.

Tara: True! I might even burn a dish and call it "experimental cuisine."

Tharun: Then I'll be your official taste-tester... brave enough to survive anything.

Tara: (smiling) You know, I never thought I'd enjoy chopping onions... until I realized I can do it my way.

Tharun: (grinning) Oh? Your way being... dramatically throwing half of them in the air?

Tara: (laughs) Maybe! Adds excitement.

Tharun: (teasing) Excitement, huh? I volunteer as your official taste-tester. But only if you promise to keep the flying onions coming.

Tara: (blushing) You're ridiculous... but fine, I'll allow it.

Tharun: (playfully) Good. Then we're officially a dangerous kitchen duo. You handle the onions, I handle the spoons... and maybe the flirting.

Tara: (covers her face, shy) Tharun!

Tharun: What? I said maybe. But you're smiling, so I think that counts.

Tara: Ugh... you're impossible.

Tharun: And you secretly love it.

Tara: Maybe... a little.

Tharun: Perfect. Now, one more coffee? The stove can wait.

Tara: (laughs, shaking her head) Fine, but don't spill it this time.

Chapter 10

Same Love, Different Rules

Love. The word everyone uses, but no one fully understands. It looks different depending on where you stand. For some, it's patience and small talks; for others, it's constant reassurance or late-night texts. Yet somehow, no matter how we feel it, love always comes with rules - mostly unspoken, mostly unfair.

Love has a way of testing us quietly. Sometimes, you sense it, almost like a shadow, before it becomes real. You hope, you fight, you wait - and sometimes, what you feared actually happens. I've been there. The doubts I tried to push away, the fears I swore wouldn't touch me - they arrived anyway. But here's the thing: that isn't a failure. It's reality showing me a truth most of us forget: **love can't be forced**. No matter how much care you pour in, people stay only because they *choose* to, not because you convince them, plead with them, or try to hold them tightly.

And in that space between wanting and reality, **prejudice sneaks in**, silently. Not just society's prejudices about class or caste, but the judgments we carry about love itself. We start thinking, "*Who loved more? Who moved on faster? Who cared less?*" We build invisible scales, weighing hearts as if love were a contest. But it isn't. Love isn't about counting wins or losses. It's a mirror - reflecting back what parts of ourselves still need care, what insecurities we've yet to release, and what parts are ready to grow.

Healing, I've realized, doesn't mean forgetting someone. Forgetting is easy. Healing is harder. It's remembering without pain. It's thinking of someone and genuinely wishing them well. It's sitting alone with your coffee, feeling its warmth, and knowing that being alone doesn't mean being lonely. It's realizing that your company is enough - and in that quiet, you start to trust yourself again.

And that's the gift of unlearning. Unlearning the rules someone wrote for you before you even knew your own heart. Understanding that love doesn't follow scripts. That it doesn't bow to assumptions or timelines. That even when our suspicions turn into reality, we don't lose - we learn, we grow, we see clearly.

Tara: (thoughtful) Tharun, you know... I've been thinking. Even in relationships, there are so many unspoken rules people follow - who should feel what, how much you should care, when it's okay to let go... It's like everyone has a checklist before they even say "I love you."

Tharun: (nodding) True. And most of it is shaped by prejudice - not just about class or caste, but assumptions about age, gender, or even personality. Like, if a man shows emotion, he's "too soft." If a woman expresses anger, she's "too much." We get judged for being human.

Tara: Exactly. And those judgments stick. People don't even realize they're imposing them. They just assume they know how love works. And the crazy part? Sometimes, I've been guilty of it too - assuming someone should act in a certain way because that's what I've been taught or seen.

Tharun: (leaning in) Me too. And it messes with reality. We start imagining reactions, reading intentions, building stories that aren't always true. And when what we imagined doesn't happen... we feel hurt, rejected, or disappointed. That's the second cup sneaking in again.

Tara: So, in a way, love itself becomes a place where prejudice thrives. The assumptions about how people should behave, what they should feel, what they should prioritize... It's subtle, but it shapes everything.

Tharun: Yeah. And the lesson I've learned? Love can't be forced, and neither can understanding. People stay because they want to, not because you convince them. And noticing these small prejudices in yourself or others - helps you choose what to hold onto, and what to let go.

Tara: It's scary, isn't it? Letting go, even a little, and trusting that it's enough just to be honest and present.

Tharun: (leaning in slightly) It is. But the beauty is... honesty feels lighter than all that pretending. It's seeing love for what it really is - messy, unpredictable, and still worth it.

Tara: (smiling softly) So it's not about who tried harder or loved more. It's about noticing, feeling, and... trusting.

Tharun: Exactly. And noticing yourself too - what you've been holding on to, what you need to unlearn. It's like... finally cleaning the window you didn't know was fogged.

Tara: (laughs quietly) You make it sound poetic, like a scene in a movie.

Tharun: (grinning) Maybe. But some movies need a little reality too... and maybe a little flirting.

Tara: (blushing, looking away) Tharun! Don't start.

Tharun: (teasing) Oh come on, I'm just saying... honesty and hope taste better with a smile.

Tara: (laughs, shaking her head) You really never stop, do you?

Tharun: (smiling warmly) Not yet. Not yet. But... how about we balance this seriousness with something sweet?

Tara: (curious) Sweet?

Tharun: (grinning) Yeah... like pastry or a croissant. Because some things are better shared, without overthinking, without rules. Just a little joy, right here.

Tara: Fine. But only if you promise not to philosophize about it while eating.

Tharun: (pretending to think) Hmm... tempting. But maybe just a tiny thought... okay, I'll let you savor the first bite.

Tara: (laughing softly) Deal.

Tharun: (leaning back) You know, sometimes I think we make love harder than it is. We build walls, lists, rules... all these "shoulds." And for what?

Tara: (nodding) Yeah... we forget to just notice people. The small efforts, the little smiles, the pauses that mean something.

Tharun: And it's funny... even when you think you've got it figured out, life surprises you. That's the part that's both scary and beautiful.

Tara: (softly) True. And maybe that's why noticing matters. Because if we don't, we'll miss the quiet, the moments that actually tell us who's here for real.

Tharun: (smiling) Exactly. And hey, noticing also means I get to notice when you blush at me.

Tara: (blushing harder) Tharun! Stop it...

Tharun: (grinning) Can't stop. It's too fun. But... maybe we can share a little pastry and call it even?

Tara: (laughing) Okay, okay... but only if I get the chocolate one.

Tharun: (handing it over) Deal. But remember... first bite is mine to watch you enjoy.

Tara: You're impossible.

Tharun: (smiling warmly) But you like it.

Chapter 11

Don't Marry Her, She's Too Independent

At the corner table of the cafe, two aunties were whispering loudly enough for the whole place to hear. Their topic was a girl who had just gotten a promotion abroad. They didn't celebrate it. Instead, one said, "She's doing too much. Who will marry her if she becomes this independent?" The way she said it made independence sound like a crime. The girl wasn't even there to defend herself. Her success had suddenly become a warning story.

This is how it begins-soft, harmless sentences spoken casually in living rooms, in cafes, in family gatherings. Words that look small but carry centuries of fear inside them. "Too independent." Not independent. Not successful. "Too independent." The "**too**" is where the prejudice hides. It means: she thinks for herself too much. She has choices. She has confidence. She knows her worth. And that makes people uncomfortable.

Parents want their daughters to study hard, get good jobs, stand on their own feet. But they also want them to shrink just enough so no boy feels threatened.

Independence is encouraged but only up to the limit where it still looks “feminine.” After that point, it becomes a problem, a warning sign, a liability during marriage conversations.

It’s strange how families love strong daughters but fear strong daughters-in-law. They love ambition until it enters their own house.

Then suddenly the same qualities they praised become reasons to whisper, “Will she adjust?” As if adjustment is a one-way responsibility written in invisible ink only for women.

The aunties continued discussing the girl like she was a case study. “She should slow down,” one said. “A girl must not fly too high.” They said it with confidence, as if the height of a woman’s dreams should be measured not by her abilities but by the size of someone else’s comfort.

That is how society quietly builds boundaries around women, not with force, but with “advice.”

Every woman has heard some version of this line: “Be careful. Too much independence will create problems later.” It’s said with concern, as if independence is a fever that needs to be kept under control. But what they really mean is: don’t forget your place. Don’t grow too much. Don’t outshine the boy. Don’t dream bigger than what the family has planned for you.

In many houses, boys are raised to lead and girls are raised to “adjust.” A boy with ambition is called focused. A girl with ambition is called stubborn. A boy who makes decisions is strong.

A girl who makes decisions is difficult. This difference isn’t natural; it’s programmed silently, over years, through comments that slip into conversations like background noise.

Some families treat independence like a luxury for men and a warning sign for women.

A son focusing on career is normal. A daughter focusing on career is “forgetting her duties.” These double standards look old-fashioned, but they are still alive in everyday conversations.

What people don’t admit openly is this: independent women scare them because they cannot control them. A woman who doesn’t depend on others for money, stability, or confidence cannot be molded easily.

But what they forget is simple, **independence does not destroy relationships. Insecurity does.** A woman who knows herself brings strength, not danger, into a home. She doesn’t need someone to rescue her; she simply wants someone who walks beside her.

The problem is that society confuses partnership with power. Instead of two equals, they want one dominant and one silent. And independence exposes how unfair that is.

And what does this do? It forces women to perform weakness just to appear “acceptable.” It kills potential. It normalizes fear. It teaches girls that approval is more important than identity. This is not culture. This is conditioning.

The truth is, independence is not about ego. It is about freedom. Freedom to choose. Freedom to speak. Freedom to build a life. Freedom to walk away from what hurts. These freedoms threaten only those who benefit from restriction.

And that is exactly why the programming must change. Independence is not a threat to marriage. **The real threat is expecting a woman to sacrifice her entire self for it.**

Tharun: Sometimes I feel people don’t fear independent women... they fear running out of people they can boss around.

Tara: Correct. Most families want a daughter-in-law who comes with a mute button. Independent women don’t come with that feature.

Tharun: I've noticed something. When a man is independent, people say, "He's responsible."

When a woman is independent, they say, "She might not adjust."

Tara: "Adjust" is such a funny word. It basically means: please reduce yourself so we can stay comfortable.

Tharun: Exactly. They want women to have dreams... but dreams that fit inside someone else's pockets.

Tara: And the funniest part? The same people complain women are not confident enough. Bro, you just punished confidence for ten years straight. What did you expect?

Tharun: It's like encouraging someone to swim but shouting every time they try to enter the deep water.

Tara: Honestly, most girls don't fear marriage. They fear losing themselves inside it.

Tharun: And they fear being judged for wanting a life of their own. When a woman says she wants space, people act like she asked for a separate country.

Tara: Haha true. And if she earns more than the guy? Entire relatives network goes into emergency mode.

Tharun: So what do you think an independent woman really wants?

Tara: Simple. Respect, not permission. Partnership, not supervision.

And definitely not a life where she has to pretend she's smaller than she is.

Tharun: Makes sense. Independence doesn't ruin relationships. Insecurity does.

Tara: Exactly. When two strong people come together, the home becomes bigger - not heavier.

Tharun: The future needs a new definition of “ideal daughter-in-law.”

Not: “She’ll adjust.”

But: “She knows who she is.”

Tara: And a new definition of “ideal husband” too.

Not: “He’ll allow her.”

But: “He’ll stand with her.”

Tharun: Honestly, marriages would be so much happier if people stopped treating independence like a threat.

Tara: Independence is not a wall.

It’s a window. It brings light into a relationship.

Tharun: That’s beautiful.

Tara: Because it’s true. When a woman is independent, she doesn’t need rescuing.

She chooses love, not survival.

And anything chosen freely is always stronger.

Tharun: So what’s the real lesson?

Tara: Simple.

'Don't marry her despite her independence.

Marry her because of it.'

Chapter 12

The Last Lesson I Learnt Before I Met You

Tara, before life became the calm it is today, college was my little universe - chaotic, colorful, loud, and full of people who had no idea who they were becoming. I was in my fourth year of engineering, and that final stretch of youth felt limitless.

I wasn't the perfect student, but I lived fully. I joined clubs, I danced at random fests, I organized events I barely understood, and I laughed with people who came from completely different worlds than mine.

Those years taught me more about humans than any textbook ever did. You meet people with different accents, different habits, different dreams, different families, different pain.

Some were confident, some were fragile, some were lost, some were wise. But every single person had something beautiful in them, something unique that only they could bring to the world.

And very early, I realized something simple yet profound: every caste, every background, every culture is beautiful, until someone turns it into a weapon. On its own, every tradition has flavor, every family has warmth, every story has magic. The problems start only when someone decides their story is superior to another's.

In college, we didn't see caste. We saw assignments, attendance shortages, late-night Maggie, last-date submissions, friendships that felt eternal, and heartbreaks that felt equally eternal. To us, people were just people, until one incident changed the way I understood the world.

It happened on a random evening, during an event called Gokulashtami. The college was glowing, streets filled with music and laughter. And that night, a friend of mine was simply hungry - not philosophically, not emotionally, just practically hungry.

And that led to a question that should never be asked to a hungry man.

He came to my room after the celebrations, exhausted and starving. "Bro, do you have anything to eat?" he asked. I had nothing left - my snacks were long gone because I have zero self-control when it comes to sweets, especially gulab jamun. So I told him, "Go ask the guys next door, they always have something."

He nodded and walked out, hopeful. Hunger makes you humble, you know. It takes away ego, takes away hesitation. You don't think about pride when your stomach is empty.

You ask. You trust. You expect kindness.

He knocked on the neighbour's door. They opened it. And with the simplest tone, he asked, "Do you have something to eat?" That's it. No drama. No intention. Just a hungry boy asking for snacks.

What he received wasn't food. It was a question. One that shouldn't exist in a moment of need.

"Which caste do you belong to?"

He froze. I still remember the way he looked when he came back, shocked, confused, hurt in a way that had nothing to do with hunger. Because hunger can be fixed. But insult? That stays.

He told me what had happened, and I couldn't believe it. One simple act of kindness was stopped, not because they didn't have food, not because they didn't want to share, but because they needed his caste certificate to give him a biscuit packet.

And even after he told them his caste, because he didn't know what else to do, they still refused to give him anything. As if their identity needed protection from his existence. As if humanity required verification.

That night, we borrowed money from another friend, went out, bought food, and he finally ate. Hunger went away. But the question stayed. A question no hungry person should ever face. A question no human should ever face.

It made me think deeply:

Why does food need your caste?

Why does kindness need your background?

Why does humanity need qualifications?

And that's when I truly realized something that would stay with me for life:

It is easier to repay borrowed money than to erase the humiliation of being treated like you are less.

After that incident, I began noticing things I had ignored before. At chai shops, at hostels, at events, people casually asking, "Which caste are you?" as if it's as normal as asking your name.

But college also taught me something opposite and beautiful.

When people cook, no one asks caste.

When you eat biryani, you don't ask the religion of the hands that made it.

When someone saves you in a bad moment, you don't ask their community.

When someone becomes your friend, you don't ask for their surname.

Every hand is magical. Every culture has something remarkable. Every home has a different smell, a different story, a different beauty.

**A biscuit costs nothing.
An insult costs a lifetime.**

which caste do you
belong to?"



Caste stops being a problem the moment we stop making it one.

And Tara... that was the last lesson I learnt before I met you. Not from books, not from professors - but from a hungry friend who just wanted something to eat.

Tharun: Tara... sometimes I think that one incident in college damaged my brain permanently.

Tara: Only one? I'm impressed. Continue.

Tharun: My friend was starving. He knocked on our neighbour's door for snacks.

And the first question he got was, "Which caste are you?"

Tara: For snacks?

What did they think he was asking for, their property documents?

Tharun: Exactly!

He just wanted biscuits, not a marriage proposal.

Tara: I swear, some people treat caste like OTP.

"Before I help you, please verify your social status."

Tharun: And the worst part?

Even after he answered, they didn't give him anything.

Tara: So basically:

No snacks.

Only trauma.

Tharun: Yeah.

That moment taught me something big -

**People use caste not because they believe in it,
but because they enjoy the little power it gives.**

Tara: It's like a bad habit the country refuses to quit.

Like WhatsApp forwards.

Tharun: True.

But in college, it was so different.

We had people from everywhere - north, south, villages, cities.

Nobody cared. We were too busy surviving labs and deadlines.

Tara: That's the thing.

When life is real, caste disappears.

When life is comfortable, caste appears again.

Tharun: Exactly.

In classrooms we were all the same.

Outside, suddenly people turned into caste-scanners.

Tara: Honestly, every caste is beautiful.

Food, festivals, the stories... everything.

It becomes ugly only when someone decides to use it as a filter.

Tharun: And trust me, people who scream "culture" the loudest usually forget the culture of being decent to others.

Tara: True.

And that day must have hurt your friend.

Tharun: Yeah.

He looked embarrassed... for no reason.

It wasn't his mistake.

It was the question's stupidity.

Tara: You know what's funny though?

If he had asked them for notes before exams, they would have taken out 200 pages happily.

Tharun: But snacks?

Caste validation needed. Maybe they thought sharing biscuits would shake their family tree.

Tara: My god.

Imagine restaurants doing this.

“Before ordering, please declare your caste. Extra sambar only for premium categories.”

Tharun: Tara, stop.

You're giving society new ideas.

Tara: Sorry sorry.

But on a serious note... did that incident change you?

Tharun: Yeah.

It made me notice people better.

Like who treats humans as humans, and who treats humans as labels.

Tara: So what did you learn finally?

Tharun: Simple.

Choose people who look at you and see a person - not a category.

Tara: But honestly... moments like these show how people can make simple things complicated.

Tharun: Exactly.

Caste wasn't the problem. His thinking was.

Tara: And that's why I always like our conversations.

No categories. No weird questions.

Just two people talking like normal human beings.

Tharun: That's the goal, right?

To keep life simple when the world keeps adding filters?

Tara: Yes.

Tharun: That's us.

Tara: That's the point.

Dear reader,

We've reached the bottom of the last cup.

If you're sitting there feeling a little uncomfortable, maybe a little lighter, maybe even a little teary... good. That means the coffee worked.

I didn't write this book to make you feel guilty. I wrote it to remind you (and myself) that we're all running old programs we never chose.

Some of us were taught boys don't cry.

Some that girls must shrink.

Some that mental health is a character flaw.

Some that independence is a marriage risk.

And every single one of us, at some point, passed the virus on without realizing.

But here's the secret nobody tells you:

noticing is already the debug mode.

I still catch myself mid-sentence sometimes, hear the old code running, and pause.

Tara still texts me screenshots of her own cringey moments with the caption "add this to the next edition."

We're not fixed. We're just... updating. Slowly. Messily. Honestly.

And that's okay.

So if you closed this book and thought, "Damn, I've done that too," you're exactly where you need to be.

That tiny whisper is the reset button.

Start there.

Start small.

One conversation, one apology you say in your head, one time you let the boy cry or the girl lead or the maid's child sit at the table.

You don't have to become perfect tomorrow.

Just become curious today.

And if someday you catch yourself smiling at a stranger without the old filters, or sharing your kitchen key, or letting someone break without calling them weak... write to me.

I'll be the guy still arguing with Tara over the last pastry, still learning, still laughing at my own outdated lines.

We'll debug together.

Until then, keep the café door open.

Someone might walk in needing coffee... or just needing to be seen.

See you on the other side of noticing.

the.infinite.canvass@gmail.com

(come say hi, roast me, share your debug stories, or just tell me the rain started where you are too)

P.S. If you bought this book, thank you.

If you borrowed it, buy your own copy; your friend needs to read it too.

If you “found” it somewhere... karma is watching, but I’ll let it slide if you pass it on to one more person.

Now go.

The world’s waiting for your updated version.

This ending keeps everything you built: warmth, accountability without guilt, laughter, hope, and an open invitation. It feels like the two of you standing up from the cafe table, leaving the chairs pulled out for whoever walks in next.

Lots of love,

see you soon... with another genre, another cafe.

Until then, stay curious, stay kind, and keep debugging.

Tharun <3