

SOME STORIES WE INHERIT.

SOME WE CREATE.

ALL OF THEM SHAPE

WHO WE BECOME

TIMELINES

SAUGATA MITRA



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Stories Matter

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Prologue:

Kolkata, November 2023

Raktim

The ambulance siren pierced the stillness of the night. It jolted the residents in the vicinity awake. A sense of foreboding, dread, and alarm hung in the air. Street dogs barked in unison, seeming to challenge the blaring siren. The red light of the ambulance washed over the driveway of the five-storied building as it pulled in.

Drawn by the commotion, a few people from the locality gathered near the entrance. These included those who slept on the pavements, security guards from nearby buildings, residents of the nearby slums, and a few from neighbouring apartments. The lights in the car parking area inside the building had now been turned on.

The security guard, Tarun, looked visibly shaken. His last two shifts had been a night shift followed by a day shift. Tired and drained after a nonstop forty-eight-hour stretch, his eyelids were heavy with sleep. He had dozed off in his chair. The ambulance siren and the repeated honking at the gate had failed to reach him. Mr Rakhit, shaking him violently, finally broke his sleep. Whatever was unfolding in front of him was something he had never encountered before.

Inside, a distraught Mr Rakhit stared blankly as ambulance attendants rushed out with the stretcher. A man in his early sixties, in a shirt and trousers, lit a cigarette. There were bloodstains on his shirt and fingers.

Upstairs, the bedroom glowed dimly from a red night lamp. Beside the low bed, blood pooled. *Riders on the Storm* played on loop, rain sounds blending into the silence. The stretcher bearers lifted a man in his mid-thirties from the bed.

Ishita Rakhit, a woman in her late fifties, stood at the bedroom door. She was motionless, watching her son's limp body being moved. Gauri, the domestic help, stood beside her, frozen in horror. Ishita's face held a look of shock and unbearable grief as the stretcher bearers carried her son out of the room. The stretcher was wheeled into the ambulance. Rajeev and Ishita stood as mute spectators. Their grief was too intense for words.

The swiftness of what had unfolded left them no time to process it. There was no time to ask why it had happened, or why their son had taken this step. They stood there, shattered and numb, watching their son disappear into the ambulance.

Chapter 1 –

The beginning of dependence

Mumbai & Kolkata, 2020–2023

Raktim

Raktim stubbed out his cigarette and took a last sip of the Thumbs Up, which now tasted flat, having lost its fizz. He dimmed the lights and lay down on his bed. The phone buzzed beside him. He picked it up and opened WhatsApp. The clock on the phone read 3:00 a.m. It was a message from her, wishing him good night—a ritual he had grown used to. He replied, *“I like talking to you.”* After a moment, she wrote, *“You say that every night.”*

“Because it’s true,” he replied. “Go to sleep,” she wrote. “Good night.” He replied with a salute emoji.

In recent years, going to sleep in the wee hours of the morning had become a ritual in Raktim’s life, and sometimes, not sleeping at all. The problem had started in 2020, when COVID struck. Raktim had to relocate to Mumbai after completing his treatment at the Rehab, taking up an opportunity at a leading advertising agency. During the lockdown, while living alone in his apartment in Andheri East, Mumbai, he suffered a panic attack. In fact, since childhood, he had dealt with anxiety and mood swings. For a brief period, he had been on medication.

However, during his early struggles in college days, neither Raktim nor his parents were fully cognisant of the gravity of his psychological problems. Treatment was erratic and inconsistent. The medication—taken irregularly—never had the chance to make a lasting difference. Instead, it offered him a fleeting sense of numbness, a brief escape from anxiety and restlessness. He began to develop a dependence on medication, drawn to the numbness it offered. It gave him a faint, almost intoxicating sense of being high. Before long, he was taking extra doses.

This pattern did not go unnoticed by his parents. Mistaking his reliance on that numbness for exaggeration or avoidance, they grew apprehensive and decided to stop the medication altogether. In the years that followed, Raktim gradually slipped into addiction. His substance of choice became alcohol, along with sleeping pills that he managed to procure through fake prescriptions.

Treatment at a Rehabilitation Centre on the outskirts of Kolkata for a couple of years, the help of the Alcoholics Anonymous fellowship and the recovery programme had helped him stay away from alcohol and drugs. He led a serene life. Yet, while the treatment and the programme had helped him remain sober and clean, the underlying problems of anxiety and mood disorder had never been fully addressed. Over time, both Raktim and his parents came to believe that sobriety and staying clean would also resolve his problems of anxiety and depression. There was an underlying fear that continuing medication might lead him back toward relapse. With this apprehension, the medicines were gradually stopped. Raktim himself was comfortable with the decision. He shared the belief that taking medication could compromise his sobriety.

The assumptions his parents made proved wrong, and that came to light when Raktim's psychological issues resurfaced during the COVID lockdown. Loneliness and anxiety grew severe. News channels only worsened his fears with grim updates. Fear of death or disease weighed on him, leaving him sleepless and without appetite. Each breath was heavy, anxiety-ridden. Restless and unable to endure each day, he finally chose to seek help. On a WhatsApp video call, his parents' recommended psychiatrist offered hope. Medication was prescribed for his anxiety and insomnia. For the first time, the path to relief seemed clear—yet the fear of relapse lingered. He still wanted to resist, but he accepted the need for help.

Chapter 2 – At Home

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim

Raktim returned home after yet another gruelling day at work. He was tired and famished. He found his father relaxing on the high-wing chair that Raktim had gifted him. His feet were propped up on a stool. A half-finished glass of whisky sat on the table beside him. Jagjit Singh played on the new Bose speakers he had bought recently. His father's eyes were closed, and he was mouthing the lyrics.

Raktim peeked into the kitchen, drawn by the aroma of the food. Madhu da was stirring the mutton in the vessel. The flame on the burner was high. He was using the ladle meticulously to mix the meat with onion, garlic, tomato, and curd paste. Next to the burner was a plate full of *alu bhaja*. His father couldn't have a meal without it. Raktim gently placed his hand on Madhu da's shoulder to ask how much longer the food would take. Madhu da replied nonchalantly that it would take a while.

"But why mutton today? Isn't it Friday?", he asked.

"Your father wanted mutton curry and luchi today," Madhu da said. He was clearly unimpressed by the sudden change in

schedule. Cooking meat, he explained, required time, energy, and the right frame of mind. For him, all three came together only on Sundays. On other days, cooking mutton meant extra work and a disrupted routine.

When he stepped out of the kitchen, he found his father with a cigarette dangling between his lips. His fingers were working on the phone keypad, probably typing a message. The glass on the table was now full. As Raktim glanced at the whisky glass, his father called out, “Babu”—as he was lovingly called by his parents—“When did you get back? I didn’t hear the doorbell.”

A sudden wave of guilt washed over Raktim. Had his father caught him looking at the whisky glass? Why did he have to look at it at all? What was he thinking? Seeing him momentarily lost in thought, his father asked, “Is everything alright?” Raktim nodded absentmindedly. He replied that he had let himself in with his own key.

Raktim entered his room, turned on the light, and threw his laptop bag on the bed. He felt his chest tighten. He felt a sudden obsession to have a drink. There was a feeling of unease, restlessness, and remorse.

Why was this happening to him, he wondered. Was it because it had been almost a month since he had attended an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting? It had been a while since he had last read the Big Book or spoken to his sponsor. He took out his packet of cigarettes. With slightly trembling hands, he flicked the lighter. After a few failed attempts, he managed to light one. He took a long puff.

Lost in thought, images from that night haunted him. He didn’t want to remember, but the past clung to him.

Suddenly, a new thought loomed. It unsettled him and brought with it anxiety and dread. How would he tell her about his past? What would happen if she found out?

Amidst everything unfolding in his mind, he had been unaware of his parents' presence in the room. His mother gently placed her hand on his shoulder. She spoke softly, "Don't worry. This too shall pass."

It was great how involved his parents were in his recovery. They attended meetings with him at times and attended Al-Anon meetings to better understand his struggles. They had never been judgmental, even during his darkest days. He knew that they had been there for him throughout, unwavering, holding his hand steady and walking beside him on his journey towards freedom.

Chapter 3-

The Drift Within

Kolkata, 2023

Nandini

A light, cool breeze wafted in through the louvred window, popularly called *khorkhori* in Bengali, bringing much-needed relief from the sweltering Kolkata heat. Nandini, a woman in her mid-thirties, was in the middle of an online meeting, her laptop resting on an antique wooden desk by the wall, its deep brown surface dulled by time and use. The chair she sat on was equally old, straight-backed and solid, its arms bearing faint marks from countless hands that had rested there over the years.

Nandini worked at Stanridge Bank in Mumbai in the compliance department. She had shifted to Kolkata for a temporary period, opting for work from home after her mother suffered a cardiac arrest. She had no siblings, and her father had passed away a few months earlier.

Nandini found her mind wandering, as it often did. Random, unconnected questions kept cropping up in her thoughts—questions to which she had no definite answers, questions whose origins and purpose she did not fully understand. Were they connected to the events from her past? She did not know.

What was it about life that made it worthwhile? Was it love, a relationship, or a career? What about family—parents, friends? And the city where we are born, where we grow up?

The meeting was a weekly catch-up, and her boss was addressing the entire team. Nandini found it hard to concentrate, her thoughts drifting elsewhere. Was this how she had always been, or was it what she had become? She had always been a star performer and had been awarded the Employee of the Year by her department twice. Yet, over the last few months, she hadn't quite felt like herself.

Her mind went back to experiences that had shaken the very foundation of her life. Nandini took a deep breath and let it out slowly. *You need to calm down*, she heard a voice within her. She took another deep breath and let it out, just as slowly.

A sudden stillness settled around her, and she felt her train of thought begin to slow. A realisation dawned—*experiences shape who we are; they shape the way we think*. A knowing expression crossed her face as the thought settled in. Her own experiences had not been particularly enriching, nothing anyone would be envious of. She smiled at herself.

When it was her turn to update her boss and the rest of the team on the call about the status of her tasks, she rattled through the entire list without pausing. Her only concern was to get through it as quickly as possible. The whole exercise had become a mundane ritual. Work itself had turned into an obligation. Her passion for it had been overshadowed by the turbulence of her past.

Chapter 4 – The Night That Stayed

Mumbai, 2016

Raktim

In his drunken stupor, Raktim was unable to process the impending impact of the situation when Shristi finally walked out of their flat in Mumbai. The inevitability of such an outcome was evident to his parents and other family members, but Raktim refused to accept that it could happen.

In the immediate aftermath of her leaving, Raktim was unable to correctly articulate the reasons behind Shristi's decision. Ishita and Rajeev moved into the flat to be with him. What they encountered was a wall of defiance and denial. Raktim was hopelessly drunk when they arrived in Mumbai.

The entire house was in disarray—unwashed utensils, an unmade bed, clothes scattered across the sofa and the floor, a broken vase, an overflowing garbage bag, empty bottles of Old Monk rum lined up on the marble kitchen counter, windows in every room shut tight, and a strong stench of alcohol hanging in the air.

The days that followed were heavy with vigilance. His parents barely slept, listening for sounds, watching his movements, afraid of what each silence might mean. Raktim had remained sober for

almost a week, largely due to the persistent pleading and vigilance of his parents. Reluctantly, he had pledged not to drink. For the first time in days, his parents allowed themselves a fragile glimmer of hope.

It was a one-bedroom apartment, and Raktim had insisted that his parents sleep in the bedroom while he would make do with the sofa-cum-bed in the living room. Ishita, however, insisted that he sleep in the same room as them. Raktim resisted at first but finally relented at his mother's insistence.

Then came the grim night—the darkness that shrouded the small light of hope. They had an early dinner, though Raktim struggled to eat. Ishita had cooked his favourite food. After dinner, Raktim once again pleaded with his parents to let him sleep on the sofa-cum-bed in the living room. His parents were unwilling to budge from their position. Raktim persisted, assuring them that he wouldn't do anything self-destructive.

The choice of the word *self-destructive* was instinctive. Its heaviness hung in the air as Rajeev and Ishita contemplated their decision. Raktim awaited their verdict, his eyes pleading, expectant. His parents struggled to come to terms with the turmoil and despondency they themselves were experiencing. Seeing their son in such a pitiable state was tearing them apart. Ishita, her eyes moist with tears, stepped forward and hugged Raktim. She could no longer hold them back. Mother and son held each other in a tight embrace, both sobbing quietly. Raktim's father gently placed a hand on his wife's shoulder. Teary-eyed Ishita and Rajeev, silent and sombre, slowly walked into the bedroom.

It was the middle of the night when Ishita was jolted awake by a feeling of unease and dread. Her heart was racing, her face pale

and clammy. She got out of bed quickly and rushed out of the bedroom.

The lights in the narrow corridor connecting the bedroom to the living room were off. In the darkness, she fumbled for the switchboard and turned on the light. A faint smell of alcohol reached her. Instinctively, she knew something was wrong.

The flat had an open kitchen, and one had to pass through it to reach the living room. As she entered the kitchen, she gasped at the sight before her. Raktim lay on the floor, face down, froth coming from his mouth. Stricken with fear and panic, she screamed, calling out to Rajeev.

Chapter 5 – The Cage

Kolkata, 2023

Nandini

The online meeting was dragging on for over two and a half hours. Nandini's mind kept drifting away. She was craving a cigarette, but smoking in her room felt risky. She might be lucky and get away with it if no one walked in.

But luck wasn't on her side. It hadn't been for a while now. From a carefree life in her own space in Mumbai, she now felt caged at home. The meeting ended online. In the real world, the wooden door with stained-glass panels was flung open, and the cook walked into her room. The cook had been employed in Nandini's household for decades and had seen Nandini since the day she was brought home as a newborn, cradled in her mother's arms. In her mind, Nandini was still a little girl. At times, Nandini found this endearing; more often, she found it annoying. Ever since her mother's illness, the responsibility of running the kitchen had fallen on Nandini's shoulders. A key part of this responsibility was deciding what to cook for different meals.

Nandini was now desperate for a smoke. The only place she could do so in peace was the terrace, and that too late at night, after

everyone had gone to sleep. *How many rules did she need to follow?*—she wondered and chuckled to herself. The disgust was apparent on her face. She hated living in this house. The place reminded her of too many episodes from her life—episodes that she didn't want to see anymore.

She heard her mind speak again. *You are so selfish, Nandini!* The tone was admonishing. It felt like being taken back to her childhood. She could almost see her mother with her usual angry expression.

In a quick response, she heard another voice: *Wasn't this what everyone always tells you? Don't you remember the last get-together with your cousins? Don't you remember those stares... the unspoken words?*

Selfish. Evil. Nandini.

Her mother's condescending and sarcastic remarks hurt her the most. She seemed intent on impressing upon Nandini that she was responsible for her cardiac arrest. In her mother's presence, Nandini lost her voice. It had always been this way, ever since her childhood. It was as though her mother drew a cruel satisfaction from reopening Nandini's old wounds, leaving them exposed, never quite allowed to heal.

Her mother's room was on the floor above hers. The bed in her mother's bedroom was the kind found in old North Kolkata houses, characterised by a heavy, ornate wooden headboard with a built-in mirror. The room itself was reminiscent of a bygone era, furnished with pieces from Kolkata's colonial past. Her mother sat on the bed, resting against the ornate headboard. The only contemporary piece of furniture in the room was the overbed table on which her dinner had been served. An awkward silence hung

in the room as Nandini and her mother ate their dinner. The nurse assigned to care for her mother sat in a wooden chair beside the bed. Nandini's mother had made it clear that she did not want the nurse—or even her daughter—to feed her. She was able to eat on her own.

The sudden silence was broken by the clatter of a spoon falling onto the floor as Nandini got up from the bed to put away her empty plate. Her mother shot her a stern look of disapproval. Nandini picked up the spoon and handed her plate and spoon to the nurse, who had risen from her chair.

“Why are you so clumsy?” her mother said, mixing the rice on her plate with the fish curry.

Nandini didn't respond.

“So, when are you planning to go back to Mumbai?” her mother asked, after a pause, still not looking at her.

“Once you are a little better,” Nandini replied. She had planned to take her mother with her to Mumbai once the doctor allows it.

“And I want to take you along with me,” Nandini added.

Her mother looked up at her, chewing her food, her face expressionless. “I am not going anywhere. This is my house, and I am staying here.”

“But who will look after you here?” Nandini asked.

“So, you are saying you will look after me?” her mother said, her tone laced with sarcasm.

It was this tone that hurt Nandini the most.

“Learn to take responsibility for yourself first. Fix your life,” her mother said.

They stung Nandini as though a thousand needles had pierced her body. Nandini could feel rage building up inside her. A sudden tightness gripped her chest, and her head felt heavy. She didn't utter a word of protest. She stared blankly at her mother for a moment and then walked out of the room.

Chapter 6 – The Need to Control

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim

Raktim felt a flash of anger rise within him as a speeding public bus—popularly called a minibus in Kolkata—almost brushed against the side of his car. The car was precious to him, as it is to most people, but in Raktim’s case, it bordered on obsession.

It had been barely a year since he had bought it—a white Volkswagen Taigun—and apart from him, no one was allowed to drive it, not even Rajeev. Rajeev would invariably pull his leg about it, often joking that the car mattered more to him than most people did. It wasn’t that Raktim didn’t want his father to drive the car; he was just constantly plagued by the fear of something going wrong—of his father, or anyone else for that matter, damaging it.

Raktim carried a feeling, deep within him, that, over time, had hardened into a belief—that he would lose whoever or whatever he loved. The thought had first taken root years ago, after a loss the family rarely spoke about anymore.

It was as though this was divine providence. He felt that the Almighty could not bear to see him happy.

Somewhere deep inside, he believed there might be a God, but that God had never done anything for him. It had never quite occurred to him that he might never have truly allowed God into his life. The trauma he had gone through when he was just fourteen had left him scarred for life. There was a strong, unshakable resentment towards God. The trauma had haunted and hunted him throughout his life. Desperate, exhausted, and resentful, he would crave an escape. Escape at any cost. Alcohol became that solution. His way out. His only escape route.

In 2017, his parents brought him back to Kolkata and admitted him to an alcohol and drug rehabilitation centre. A long period of treatment at a rehabilitation centre along with Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, had helped him stay sober for nearly six years. As his sobriety progressed, his life, too, slowly began to come back on track. Yet some things remained unchanged, unacknowledged.

Initially, he harboured deep resentment towards his parents for admitting him to rehab. Over time, however, through conversations with his sponsor, that resentment had slowly begun to fade.

Going back to his usual ritual, post-dinner, he poured himself a chilled glass of Thumbs Up, took a sip, and checked his phone. It was already 1:00 a.m., and she still hadn't called back. A churning unease settled in his stomach as he wondered why she hadn't called yet. Should he call her instead? The thought crossed his mind.

No. Wait for her call, a voice inside him instructed.

He lit a cigarette and stared at the night sky. His phone beeped—most likely a WhatsApp notification. He quickly pulled it out of

his pocket. The message was from an office colleague: *Hey, sorry for messaging so late. The meeting with the client tomorrow has been cancelled.*

Raktim was about to reply when his phone started ringing. It was a call from Rhea. Finally, a smile appeared on his face, and he felt his anxiety begin to dissipate.

Chapter 7 – In Transit

Kolkata, 2023

Nandini

Traffic had come to a standstill on Free School Street. Cars were parked along the side of the road, crowds spilling out onto the pavement as they waited outside the two iconic Kolkata restaurants—Mocambo and Tung Fong. The evening breeze, followed by a burst of heavy rain, offered a brief respite from the sweltering heat that had engulfed the city over the past few days. The City of Joy had been boiling, with temperatures approaching 45 degrees.

Nandini sat in a yellow taxi, an integral part of Kolkata's ethos. Whenever she was in the city, she chose to travel either by yellow taxi or by public bus. It was always a conscious decision—not to take an Uber or any similar cab.

Why did she do this? she wondered, sitting in the taxi, waiting for the traffic to get cleared. Why not choose comfort? What was it about the crowded buses that drew her in? Was it nostalgia? But didn't her past bring with it hurt and pain? Wasn't this very city an inseparable part of that past?

Yes, it was. She had run away—far away—from it. Then why this pull of nostalgia? Why this contradiction?

The ringing of her phone broke her chain of thought. She glanced briefly at the screen and disconnected the call. Outside, the traffic had slowly begun to move again. The taxi inched forward.

Her mind wandered once more. She imagined herself at sea, caught in the midst of a raging storm—alone in a small boat, tossing and turning with the waves. The water crashed against the sides, spilling into the boat. In the midst of this vivid, almost transcendental vision, she heard a familiar, comforting voice, one that had always brought her reassurance and calm during troubled times. The words echoed within her: *“Why are you so worried? Just have a little faith.”*

The voice's echoing calm was pierced once more by the harsh ring of her phone. This time, she answered the call.

“I am stuck in traffic. Will reach in ten,” she said,

Chapter 8 – The First Connection

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim

Amidst the chaos of everyday life, those nightly conversations had become a respite. That was how it had all begun. Raktim had initially been unsure and reluctant to explore dating sites. He believed that a relationship simply happens—almost like divine providence—it cannot be planned. In his newly found, spiritually inclined way of thinking, his Higher Power would make it happen.

But would his Higher Power really have the time to do this for him? he wondered. Wasn't there that age-old saying that God helps those who help themselves? His recovery sponsor had suggested, “Raktim, pray.”

Pray? Pray to God for a relationship? How outrageous that sounded to him. Shouldn't his prayers be about staying sober alone?

The dichotomy grew louder inside him. He wasn't convinced about praying to his Higher Power. The deadlock remained, the contradictory voices within him refusing to quieten.

Raktim developed a strange new habit: visiting the App Store, searching for the Blume app, clicking “download,” then stopping midway. This went on for several days. And then, one day, he finally downloaded the app—only to be put off by the endless writing it demanded: about himself, about what he was looking for, about who he was.

He knew he was articulate and had a strong command of english. Raktim had good communication skills. But when it came down to writing about himself, he somehow didn’t know where to begin.

Raktim was confused. Keeping his phone aside, he lit a cigarette. A strong cup of black coffee would clear the fog, he thought, nodding to himself in approval.

With a steaming cup of black coffee, a generous amount of sugar, and nicotine in his system, he felt a clarity—one that had so far eluded him—begin to return. Self-confidence, a willingness to experiment, and the courage to risk rejection—that was all he needed, he thought, as he stubbed out his cigarette.

With a steely resolve, he began to type. The words started to flow, shaping a colourful, thoughtful portrait of who he believed himself to be.

He let out a sigh of relief once the writing was done. So, he had been making heavy weather of this entire exercise, he chuckled to himself. All he needed to do was start—and now it was done. He felt good about himself.

The pictures he had uploaded were chosen instinctively, and the profile picture he had selected felt just right. He browsed through a few profiles, swiping left on most of them. Finally, a little tired and somewhat bored, he switched to listening to music.

Chapter 9 – The Inevitable Meeting

Kolkata, 2023

Nandini & Abir

He had ordered his usual pour-over at Starbucks and taken a seat at the far end of the café on Park Street. The taxi had inched forward slowly through the congestion on Free School Street towards Park Street. At the corner where the two roads met, Nandini stepped out of the cab.

This was an evening she looked forward to, but she knew it wasn't going to be easy. A chapter in her life that had remained open for almost a decade was nearing a closure. A chapter where every word carried the weight of betrayal, shame, pain and turmoil. Her phone rang again. She promptly declined the call. She stood still for a moment, fiddling with her phone. A restlessness began to rise within her. Her palms turned clammy, and she could feel her heartbeat quicken.

She took a tentative step forward, every fibre of her being urging her to turn back and leave.

I have to do this. I must do this, she muttered to herself.

How long was she going to carry on like this? she muttered to herself. This had to end. Why did she have to suffer? The questions continued in a relentless dialogue within her.

She was dressed in a simple kurta and salwar with a dupatta—something she had found in the almirah at her home in Kolkata. She looked at her reflection in the store's glass panels before entering Starbucks and wondered, *"Is this who I am?" Why have I become like this?*

She gently pushed the glass door and entered Starbucks. There weren't too many people inside, and the quiet only seemed to amplify the voices in her head.

She closed her eyes for a brief moment and muttered softly, "God, I need your help."

The words came instinctively, and that in itself left her unsettled. How was she praying to God? she wondered. It was so unlike her. Where was God when she had needed Him the most?

One of the attendants approached her gently and asked if everything was okay. She nodded almost mechanically.

She looked around the café and found him at the far end, speaking on the phone.

Chapter 10 – Redemption

Kolkata, 2023

Nandini & Abir

He had arrived in Kolkata on the morning flight and checked into The Park Hotel in Park Street. He was wearing blue denim and a white casual linen shirt, clean-shaven, with his favourite deodorant on. Nandini gently walked up to his table, and, on seeing her, Abir abruptly disconnected the call and stood up. It had been almost 5 years since they had both met. She smiled and reached out her hand. They shook hands. It was an awkward moment for both, and their body language - the loose handshake - was a clear visual proof of that.

To ease her discomfort, he asked if she would like some green tea.

Nandini nodded with a soft smile. Abir got up and walked to the counter to place the order. In the meantime, Nandini took out the file that had the divorce papers.

After reviewing the relevant documents and signing them, she gently nudged the file towards Abir.

“Nandini, I am very sorry to hear about your father... and about your mother’s illness,” Abir said softly.

Nandini nodded her head. Abir began reviewing the papers and signing them. In the meantime, the counter called out Abir's name. He started to get up when Nandini said, "I'll get that"

Nandini sipped her green tea as Abir reviewed and signed the papers. Once done, he gently closed the file and kept it in the centre of the table.

"Nandini...I want to apologise...." Abir started speaking

Nandini interrupted him gently, "No...please don't...I should be the one apologising for what I did to you.", she said.

Abir shook his head.

"What I had done amounts to betrayal. But I....I...just didn't know....how to...." Abir said.

"Let it be. We have been through this for almost a decade. Let's not go back there anymore," she said.

They both fell silent. Nandini took a sip of her green tea, and Abir took a sip of his pour-over.

"How do you manage to have black coffee cold?" she said, smiling.

"Some habits stay forever", he smiled back.

Chapter 11 – The First Match

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim

Raktim's phone beeped in the middle of a regular job discussion meeting. He took a quick glance at the screen. The notification was from Blume. Someone had liked him.

"Must be some weird person," he thought to himself. None of the people he had swiped right on had responded so far. After the meeting, Raktim stepped out for a smoke break. To smoke, he had to leave the office, take the elevator down from the ninth floor, and step outside the building—it was a non-smoking zone. How much effort he had to take just for a cigarette, he chuckled to himself.

The girl who had liked him on Blume was shown as "R." Her profile picture showed two girls and a guy, all wearing Santa caps and smiling at the camera. It looked like a selfie. But who was "R" among the two girls? Raktim wondered. Both looked pleasant enough. The profile didn't have a verified stamp.

"Must be a fake profile," he thought.

And yet, he clicked on the like button. No harm in checking it out.

Raktim was restless. Every now and then, he checked his phone. Shreya, who worked with him and sat opposite him, noticed the distraction. For some reason, Shreya always addressed him as “Sir,” something that irritated Raktim. The first time she had done it, he had replied, “Shreya, I haven’t been knighted yet.” She hadn’t quite understood what he meant the first time. His tone had been deliberately serious. It took her a while to catch the sarcasm, but that didn’t deter her.

This time was no different.

“Sir...” she began.

“Don’t call me Sir,” Raktim snapped.

The sharpness in his voice was unlike him. Shreya looked slightly taken aback but chose not to pursue it, returning to her laptop screen. “Hey, sorry. I’ve just been a little distracted,” Raktim added, realising he shouldn’t have snapped at her. She nodded and said, “Okay, Sir. No problem.”

Raktim burst out laughing. “Uff, Shreya, you are impossible. I beg you,” he said, folding his hands in mock surrender. “Please don’t call me Sir.”

Shreya kept on smiling, nodded.

Chapter 12 – A Face to the Voice

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim & Rhea

They started chatting on Blume that very night, and after exchanging a few messages, Rhea said she would call him on WhatsApp. When the call came, Raktim saw her name flash on the screen — Rhea.

During the conversation, he asked, almost in passing, “By the way, what’s your full name?”

“Rhea... Banerjee,” she replied.

“Okay,” he said, and moved on.

After the call ended, he saved her number as Rhea Banerjee.

Rhea had studied Sociology at Ashbourne College and later completed an MBA in Finance from ISBM. She was based in Mumbai and worked at Southbend Bank as an asset manager. She was currently working from home in Kolkata, as her mother was unwell.

Raktim was unsure whether to ask Rhea which of the two girls in the profile picture was her. The question kept resurfacing in his

mind as they spoke, but each time he pushed it away. Why was it important to know what she looked like? He asked himself.

What do looks have to do with who a person is deep within?

And yet, wouldn't it help to put a face to the voice? He reasoned. Unable to quieten his curiosity, Raktim finally asked the question. Rhea replied that the girls in her profile picture were her office colleagues.

Raktim found the answer odd. Who puts pictures of their colleagues on a Blume profile? He wondered silently.

The brief pause that followed was broken by Rhea herself. "My colleagues insisted that I create a profile. When I refused, they went ahead and created one for me," she said.

Raktim understood the part about colleagues creating a profile. What he didn't understand was why they would put their own picture instead of hers. Feeling slightly bolder now, he asked, "Why didn't they just put your picture? You all work together. It can't be that difficult to take a photo and upload it."

Raktim had a knowing expression on his face, like a detective on the verge of uncovering something. As though she could sense his doubt, Rhea responded quickly. They had initially uploaded her picture, she said. She had been furious when she found out and had demanded that they should delete the account immediately. They persisted, coaxing her to give it a chance. Finally, she had agreed — on the condition that they remove her picture and replace it with something else. If she happened to connect with someone who liked her writing — which her colleagues had crafted rather well — she would then share her photograph. Did it make sense? Raktim wondered. It was convoluted, yes. But not entirely impossible. Just as he was still processing it all, Rhea sent him her

picture on WhatsApp. The picture Rhea sent had been taken at home. It wasn't a selfie. She was simply dressed, looking into the camera with a soft, unguarded smile. Raktim felt a subtle sense of relief. The unease that had lingered in his mind softened. There was something about her that he liked at first glance.

Chapter 13 – The Decision to Meet

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim & Rhea

Their nightly conversations had now become a regular feature in their lives. They had yet to meet in person. Raktim was keen, but sceptical about bringing it up. What if she refused? He wondered. He wasn't prepared to rush it, and Rhea hadn't raised the subject either.

Raktim had given her a brief overview of his life — that he was divorced, that he worked in an advertising agency, and snippets about his stints in Mumbai and Delhi. But he had deliberately left out the part about his struggles with alcohol and his subsequent treatment. He wasn't ready to speak about that chapter yet. He wasn't sure how Rhea would react. The truth was that he lacked self-acceptance. He struggled to come to terms with the fact that he had once been an active alcoholic. Rhea, on her part, had spoken sparingly about her background and had mentioned that she was in the process of getting a divorce.

But somewhere amidst all this, a simmering tension lingered within Raktim. While Rhea had spoken about her divorce and the different episodes in her life that had led to it, he carried a gnawing

feeling that something was amiss. But why did he feel this way? Was it because of his own insecurities? Was he merely overthinking? Perhaps it was his fondness for conspiracies, his tendency to read between the lines. He had no way of knowing why the unease persisted.

Then, one day, Rhea called while Raktim was at work. It was unusual for her to call during the day on a weekday. She sounded upset, and during their brief conversation, there were long stretches of silence. Raktim, often accused of having verbal diarrhoea, found himself at a loss for words. That only deepened his discomfort. It was then that Rhea asked if he would like to meet that evening for a cup of coffee. A quiet wave of relief passed through him. But almost immediately, guilt followed. How self-centred and selfish of him, he thought. He was thinking only of his own excitement. There was no real concern for why she was upset.

Raktim suggested Starbucks on Park Street, but Rhea declined. Instead, she suggested Blue Tokai Café in Salt Lake — closer to Raktim's office.

They agreed to meet at 6 p.m.

Chapter 14 – The Storm Within

Kolkata, 2023

Nandini

The wooden louvred shutters rattled in the lashing rain. Nandini lay on her bed, her expression blank. Her eyes, almost lifeless and glassy, were transfixed on the rain visible through the narrow gaps between the window panels. The sound of thunder and a flash of lightning reverberated through the room. She curled into herself, her frail body trembling. Her eyes flooded with tears, and she felt the warmth of a teardrop trickle down her face onto the bed.

The small metal hook that held the louvred shutter in place gave way under a strong gust of wind, and the window slammed shut with a loud crack. Without the hook to steady it, the shutter began to bang repeatedly against the iron grills. The sharp thuds echoed through the room, each strike sounding like the crack of a whip, the strained hinges letting out a piercing creak that resembled a cry of anguish.

Nandini sat up, wiped her tears, and reached for her phone. Her hands trembled as she dialled the number and held the phone to her ear. After a few rings, the call was answered. Before the person on the other end could speak, she cut in sharply. “Avik, I am

sorry,” she said, tears streaming down her face. “I am sorry for what I have done to you and your life.”

The voice on the other side tried to interject, but Nandini continued. “I am a very bad, selfish woman. They were all right about me.”

She was now sobbing uncontrollably. “Please forgive me.”

Before he could respond, she disconnected the call and flung the phone to the far end of the bed. The phone rang again, but she did not answer. She sat quietly, the sound of the ringing clashing with the rain outside.

Slowly, almost as if in a trance, she got off the bed and walked out of the room. She climbed the stairs leading to the terrace. The lower edge of the wooden door to the terrace had chipped over time, and rainwater seeped in through the cracks. The latch rattled violently in the strong gusts of wind.

Nandini pushed the door open. A burst of wind and rain drenched her instantly. Defiant, braving the storm, she stepped onto the terrace. The rain lashed against her frail body, the wind whipping her hair wildly around her face. She closed her eyes and lifted her face toward the sky, tears mingling with the rain.

Amidst the fury of the storm, there was a strange stillness within her. For the first time in a long while, she was not defending herself, not justifying her actions, not arguing with the voices inside her. She simply stood there, drenched, exposed, and whispered into the rain, “Forgive me.”

Chapter 15 – The First Meeting

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim & Rhea

Raktim felt ecstatic and tense at the same time. Why was his life always a bundle of contradictions? He wondered. The conflicting emotions made him jittery, as though his inner turmoil had begun to manifest outwardly. His palms were clammy, and his hands trembled slightly — a familiar occurrence whenever he was nervous. “Keep calm, keep calm,” he muttered under his breath. Shreya, seated opposite him, watched with mild amusement. What had gotten into her boss? she wondered. Before she could ask anything, Raktim stood up abruptly, packed his bag, and turned to leave. Shreya, bewildered, found his behaviour unsettling. “You’re leaving?” she asked. “Yes, I’m meeting a friend,” he replied. Without making eye contact, he walked toward the office exit.

Raktim reached Blue Tokai Café 30 minutes before the scheduled time. He pushed open the glass door and scanned the café to see if Rhea had arrived. Inside, there was only one couple seated at a corner table; the rest of the café was nearly empty. He stepped back onto the sidewalk, lit a cigarette, and dialled Rhea’s number.

She answered and said she was on her way. “I’ll be there in ten,” she told him.

After the storm and heavy rain the previous day, the heat had reduced significantly, and a light evening breeze lingered. It had been over ten minutes, and she was yet to arrive. A little nervous, Raktim glanced at his phone, contemplating calling her again, but decided against it. What if she doesn’t show up? He wondered.

A yellow taxi pulled up ahead. A girl wearing a green salwar, a white kurta, and an off-white dupatta stepped out of the cab. She carried a brown leather handbag and wore glasses. She looked exactly as she had in the photograph, and yet there was something in her eyes that the photograph had not captured. Raktim stood staring at her as she slowly walked toward him.

She extended her hand. “Hi, Rhea.”

Break out of it, Raktim told himself, and smiled. “Hi, Raktim...”

Before he could say anything further, she sneezed several times in quick succession.

Startled, Raktim said, “Was it me?”

She looked up, dabbing at her now-reddened nose with a handkerchief. “What do you mean?”

“I mean... I was wondering if seeing me made you sneeze,” he said, smiling awkwardly.

Rhea gently slapped his shoulder. “Rubbish,” she said. “I got drenched in the rain yesterday.”

Raktim’s expression turned concerned. Wasn’t he supposed to be concerned? He thought.

Rhea glanced toward the café entrance. “Shall we?”

Rhea and Raktim chose a table near the entrance. It was Rhea's suggestion. Raktim did not object; from there, he could keep an eye on his car parked across the road. He was perpetually paranoid that someone might deliberately scratch it.

They sat for a while, scanning the menu. Rhea suggested what they should order, and Raktim readily agreed. He stood up to place the order and pay at the counter, but Rhea insisted it was on her. Raktim tried to protest, but Rhea wouldn't budge. He eventually relented, not wanting to upset her.

Rhea and Raktim waited for their order to arrive. Rhea looked out toward the road and had not spoken a word. She seemed distracted, occasionally glancing at her phone.

The silence began to feel heavy. Raktim grew increasingly uncomfortable. A voice inside him told him something was amiss. She had seemed fine when they met — playful even, slapping his arm, ordering confidently. And now, suddenly, she looked withdrawn.

Was it something he had said? He wondered. But he had hardly spoken.

He gently asked if everything was okay, if she was feeling alright.

She looked at him. There was something in her eyes — something unspoken. He could sense it, but he couldn't quite grasp it.

"Everything's fine," she said softly.

She was about to say more when her phone beeped. She glanced at the screen immediately, and her fingers began moving quickly across the keypad. Another beep followed. She typed again, more urgently this time.

The exchange lasted a few minutes. It was as if she had slipped into another world, removed from where she was sitting.

Raktim felt the discomfort grow inside him.

She finally typed one last message and placed the phone face down on the table. It beeped again. This time, she pressed the side buttons together and switched it off.

Just then, their order arrived. Raktim had ordered black coffee; Rhea had ordered green tea.

After a few sips, Rhea said she needed a smoke. They stepped out of the café and stood on the sidewalk. She spoke first. “I’m sorry about that,” she said, referring to her behaviour.

Raktim didn’t know what to say. “It’s okay,” he replied. “I don’t mind.”

After a pause, she added, “It was my boss.”

Raktim wasn’t sure whether to ask what the messages were about. But he could sense that whatever the exchange had been, it had been anything but cordial.

Once back inside the café, Rhea seemed more relaxed and began to talk. She spoke about how anxious she was to get her divorce finalised.

Raktim spoke about his separation from Shristi and said it was a mutual divorce. He deliberately left out the part about his alcoholism. He spoke about his parents — how deeply he loved them. About his father and his fondness for *alu bhaja*. About his mother, who was his best friend. Also, about his obsession with his car.

Rhea smiled.

She spoke about her mother and their relationship. There was sarcasm in her voice. Her words were cold and detached as she described the hurt and pain she had endured. She spoke about her extended family and their hurtful behaviour. Beneath her composure, Raktim could sense a quiet, simmering rage.

Nearly three hours had passed since they had met. It was now well past 9 p.m.

Rhea mentioned she needed to return home. It was almost a ritual — having dinner with her sick and ailing mother. There was that same cold sarcasm in her voice.

Raktim offered to drop her off at home. She politely declined, saying she stayed far away. He insisted he wouldn't be inconvenienced. Rhea requested that he not insist.

Raktim did not push it further.

A yellow taxi waited outside — the same one she had arrived in.

She said goodbye and began walking toward it when Raktim suddenly asked if she would share her Instagram profile.

She paused for a moment. Looked at him. She held his gaze a second longer than necessary.

“I deleted it,” she said.

As the taxi drove away, Raktim stood still for a moment. Something felt terribly off. Or was it just him being paranoid? He wondered.

He lit a cigarette and took a long drag. “Nothing is wrong, Raktim. Chill. Stop overthinking,” his mind told him. The same mind that loved to cook up conspiracies and absurd scenarios.

Who was he supposed to listen to, if his own mind was playing truant?

He took one last drag, stubbed out the cigarette, and walked toward his car.

Chapter 16 – Between Guilt and Love

Mumbai, 2023

Avik

The Bar Stock Exchange in Bandra West, Mumbai, was packed — as it usually was on Friday evenings. The bar counter seats were all occupied, and a cacophony of voices rose above the din as people ordered drinks. Those fortunate enough to have secured a seat had to endure the constant jostling of arms stretching across the counter, reaching impatiently for glasses being passed over.

The house music was blaring, far too loud for any meaningful conversation. People had to shout into each other's ears just to be heard. Perhaps that was the point, he thought — the louder the music, the less people talked, and the more they drank.

Avik sat at the bar, nursing his third whisky.

Nandini's words kept echoing in his head. Hearing her voice again after so long had reignited feelings of helplessness, guilt, and remorse that he had been trying hard to bury. Her apology felt like a sudden stab at wounds that were still raw. He had lost everything — his family, his home, his job, his friends. Guilt, shame, and remorse had become his constant tormentors. But the greatest loss

of all had been his sense of self-worth. Waking up each morning and not feeling worthy was like living in chains.

But was it all her fault? He wondered, tears streaming down his face. Wasn't he equally to blame? Why should the burden of infidelity rest solely on her? Was it because she was a woman?

And what about what she had endured? The deceit. The false accusations. The mental torture. He should have stopped himself, but he didn't. How could he lose control? How could he be so reckless? She was vulnerable — in the middle of turmoil, uncertainty, and anger. But wasn't he angry too? Her anger at being cheated. His anger at his own family. Somewhere in that shared anger, they had crossed a line.

But there was a larger truth. One he wasn't ready to face.

Avik had fallen in love with Nandini.

Why was it so difficult to accept that love could happen even to a married man? Did that make him unworthy? Or was it the way it had happened that made him feel that way?

Chapter 17 – Back to the Music

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim & Rajeev

Raktim's house was throbbing with the energy of an old college mates' reunion. His father was in his element, wearing a multicoloured shirt, a glass of whisky in hand, singing *Sweet Caroline* at the top of his voice. They seemed like youngsters again — boisterous and loud, reliving their years at St. Xavier's College.

His mother was busy in the kitchen, with Madhu da helping her prepare the starters.

Raktim used to play the guitar. During his school days, he had been part of the school band, performing at several inter-school competitions. In college, he formed a band with his friends. Blues was his favourite genre of music, and he had aptly named the band 12 Bar. Father and son would often jam together whenever the opportunity arose.

With increasing work pressure and a growing disinterest — which he often blamed on his own laziness — it had been a while since Raktim last took out his guitar. Yet he loved jamming with his father. Their musical tastes were very different, but they respected each other's choices and listened with genuine interest.

Raktim needed to get Rhea out of his head, at least for the time being. Their meeting — something he had cherished — had also given rise to questions he could not ignore. He had been replaying it in his mind while driving home.

He greeted his father's friends as he entered. Rajeev had already moved on to a Beatles number. He completed the song to a round of applause. Father and son exchanged a brief glance. Raktim could see the familiar twinkle in his father's eyes — he knew exactly what it meant.

A few minutes later, Raktim was back in the living room, his Fender Stratocaster plugged into his new Blackstar amp, the overdrive switched on. Rajeev stood, eagerly awaiting his cue as Raktim began the intro.

Chapter 18 – Black and Red

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim

The Sanskrit root of his name was *Rakta* — red. Energetic. Passionate. Intense. The colour of blood.

Yet Raktim's favourite colour had always been black. A dark, chaotic counterpart to red's intensity.

Dark and chaotic — that was what his life had been during his drinking days.

But had he actually liked that darkness?

The height of chaos. The thrill of not knowing where he was heading. Living only to drink, to numb, to escape. Wasn't reality a bitch? Yes, it was.

There had been a strange seduction in it — the feeling of floating, of being untethered, of watching the world blur past him. The illusion of peace. The counterfeit serenity of detachment.

The marriage to Shristi had been a mistake. Or perhaps he had been the mistake. The guilt of what he had done to her had once felt unbearable. It had taken him years to learn how to live with it.

Six years of sobriety had taught him to name it differently. Disease. Compulsion. Addiction. He understood now that it was his illness that had driven him to behave the way he had. Intellectually, it made sense.

Emotionally, it was never that simple.

Shristi had refused to meet him. There had been no opportunity to make amends. No closure. Just silence.

And now — what was he doing?

Why was he exposing himself to vulnerability again? Wasn't solitude safer? Predictable? Controlled?

Why was he being drawn to Rhea?

He hardly knew her. They had met only once.

What if it all unravelled again? What if he lost control? What if he started drinking again?

What would happen to his parents, who had already endured so much because of him?

But could he really stop himself now?

Did he even want to?

Was he in love with Rhea?

Everyone would laugh at him. Tell him he was being foolish. Love doesn't happen like this. Not so quickly. Not over late-night conversations and one meeting.

That's what everyone always said.

But something had shifted the day he met her.

And he knew it.

Chapter 19 – An Uneasy Calm

Kolkata 2023

Raktim

The overcast sky cast a gloomy pall over the city. Raktim made himself a cup of strong black coffee and lit a cigarette. He loved this weather — the dark clouds, flashes of lightning, the promise of a storm. It strangely brightened his mood.

Paradoxical, he chuckled to himself.

He and Rhea had spoken late into the night. She had spoken about her relationship with her mother.

“She blames me for everything,” she had said. The angst in her voice had been unmistakable.

Everyone in her family had an opinion about her life — her uncles, cousins, even the cook and the domestic help, she had added, her tone heavy with sarcasm. The fact that her marriage hadn’t worked out had also been blamed on her.

Raktim had listened carefully. At times, he had felt the urge to offer solutions, to explain things logically, to calm her down. But he had stopped himself. He knew that sometimes people simply wanted to be heard.

Yet something about the conversation had unsettled him.

There was a great deal of resentment in Rhea — towards her mother, her extended family, and her husband. It showed in her tone. It lingered in the pauses between her words. It made Raktim slightly uncomfortable, though he couldn't fully understand why.

They ended the call, and Raktim asked if she would like to meet again.

She had warmed up to the idea. This time, she suggested driving down to the new Coffee House in New Town. She asked Raktim to pick her up from near her house. She would wait at the exit gate of the Shobhabazar Metro station at 6 p.m.

Raktim took another drag of his cigarette.

Picking her up.

Why did that feel different?

And why did that thought make him both excited and uneasy at the same time?

Chapter 20 – A Sunday Ritual

Kolkata, 2023

Nandini

The bazaar on Shobhabazar Street was brimming with people. Vehicular movement had come to almost a standstill, as was usual on a Sunday morning. The smell of raw fish, spices, samosas being fried in large kadhais, tea leaves from shops selling different varieties, and the faint smell of garbage created a strange concoction in the air — overwhelming, chaotic, yet familiar.

The overcast sky had given way to a spell of light rain, which had now softened into a gentle drizzle. A cool breeze lingered in the air.

Shoppers moved through the crowded bazaar with black umbrellas in one hand and worn jute shopping bags in the other — the bags darkened slightly by the damp. The vegetable and fish vendors stood by their makeshift stalls, awkwardly balancing umbrellas in one hand while trying to shield themselves and their wares from the drizzle.

Nandini and her cousin Urmila, who lived on the floor above her mother's room in the same old house, got down from the hand-pulled rickshaw at the mouth of the lane. Each carried an umbrella

in one hand and a shopping bag in the other. Without speaking much, they stepped forward into the sea of shoppers, quietly merging into the restless rhythm of the bazaar.

The rain and the filth on the road made walking difficult. Muddy water had collected in small patches. One had to be careful with every step. The crowd made it worse. Umbrellas collided, and people brushed past each other. For a moment, Nandini feared someone might lose balance and fall.

Sunday lunch was always the same — rice, biuli's dal, shukto and mutton curry. It was almost a ritual. Although Nandini's kitchen and Urmila's kitchen were separate, they had their Sunday lunch together. It would be Nandini, her mother, Urmila, her husband, Suman, and their twelve-year-old son, Aritro.

Nandini got along well with her cousin. At least Urmila wasn't judgmental or preachy. With Suman, the relationship was mostly cordial. But at times, he had a tendency to offer advice she hadn't asked for — solutions to problems she wasn't seeking to solve.

Urmila and Nandini returned home and washed their feet and their slippers under the tap in the courtyard of the house, now covered with mud from the bazaar.

Nandini had left her phone at home before stepping out. Aritro was on the balcony to greet them. He had Nandini's phone in his hand and said it had been ringing on and off for quite some time. There were many missed calls from someone called Avik.

Suman, standing behind Aritro, took the phone from his hand and reprimanded him.

It was an awkward moment for Nandini. Her gaze turned towards the concrete floor of the courtyard. Urmila could gauge her

discomfort. She immediately scolded Aritro and told him to go to his room and do his maths homework.

Nandini felt guilty for the scolding Aritro had received from his parents. She silently cursed herself for the disgrace her actions had brought upon her family.

Urmila placed her hand gently on Nandini's shoulder and, in an attempt to diffuse the situation, asked her to join her in the kitchen to begin the preparations for Sunday lunch.

Nandini did not make eye contact. She nodded in agreement.

Chapter 21 –

The Space Between Two Words

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim

Ishita and Rajeev were in the living room watching a film. Rajeev was a film buff. Photography was another of his passions. He preferred taking photographs in black and white. He said colour distracts from emotion.

There were several albums at home filled with Raktim's photographs, from his toddler years to his college days. Most of them were in black and white. It was a carefully curated visual journey of his life, each phase captured with patience and tenderness. In some of the older photographs, Raktim stood beside a taller boy, an arm casually slung around the taller boy's shoulder. Over the years, a few of those photographs had quietly disappeared from the albums.

Raktim had inherited his father's eye for photography and his love for films. Ishita, on the other hand, was quieter, more reserved. She loved reading. Her love for books had passed on to Raktim.

Rajeev was completely absorbed in the film — one he had probably watched a thousand times, Raktim thought with a faint smile. It was Raktim's favourite too. He must have watched

Goodfellas a thousand times himself. For a moment, he wondered who had seen it more — him or his father.

Ishita sensed his presence and looked up.

“Where are you off to?” she asked.

She was more than just his mother. She was his confidante. He had rarely hidden anything from her. He didn’t like to. But this time, he told a half-truth. And a half-truth is as good as a lie, Raktim thought.

“I’m going to meet a friend,” he said and gently closed the door behind him.

There was less traffic than usual since it was a Sunday, and he reached earlier than scheduled. Raktim considered dropping her a message to let her know he had arrived but decided against it. In what felt like only a moment, there was a knock on the passenger window. It was Rhea.

Time seemed to pause. They looked at each other. She had a soft smile on her face. So did he.

In that moment, Raktim felt a strange serenity — a quiet reassurance.

Yes, I love her, he thought. *And I don’t care what the world has to say about it.*

Rhea remained mostly quiet during the drive. Occasionally, their eyes met. There was something in her smile that felt deeply endearing. A life that had felt like a relentless roller coaster suddenly felt still. He believed he had found calm.

The Coffee House in New Town carried the charm of old Kolkata. They ordered fish fry and coffee.

Sitting across from her, Raktim felt almost hypnotised.

Don't be impulsive, a voice inside him warned.

He ignored it.

"Rhea... this might sound strange, but I want to say it. I really, really like you."

Rhea rested her chin lightly on her hands. She smiled softly. After a pause, with her gaze fixed on Raktim, she said, "Raktim, you are a really nice person... but..." She looked away briefly.

Raktim could feel his heart beating faster. Instead of waiting for a response, he asked: "But what?"

She looked back at him. The softness in her smile shifted — almost into a faint smirk.

"Today you say you like me. I'm sure when you know me fully... You won't."

The nonchalant way she had spoken those words unsettled Raktim. The stillness of the moment no longer felt peaceful. It felt heavy.

Rhea looked away again.

In that brief silence, a voice rose from somewhere deep within him.

"I want to know you," he said quietly. "I want to love every bit of you. After everything I've seen... everything I've been through... I feel like I've finally found what I have been searching for all my life."

Rhea kept her gaze fixed on him as he spoke. When he finished, she lowered her eyes for a moment.

A wave of unease washed over Raktim. He had the strong feeling he had rushed it and had hurt her. He feared that she would stop meeting and talking with him. Anxiety rose quickly, followed by a familiar self-loathing.

Why do I always do this? Why can't I just hold back?

"I need time, Raktim," she said finally, lifting her eyes to meet him again.

There was something in her gaze — almost like a veil — as if something deep within her was hidden behind it. Raktim felt the moment slipping away — something fragile, precious. He didn't want to let it go. Every part of him screamed to hold on.

Don't let this moment pass. Don't let her drift away.

Time doesn't bring people closer, he thought. It pushes them apart. Time deceives. It creates distance. It erodes. But could he ever control time? Has he ever been able to change its course? No. Time had always moved as it pleased. And he had always remained a mute observer.

Wasn't time Him, and wasn't He time? No past. No present. No future. Just this.

Let go, Raktim. Let go and let Him take over. He knows no boundaries.

Let go...

Raktim was lost in his thoughts.

"Raktim, are you okay?" she asked softly, her fingers brushing against his palm.

Raktim felt the silence as deeply agonising as they drove back. He couldn't bring himself to speak. The hurt, the deep sense of loss,

the familiar low self-esteem — all of it together felt like relentless waves crashing against the wall of a dam. He felt cold. Numb. His hands trembled slightly.

A thought entered his mind, and he silently prayed —

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I can’t change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

He took a slow breath. Rhea had been watching him all along.

She gently touched his hand. “Raktim, I am sorry. I am in a mess right now. I don’t want to drag you into that mess. Please understand.”

Raktim turned towards her and nodded. “I understand, Rhea,” he said softly. “I’m here for you. I’ll wait.” He tightened his grip on the steering wheel.

Chapter 22 –

The Weight of Guilt

Kolkata, 2023

Nandini

A loud clap of thunder, the menacing rattle of the wooden louvred windows, the heavy rain, and the crashing sound of glass jolted Nandini awake. She switched on the table lamp. Shards of glass lay scattered on the floor beside the wooden table. She should have kept the glass in the kitchen, she thought. She picked her way across the room and took the broom and dustpan from the corner near the almirah. Carefully, she gathered the broken pieces and emptied them into the dustbin. After firmly shutting the louvred window, she returned to her bed and picked up her phone.

There were several missed calls from Avik. It was already past midnight. She dialled his number. He answered on the first ring.

“Where have you been, Nandini? Why aren’t you answering my calls? Are you okay?” he said, sounding almost panicked. She could hear his heavy breathing. His speech was slightly slurred.

“What do you want, Avik?” she asked, her voice calm but stern. Her hands were trembling. Feelings were rising inside her — feelings she did not want to acknowledge.

“What do you want?” he asked again, his voice turning helpless.

“I want you, Nandini. I want you in my life. Because I—”

“Don’t say it. Don’t say it. Please...” she cut in sharply.

“I’m sorry for what I’ve done to you. I’m sorry for ruining your life. It was all my fault...”

“No, Nandini, no...” Avik pleaded. “You didn’t do anything wrong...”

“What do you mean I didn’t do anything wrong?” she said, her voice rising.

“Nandini... listen... please—”

“No. I won’t listen,” she said, almost screaming now. “I broke your family. I took away your happiness. I am a very bad and evil woman...”

“Nandini, I love you... I love you... Please come back... I am”

Before he could complete the sentence, Nandini disconnected the call and switched off her phone.

She sat still on the bed. Her face was blank, emptied of expression. Outside, the thunder roared again.

Chapter 23 – The One Who Knows

Kolkata, 2023

Ishita & Raktim

Raktim woke up early the next morning. The aftershocks of the previous evening had not left him. They lingered quietly within him — a dull heaviness he could not shake off. He sipped his strong black coffee and sat still.

Why was he unable to accept that Rhea had only asked for time? Why couldn't he be patient? It wasn't as though she had rejected him. It wasn't as though everything was over. Then what was this sinking feeling inside him?

He could still feel the touch of her hand on his. He could still see her eyes. There was something in them. Something she had not said. Something she was holding back. And that look had unsettled him.

What had he even meant yesterday? Was time in his control? Had it ever been?

He frowned slightly.

Why did he always feel that time deceived him? That it brought him close to something, only to take it away? He had never been able to change its course. He had always been a silent observer.

Let go. Let God.

He had heard that line so many times. It sounded simple. But surrendering was not simple. Trusting was not simple.

He took another sip.

If he had said he would wait, then he would have to live with what waiting meant.

A soft knock on the door broke his chain of thought.

He unlatched the door and took a step back. Ishita stood there, looking at him with a quiet, questioning expression.

“Are you okay?” she asked, walking into his room.

Raktim sat down on the edge of his bed.

“Your room always smells of smoke. How much are you smoking these days?” she asked, concern evident in her voice.

“Ma, please... I don’t want to talk about it now,” he said, sounding slightly irritated.

“Fine, I won’t ask. It’s your health. You decide,” she replied, raising her hands in surrender.

Raktim looked at her. “Not this drama again, Ma.”

She sat down beside him quietly.

“Now what?” he asked, a faint smile appearing on his face. He knew what was coming next.

“Is there something you want to talk about?” she asked gently.

Raktim shook his head. “No.”

“Are you sure?” she pressed softly.

This time, he looked at her, trying to appear stern, but the smile betrayed him. A soft smile spread across her face, too.

He leaned forward and hugged her.

“I want to have something nice for lunch,” he said, still holding her.

“Not going to work today?” she asked casually.

“No. Don’t feel like it.”

“Okay...cool,” she said softly, getting up from the bed. “Let me make something nice for you.”

She walked toward the door. For a moment, Raktim watched her. There was something about her presence — steady, constant — that grounded him.

The door closed gently behind her.

Chapter 24 –

The Stories We Believe

Mumbai, 2016

Raktim & Shristi

Raktim switched on his laptop, logged into Amazon Prime Music, and played one of his favourite songs, “Coming Back to Life” by Pink Floyd. He would often listen to it on loop. The music carried him back to Mumbai, to a time when he was married to Shristi. Back then, they were happy together. The problems hadn’t started yet—the problems that would arise from his alcoholism.

He remembered an evening when he and Shristi were at home, smoking up, listening to this song, and just talking. Raktim wasn’t very high, just a light buzz, but for Shristi, it had come on quickly, and she was quite high.

“You know, Raktim,” she said, taking a drag, “I feel you overthink too much, yaar.”

“Overthink? Hmm... yeah... perhaps,” Raktim replied.

She continued, “And I’ve noticed—maybe I should have told you earlier—your belief systems are too rigid. Once you believe in something, you don’t want to consider other possibilities.”

“You could say that. Someone—I don’t remember who—once told me that sometimes we unconsciously start manifesting our beliefs. I mean, I do that, or so they said.”

“Correct, correct... that’s what I was also thinking. But you shouldn’t do that, na?” Shristi said, kissing him on the cheek.

“Thank you—but what did my lips do wrong?” he said, smirking.

“Should we order some beers? Just one each,” she said, getting excited. “But you won’t overdo it, promise?”

“Okay... I won’t, promise...” he said.

Raktim called the nearby wine store and ordered five beers.

“Where were we?” he asked.

“I don’t know... where are we?” she said innocently.

Raktim smiled. He knew Shristi was now very high.

“You know, there’s something called a self-fulfilling prophecy,” he said.

“Self what?!” she asked.

“Never mind...” he replied.

Raktim increased the volume of the song. He didn’t remember much else from that evening in Mumbai.

There was one thought he was always aware of and had come to believe: he was the kind of person who always eventually lost whoever or whatever he loved. That belief was deeply seated in him. He had never explored the possibility of challenging that thought.

He dialled Rhea’s number. It rang out.

He tried again. Same result.

He spent the rest of the day lying quietly on his bed, listening to music or flipping through the book he had recently bought on his favourite subject, World War II. Rhea did not call back.

The next day at work, he kept checking his WhatsApp. No message.

He typed something. Deleted it. Typed again. Deleted it again. This went on for a while.

As the day moved forward, so did his anxiety. It rose slowly, steadily.

Finally, he typed:

Hey, where are you? All, ok?

He stared at the screen.

The voices inside his head had found their stage again.

“Don’t send it. She won’t reply. What’s the point?”

His thumb hovered over the send button.

“God, please help me,” he whispered under his breath.

The voices responded immediately, louder now, dripping with poison.

“You think He has time for you? Don’t expect anything from the Almighty.”

Raktim closed his eyes. Took a deep breath. Pressed send.

One tick.

He kept staring at the screen.

After a few seconds, the single grey tick turned into two grey ticks.

Delivered.

But not blue.

His heart lifted and sank at the same time.

At least the message had reached her.

But had it really reached her?

He continued staring at the screen, waiting for the blue ticks that never appeared.

The silence thickened around him.

Someone tapped his shoulder.

“Sir, are you okay?”

Chapter 25 –

The Weight of Being Nandini

Kolkata, 2023

Nandini

Trust is fragile, and once broken, it is very difficult to rebuild. Time can, in some instances, act as the binding force, holding the broken pieces together. But it is never the same. Some pieces are no longer in a state to be put back. They don't fit anymore. The cracks remain. And what is rebuilt is not what once was.

Nandini was on her terrace smoking her fifth cigarette on the trot. It was late at night. In the evening, she had to face her mother's wrath again. They were having tea together when suddenly her mother started talking about her father and the pain he had to go through over the years.

"He went away and left me to face the shame alone. How convenient of him," she said, her tone laced with sarcasm.

Nandini knew what her mother was getting at. She wanted to change the topic of conversation but didn't know what to say.

"People in today's world have no sense of remorse. How do they even manage to be so insensitive and shameless, I wonder," her mother said

Nandini couldn't stop herself anymore. She blurted, "What did you expect me to do, Ma? Go on suffering?" she said, now tears welling up in her eyes.

Her mother's eyes met hers. They had no compassion or feeling and instead reflected the anger and disgust she harboured.

"What you have done, you deserve to suffer", she said.

Nandini got up from her chair and walked out of her mother's room.

The words had pierced her fragile self, tearing it apart. She stubbed out the cigarette and started walking towards the terrace door. For a moment, she paused. A sudden thought had crossed her mind — the meaning of her name.

Nandini.

Someone who brings joy.

She looked up at the cloudless sky, with a few stars sparkling.

"What an irony", she mumbled to herself.

What was her life about, anyway?

But...*A life of sin.*

Chapter 26 – Echoes of That Day

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim

It had been a week since he had met Rhea — a week since that evening. During the week, Raktim had struggled to concentrate at work. He had begun to feel resentful towards himself. How could he lose focus like this?

But the thought that kept clawing at him was how he had allowed himself to become vulnerable again. He was certain that Rhea would never call him back.

Her asking for time was just a way of gently pushing him away. Why else would she not call or reply to his messages?

Throughout the week, he had checked his phone countless times. The two ticks were still grey.

Was she okay? He thought, worried. Could it be that something had happened to her?

The thought brought with it a strange feeling. For a moment, he tried to brush it aside, telling himself he was overthinking again. But the unease did not leave him. Instead, it began to grow.

A sudden shudder ran through him. A choking sensation rose in his throat, as though he was unable to breathe. Raktim's face turned pale. His body began to reflect the turmoil within him.

The office suddenly felt too loud — the clicking of keyboards, the low hum of conversations, the ringing of phones. The air around him felt heavy.

He got up from his seat and headed quickly towards the washroom.

Shreya was in the canteen when she saw Raktim rush past towards the washroom.

Inside, Raktim bent over the sink and started vomiting. He had left home in a hurry that morning without eating breakfast. Ishita and Rajeev had not been home when he left. That had struck him as a little unusual, because they were usually around at that hour. Madhu da had been in the kitchen, calling out to him, but Raktim had not responded.

Now, retching on an empty stomach, yellow bile mixed with gastric acid and mucus came out, leaving a burning sensation in his throat. He rinsed his mouth, washed his face, and stepped out of the washroom.

Shreya was waiting outside the canteen. "Are you feeling okay?" she asked.

Raktim nodded. "Do we have any important meetings today?" he asked, avoiding eye contact.

"No, nothing that I can't manage on my own. You should go home and get some rest," she said.

"By the way, when is the PPM for the V-Tel film?" he asked.

“It’s on the 20th,” she replied.

“Oh... and today is...” he said, taking out his phone to check the date.

Before he could look at the screen, Shreya said, “18th.”

For a moment, Raktim did not react. The number seemed to hang in the air.

Eighteenth. He repeated the word silently in his mind.

Then something inside him shifted. His face went blank. The colour drained from it completely.

It felt as though the world around him had slowed down. Everything seemed blurred. A strange sense of detachment came over him.

Then he began to hear sounds. The loud ringing of a telephone.

Hushed voices. A woman crying. A cry filled with deep pain and grief.

The image of a motorbike helmet lying on a hospital floor flashed briefly in his mind.

He was there again. Time stretched strangely. Moments felt like days.

Someone shook him hard.

It was his friend — someone he was very close to.

Raktim seemed to be staring somewhere else.

“I need to go home,” he said.

Now it made sense why his parents had not been home in the morning.

He walked slowly towards his workstation to collect his bag. His friend and Shreya followed him to his desk. A few of his colleagues looked at him with concern.

“Should I drive you home?” his friend asked.

“No... I’m fine,” Raktim said quietly, gently touching his friend’s shoulder.

Chapter 27 –

The Ritual of Pain

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim

Raktim was struggling to concentrate as he drove back home from the office. His mind kept drifting away. At one point, he drove through a red light — something he would never normally do. He realised it only after he had crossed the signal. The driver of a passing taxi shouted something at him, but Raktim barely registered it.

When he reached the Chingrighata crossing, he found himself stuck in a massive traffic jam — unusual for that time of the day. Raktim was getting impatient. His fingers drummed restlessly on the steering wheel as he waited for the line of cars ahead to move.

While he sat there enduring the standstill, his phone began to ring. On the infotainment screen of his car, Rhea's name flashed. Raktim stared at the name flashing on the screen as the phone rang, the sound blaring through the car speakers. For a few seconds, he did nothing. His hands remained on the steering wheel, his fingers still drumming absent-mindedly.

The phone kept ringing. Should he answer?

He continued to stare at the screen. After a while, the call disconnected.

It took almost an hour for the traffic to clear. When the line of vehicles finally began to move, Raktim eased forward and soon reached the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass.

He drove steadily and merged onto the MAA flyover, where speed cameras constantly monitored traffic.

Raktim usually adhered strictly to the speed limit. He was a very cautious driver and rarely allowed himself to drive fast.

Driving fast was irresponsible; he would often tell himself.

He had no right to be reckless.

His recklessness could cost someone their life.

That would not be an accident.

That would be murder.

While waiting at the traffic signal at the Park Circus roundabout, his phone rang again.

It was Rhea calling.

Raktim kept his eyes fixed on the road, waiting for the signal to turn green.

The phone kept ringing.

He did not pick up.

The call rang out just as the signal turned green.

Raktim took a left at the signal and headed towards his home.

As he was crossing Birla Mandir, his phone rang again. This time, the name “Mumzie” appeared on the car’s infotainment screen.

He received the call but remained silent.

“Babu,” his mother said, her voice soft and mellow.

Raktim knew what she meant. Just hearing her tone, he instinctively understood what she wanted to ask. It had become a sort of ritual. She did not need to ask the question. Just saying his name, and the tone in which she said it, conveyed everything.

And each time she did this — especially on this day — it irritated him.

Why did she have to do it?

What did she expect him to say?

Why did he need to say anything?

How could he possibly describe what he felt?

It had been almost twenty years, and he still struggled to understand what he felt... or what had happened to him.

“I am fine, Ma,” he said, sounding slightly annoyed.

“Where are you, Babu?” Ishita asked.

Raktim felt his irritation rise.

“I’m going for a meeting. I’ll see you later,” he said.

Before Ishita could respond, he disconnected the call.

Sometimes, people become possessive of their pain. They do not want to part ways with it. Perhaps they believe they need to hold on to their pain for as long as possible, because they need it to

understand what it has done to them. There is also the possibility that guilt plays a role. A self-imposed sense of guilt convinces them that they must continue to carry the pain.

Perhaps this was what was happening to Raktim. Which was why he did not go home, even though that had been his plan when he stepped out of the office. He probably did not want to face his mother. He did not want to share his grief.

Instead of going home, he drove aimlessly around South Kolkata for a while and then stopped at Fillers in Vivekananda Park.

Fillers was a place he had come to visit every 18th of August.

Chapter 28 – The Pull She Couldn't Name

Kolkata, 2023

Rhea

Rhea boarded the metro from the Sovabazar metro station. She was on her way to show her mother's medical reports to a doctor who had his chamber in Bowbazar. The metro wasn't very crowded, and she found a place to sit. She put on her Bluetooth headphones and started listening to music. She loved listening to music while on the move.

Recently, she had rediscovered Niladri Kumar's album *Sitar Gaze*. There was a time when she had listened to this album on loop. Unbeknownst to her, *Sitar Gaze* happened to be one of Raktim's favourites as well.

The distance to Bowbazar station was short. She stepped out into the bright sunshine, carrying her laptop bag, which had her mother's medical reports. Rhea was wearing a simple salwar and kurta.

The sound of the sitar layered over a new-age soundscape, the bright sunshine, the soft breeze, people walking along the sidewalks and spilling onto the road, buses plying and honking, cars zipping past, jewellery shops lined along the street, tea stalls

and small shops selling sweets and snacks — all of it formed the rich setting through which Rhea walked, her gaze fixed on the path ahead.

Music has a way of touching the soul, and the tracks in *Sitar Gaze* were filled with notes that seemed to transcend physical barriers and reach somewhere deeper within. Rhea felt every note soothe her mind. It made her thoughts slow down.

The busy world around her moved at its own restless pace, but the music created a quiet shield around her — protecting her from the noise, the confusion, the frantic movement of the city.

What had made her call Raktim again? The thought rose quietly inside her.

Wasn't it evident to her that Raktim had moved away from her? Wasn't that why he hadn't called?

But hadn't he sent those WhatsApp messages? she wondered.

Then again, he hadn't called her after that. And today he hadn't received her call either.

Perhaps he had seen through the veil.

Perhaps he had figured her out.

She nodded slightly to herself and muttered something under her breath.

But the real question still remained unanswered.

What had made her call him?

What was it about him that made her miss speaking to him?

Could she allow herself, once again, the liberty of finding a friend?

Or was it just friendship she expected...?

Chapter 29 – A Song for His Brother

Kolkata, 2001

Rahul & Raktim

Rahul and his band Circle were to play at *Someplace Else*, the pub at The Park. Ishita and Rajeev were both very excited about seeing their son play live for the first time. This was to be Circle's first live gig, and *Someplace Else* had almost become a launch pad for new bands in Kolkata. They were to open for Krosswindz.

The Rakshit home was abuzz with excitement. Rajeev had invited a few of his friends to *Someplace Else* as well. Amid all the excitement, Raktim returned from school looking sad and upset. In his art class that day, the children were tasked with making clay models and taking them home as gifts for their parents. Raktim had been very excited about the task, but somehow, he had not been able to make what he had planned.

As a child, he was devastated. His teacher had tried to cheer him up, but it hadn't helped.

When he reached home, he found Ishita and Rajeev busy getting ready to leave for the evening. Clay marks were still on his hands and on his shirt. Ishita saw him in that state and immediately

scolded him. But when she heard what had happened, her tone softened.

“Oh, baby, don’t feel bad. It’s okay. You can make it next time. Now quickly finish your studies so that we don’t get late for Rahul’s performance.”

Raktim had wanted a hug. He had wanted to tell his mother how much he had looked forward to gifting them what he had made. How much it had hurt him that he couldn’t do it.

Instead, he lowered his head and quietly went to wash up. Rahul had been watching everything silently.

Later that evening, they were at *Someplace Else*. Rahul’s band Circle was receiving loud applause after every song. The guitarist from Krosswindz, who was also Rahul’s teacher, was standing in the front row. Rahul noticed him clapping and smiled. Rajeev and his friends were loudly requesting songs. Ishita was thrilled. Her eyes were shining with pride as she watched Rahul on stage.

Raktim sat quietly, feeling left out. Maybe even a little jealous. Deep within, he found himself wishing he could play the guitar too.

After one of the songs ended, Rahul stepped up to the microphone. “The next song,” he said, “I dedicate to my little brother... the most precious person in my life. A little angel in my life.”

He pointed toward Raktim.

“Bro, one day you and I will jam together. I’m sure you will be a far better guitarist than I ever will.”

Raktim immediately blushed. Raktim tried to hide behind Ishita's shoulder. The entire crowd turned to look at him and began clapping.

Ishita hugged him tightly.

Rahul then began the opening arpeggio of Indus Creed's *Pretty Child*.

Chapter 30 –

The Ritual of Remembrance

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim

Raktim ordered a cup of coffee with milk, something he usually didn't have. He preferred his coffee black. But on the 18th of August, he always ordered milk coffee. It had become a ritual he never questioned. He slid back in his car seat, searched for Niladri Kumar's album on Amazon Prime and clicked on the play button. He gently placed the coffee mug on the centre console and lit a cigarette.

It was early afternoon on a weekday, and the café was almost empty. On weekends, Fillers would be crowded. In fact, the entire area around Vivekananda Park is very crowded now, with so many new cafés.

The track he usually listened to on loop from the album was called "Heartbeats". It began with the sound of a heartbeat, followed by the sombre, sustained notes of a keyboard. The sitar entered slowly after a short vocal rendition. The soundscape created by the sitar melody, the background keyboard, and the vocals had an otherworldly feel. He got goosebumps every time he heard the

piece. The tune transported him to a different world, far away from the one he lived in.

Raktim closed his eyes and let the music flow into him and through him. At times, late at night, he would switch off the lights and listen to this piece on his tower speakers. In those moments, he felt Rahul's presence around him. Many times, he would speak to him. Tell him about his life. A life without him. There were times when he could feel the warmth of a tear trickle down his face.

Today would be a difficult day, and he knew it. He dreaded this day every year. So many years had passed; it still felt as though that evening had never really ended. As though it had stayed somewhere inside him and would continue to haunt him for the rest of his life.

And yet it was strange — at times he almost welcomed the pain.

Forgetting the pain would feel selfish.

How could he ever forget him? He would always be there.

Just then, his phone started ringing again. Ishita's name appeared on the infotainment screen.

Raktim disconnected the call.

He finished his coffee, paid the bill, and drove towards his home.

Chapter 31 – The Fault Line

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim

Madhu da opened the door when Raktim reached home. In the living room, a few of Raktim's relatives were present, from both Ishita's and Rajeev's sides of the family. The furniture had been rearranged to create more space. A sombre silence hung over the room.

Near the large sliding glass window, a small table had been placed. On it stood a framed photograph of Rahul, adorned with a garland. A few incense sticks burned beside the frame. The room was filled with the smell of incense.

Ishita was sitting on the floor in front of Rahul's photograph, and the relatives were seated around her. Rajeev stood nearby, speaking softly to Raktim's uncle.

Raktim froze for a moment when he saw Rahul's picture. A sudden numbness washed over him. He could feel tears welling up in his eyes.

Ishita turned when she saw him enter. She immediately got up and rushed towards him, wrapping him in a hug. Raktim gently pushed her away.

“What’s all this, Mum?” he asked.

“It’s the 18th today...” she said, her voice trembling now, tears streaming down her face.

“So, what if it’s the 18th?” Raktim snapped back. “We never do all this.” He pointed towards Rahul’s picture on the table. “You know I hate all this.”

“Can’t I grieve for my son?” she said.

“I am not saying that, Mum. But.... I...I am not comfortable with this”

“We understand your feelings, baby, which is why all these years we didn't do anything”, his father said

“I know, Baba.... but...I don't want to be a part of this. I am going to my room,” he said, walking into his room and locking the door.

Chapter 32 – Milk Coffee

Kolkata, 2002

Raktim & Rahul

On Raktim's 14th birthday, Rajeev had gifted him a Fender acoustic guitar, on Rahul's insistence. Raktim had been taking guitar lessons at the Kolkata School of Music for almost a year.

The initial few months had been difficult for him. He struggled with the basic finger exercises, where he had to play four consecutive frets on each string across all six strings. The tips of his fingers began to ache, and at times the pain was so sharp that he had almost thought of giving up.

During one of the lessons, he became very upset and refused to continue with the class. The teacher tried to pacify him, but that didn't help. Eventually, the teacher had to call off the class and send him home.

Rajeev was very angry when he heard about it, but Ishita tried to comfort and motivate Raktim.

Later that evening, Rahul returned home and found Raktim in the living room, sitting beside his mother, looking glum, while Rajeev stood nearby, looking visibly upset, smoking a cigarette.

Rahul sat down next to Raktim and pulled him close. He whispered in his ear, “Do you want to go for a spin?”

Rahul had recently bought his bike. Raktim’s face lit up instantly.

Ishita tried to object, but Rahul ignored her.

A few minutes later, Raktim, wearing a helmet, sat behind Rahul on the bike, hugging him tightly as they rode off. They stopped at Fillers, a place where Rahul usually hung out with his friends.

Rahul ordered a black coffee for himself and asked Raktim what ice cream he would like.

“I want to have what you are having,” Raktim said excitedly.

“You won’t like it. It’s bitter,” Rahul said.

But Raktim was adamant.

“Fine, I’ll get you coffee. But not black coffee. You’ll have milk coffee with sugar.”

Raktim knew there was no point in arguing. He was happy to have coffee anyway, so he readily agreed.

Chapter 33 – Between Love and Guilt

Kolkata, 2023

Nandini & Avik

It was Friday evening, and Nandini had finished work early. She closed her laptop and stared at the wall with an empty expression. After a moment, she looked towards the window across the bed. The sky was overcast.

Nandini got up from her chair and looked at her phone screen. There was a new WhatsApp message. The message was from Avik.

“I want to speak to you, Nandini. Please answer my call,” the message read.

Nandini replied, *Is there anything left to speak about?*

Avik responded almost instantly.

Please, Nandini, don't do this to me.

Exactly. I don't want to harm you anymore. What will you get out of speaking to me anyway? I am surprised that even after what I have done to you and your life, you still want to speak to me. You should hate me.

I love you, Nandini. Please speak to me.

Nandini stared at the screen for a moment before typing.

Avik... no... I don't want to hear this...

A few seconds passed before his reply came.

But that's the truth, Nandini.

She typed again, her fingers pressing harder against the screen.

But I don't feel that way about you. I don't love you, Avik. Whatever happened between us... It was a mistake. Don't you get it?

There was a pause.

Then his message appeared.

Fine... I accept that. All I want is for you to speak to me once. That's all I want.

Nandini looked at the message but didn't respond immediately.

A few moments later, she finally typed.

Okay... but not now. I'll call you later.

The reply came almost at once.

Thank you, Nandini. I'll wait for your call.

Her eyes now fell on her cupboard.

It's been a while since I cleaned it and organised my clothes, she thought.

Nandini started taking her clothes out of the cupboard, folding them carefully before putting them back. As she opened one of the drawers inside the cupboard, she noticed a photo album lying at

the back. A thin layer of dust had settled on it. She took the album out and sat on the bed. As she opened it, she saw pictures from her school days at Parkview Girls' School. There were photographs of her with her school friends.

She turned another page. There was a photograph of her with her father.

Nandini kept looking at the picture. She gently ran her hand over it. The photograph had faded slightly with time. Tears welled up in her eyes, and a few drops fell on the photograph.

She slowly took the photograph out of the album.

"I miss you, Baba... I'm so sorry," she whispered softly. She brought the picture close to her chest and hugged it.

Chapter 34 – The Family

Kolkata, 2002

Rajeev, Ishita, Rahul & Raktim

Saturday evenings were reserved for Raktim's guitar lessons. He had quit Kolkata School of Music, and his new guitar teacher was his rockstar brother, Rahul. Raktim had started enjoying the lessons and, more importantly, had begun improving at his finger exercises, which were essential for building technique. Rahul was a wonderful teacher. At every step, he motivated Raktim and encouraged him to keep practising.

Rahul was in the final year of his graduation, and his university examinations were fast approaching. That Saturday evening, he had to leave for a joint study session with his friends. He wrapped up Raktim's guitar lesson early and gave him a set of exercises to practise during the week.

Ishita had made chicken rolls at home. Rahul quickly finished his, picked up his bag and helmet, and rushed out of the house.

As Rahul ran down the staircase, Ishita called out from behind,

“Don't rush... ride carefully!”

“Don't worry, Ma!” Rahul shouted back.

Raktim sat down with his guitar and began practising the exercises Rahul had given him. He had also managed to learn a few chords on his own and wanted to surprise Rahul when he returned. Determined to impress his brother, he kept strumming the chords again and again.

“Raktim, enough of guitar playing. Now go and practise maths,” Ishita said from the living room.

Raktim hated maths. Just hearing the word made him lose interest instantly. He loved English literature, history, and geography. History was his favourite subject. But he knew there was no escaping mathematics. He would have to endure it for a few more years.

Reluctantly, he placed the guitar back inside its case and gently rested it against the wall in his room.

“Ma... can I sleep for a while? I’m very sleepy. I promise I’ll wake up soon and practise maths,” he said, making a baby face.

Ishita knew he was trying to avoid maths, but she let him lie down and rest.

When Raktim woke up, it was almost time for dinner. Madhu da was laying the table in the dining room. Ishita sat on the sofa reading a book, while Rajeev watched television with a drink in his hand.

“Where is Dada?” Raktim asked casually. “How come he isn’t home yet?”

Ishita glanced at the wall clock. It was almost 9:30 p.m.

“Maybe the study session ran late,” she said lightly, though she reached for her phone.

Before she could dial, the phone began ringing in her hand. The number on the screen was unfamiliar.

“Hello... yes, I am Ishita Rakshit... I can't hear you properly,” she said, pressing the phone closer to her ear.

“Rahul... what about... yes, Rahul Rakshit is my son...”

Ishita slowly stood up from the sofa.

Raktim kept his gaze fixed on his mother. He noticed her expression beginning to change. Her face slowly turned pale and expressionless.

“What!” she said suddenly, her voice rising.

“What did you say...?”

Fear and dread had crept into her voice.

Rajeev immediately switched off the television and stepped forward, reaching out to take the phone.

Something the voice on the other end said made Ishita cry out loudly.

“You are lying! This cannot be true! This must be a mistake! He was with his friends studying... he must be on his way home and—”

Before she could finish, Rajeev gently took the phone from her hand.

Ishita collapsed back onto the sofa. She stared ahead, unblinking. A moment later, her hands began to shake.

“This isn't true... there must be some mistake...” she murmured repeatedly, shaking her head.

Rajeev stood quietly with the phone pressed to his ear, his face grim.

“Okay... we will be there soon,” he said softly before disconnecting the call.

Ishita had slipped into incoherence, repeating the same words over and over.

Rajeev knelt beside her and gently cupped her face, trying to turn it toward him. But she kept looking away, her lips moving in broken whispers.

Now even the words had begun to lose meaning.

“Ishita... we need to go,” Rajeev said quietly.

Her eyes finally met his.

Rajeev shuddered at the expression on her face.

“You remember the day Rahul first spoke?” she said suddenly, her voice strangely calm.

“The first thing he said was ‘Ma’. He loves me so much more than he loves you.”

She smiled.

It was not a smile of joy.

Sometimes when the loss is too great, when the shock is too devastating, the mind simply shuts down. It can no longer process reality. The body’s reflexes fall out of rhythm. Expressions of joy and grief lose their meaning. Something inside collapses.

Rajeev pulled Ishita into a tight embrace.

Ishita let out a sound that didn't feel human — a deep, guttural wail rising from somewhere inside her, shattering the silence of the house.

Raktim stood frozen, watching his parents.

For the first time in his life, he felt afraid to ask a question.

Chapter 35 – Acceptance, or Something Else

Kolkata, 2023

In the face of loss—sometimes trivial, sometimes irreplaceable, permanent, life-altering, or devastating—there are many words, and yet none feel quite adequate. And still, the subtle message the world offers us is one of acceptance.

So, what does acceptance mean for parents who have lost a child? Is it about being okay with it? To accept it in that sense? That does not seem plausible.

Perhaps acceptance is simply about accepting reality—understanding that their son is physically gone and will never return. It is about learning to live with that reality.

When Ishita first heard the news, she was in shock and denial. *It couldn't have happened.* It couldn't have been her son; the voice on the call was speaking about. Rahul was safe—he was on his way home.

What was Rajeev feeling? When he took the phone from Ishita and heard the same news, what was going through his mind? Did his calm demeanour mean he was insulated from the shock and denial? Or was it something else?

Was it possible that, for a fleeting moment, he felt anger—anger at Rahul for being careless, anger at himself for buying him that bike?

And what about Raktim? What was he feeling as he stood there, watching his parents?

Raktim was only fourteen when Rahul died. The impact of that loss would continue to reverberate within him for the rest of his life.

As for Ishita and Rajeev—did they ever truly accept reality? Years passed, and perhaps, in time, they learned to live without Rahul. Maybe that is what made them even more protective of Raktim.

Over time, they consciously avoided conversations about Rahul—especially in Raktim's presence. It was their way of trying to shield him from grief. But did it really work?

Was removing Rahul's photographs from the albums an attempt to avoid grief—or an effort to accept reality?

Chapter 36 –

4 A.M:

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim

Raktim woke up feeling restless. The past week had been difficult, and sleep had come in fits and starts. There was a strange flutter in his stomach. His head felt heavy, and there was a faint tightness in his chest.

It was four in the morning.

He stepped out onto the balcony. The city was still asleep. A deep silence hung in the air, and somehow that quietness only seemed to make his restlessness worse.

He took out a cigarette. His fingers trembled slightly, and the cigarette slipped from his hand and fell to the ground.

“Shit,” he muttered under his breath.

He bent down, picked it up, lit it, and took a long drag.

After a moment, he walked back into his room and picked up his phone from the bed. Almost absent-mindedly, he opened WhatsApp.

The last message he had sent to Rhea a week ago now showed two blue ticks. He hadn't noticed it before.

Her status showed she was online.

His heart suddenly began to race.

He quickly typed:

Hi... need to speak to you?

He pressed send.

Within seconds, the message showed two blue ticks.

Her status changed to *typing...*

Raktim held his breath.

A message appeared.

Up so early?

Raktim exhaled slowly. A wave of relief washed over him, though he was slightly surprised by her nonchalance.

I am sorry I didn't answer your call, he replied.

It's ok, she wrote.

How could she write *It's ok?* he wondered.

Then he chuckled quietly to himself.

What else would she write anyway?

It hardly mattered to her whether he spoke to her or not.

For a moment, he felt like ending the conversation there. Instead, he typed:

Why did you suddenly disappear? Is it because of what I had told you?

He sent the message and waited.

Seconds passed.

There was no reply.

With every passing moment, his restlessness grew again. Irritation crept in quietly.

He stubbed out the cigarette he had been smoking and lit another.

Just then, his phone beeped.

I was a little tied up. My mom wasn't feeling too well. She had to get some tests done.

Raktim felt a sudden wave of relief flow through him. But even as he felt it, he realised she had not mentioned anything about what he had said that evening.

Oh... how is she now? He typed.

"She is better... improving," she replied.

Raktim stared at the screen.

He typed:

"Ok" ...and after a pause wrote *"...are we ok?"*

He paused.

Was he being too pushy?

Was he being selfish?

Probably yes.

He deleted the message.

Instead, he typed:

“You want to catch up for coffee one day?”

He pressed send.

Her reply came quickly.

“Sure. Sunday evening?”

Yes. That would be good, Raktim replied, adding a smiling emoji.

“Go to sleep now,” she wrote, adding a smiley.

“What about you?” he replied.

“Me too. Feeling sleepy,” she wrote.

“Hey... it was really nice chatting with you after so long. Goodnight,” Raktim replied.

“Goodnight,” she wrote, adding a smiley.

Chapter 37 – What We Don't Say

Kolkata, 2023

Nandini & Avik

Nandini was sitting alone in a coffee shop. Her laptop was open in front of her. She had just finished an online office meeting. She was there, yet she was not really there. That had become her normal.

Nandini closed her laptop and slipped it into her bag. She sat still for a moment, staring ahead, as if trying to gather herself. Then she got up from the chair.

She had decided to take the metro back home and started walking towards the station. There was a light evening breeze outside. She was wearing a dark blue embroidered kurta with a black salwar, her hair left open. She had bought a new pair of spectacles with a retro frame. After a long time, she had dressed up.

As she stepped out of the coffee shop, her phone rang.

It was Avik.

She paused for a moment. She realised she hadn't called him back the other day.

She answered the call.

“Hi, Nandini...” he said. “I’m so grateful you answered.”

Nandini didn’t respond.

“Nandini... you there?” he asked.

“Yes... I am. I’m sorry I didn’t call you back.”

“Can we speak now?” he asked, his voice soft.

“Yeah... we can,” she replied.

Chapter 38 – Before Everything Changed

Kolkata, 2013

Nandini & Abir

The first time Nandini met Avik had been many years ago.

Back then, she was stepping into what was supposed to be a new chapter in her life. It was an arranged marriage.

Nandini's father and Abir's father had been friends since college. Abir was thirty-six, running his family's printing business in Mumbai. Nandini was twenty-five. She had just completed her MBA from ISBM and had joined Indus Capital Bank as an investment banker.

She wanted to continue working in Kolkata. But her parents were keen for her to marry Abir. They reasoned that moving to Mumbai after marriage would allow her to continue her career without disruption.

Nandini felt she had no real choice. Her mother, especially, was clear — this was what she had to do.

She had spoken to her father about wanting to stay single and focus on her career. He had listened to her patiently. He was a reasonable man, open to hearing her out. He suggested that she

meet Abir first, spend some time getting to know him, and then decide what she wanted to do.

Nandini agreed. And she decided to meet Abir.

She didn't know then how much that meeting would change her life.

Chapter 39 – Perfectly Aligned

Kolkata, 2013

Abir

Abir Ghosh was the epitome of the eldest son — responsible, dependable, and deeply caring. He was also a loving elder brother.

Academically, he had always been brilliant. He was an alumnus of the prestigious IIM Bangalore, where he specialised in Marketing and Finance. After completing his course, he joined the family's printing business.

The Ghosh's lived in a lavish bungalow on Union Park Road in Bandra West. Abir's father, Sanjay, had retired from an active role in the business, leaving the responsibility to his two sons.

Abir was an upright individual and well-regarded in business circles. He was an avid reader, a fitness enthusiast, and someone who consciously maintained a work-life balance. He had a refined taste in music and was particularly fond of jazz.

His friends were like-minded individuals from Mumbai's business circles — erudite, successful, and affluent. On many weekends, they would drive out together to nearby getaways.

Avik, Abir's younger brother, was nothing like him. Where Abir was measured and predictable, Avik seemed to move through life with an ease that bordered on recklessness. He believed in living fully, in not holding back. He had married Namita, his college girlfriend. They had a son, Ayush.

Abir, on the other hand, was different. His focus had always been his education and career. He enjoyed expensive Scotch whisky and reading—especially biographies of successful individuals—and he preferred driving his BMW himself. He had lived his life with clarity and control—everything in its place.

When Sanjay and Sumita, Abir's mother, spoke to him about his marriage to Nandini, he refused almost instantly. He did not want to get married. He said he had no time.

But it wasn't said in frustration. This was exactly the life he had chosen for himself.

He was deeply invested in his work. It was his vision to take the business to the next level.

And more than anything else, he did not feel the need for companionship.

It wasn't something he felt was missing.

It was on Sumita's insistence that Abir agreed to meet Nandini. He made it clear that he was only agreeing to meet her — it did not mean he was agreeing to the marriage.

Abir decided to fly down to Kolkata on a Saturday morning, meet Nandini in the evening, and fly back to Mumbai the next day.

They met at the coffee shop at ITC Sonar.

Nandini knew she didn't have many options. Although her father had left the decision to her, she knew her mother wouldn't. There was a quiet sense of powerlessness, of being resigned to what lay ahead.

And yet, life sometimes had its own way of surprising her. She actually liked Abir.

He was older than her by almost ten years, and there was something about him that drew her in — his clarity, his composure, the way he spoke.

There was nothing about him that felt unsettling.

Abir, on his part, found Nandini to be a nice person. She was articulate, well-read, and deeply focused on her career.

There was clarity in the way she spoke about her life.

Abir appreciated that.

It felt... aligned.

Chapter 40 – What We Don't Say

Kolkata, 2023

Nandini & Avik

There was a brief silence after Nandini said they could speak. Avik knew he had to begin. It had always been like this between them. Sometimes they would just sit in silence, and even that would speak. They knew what the other was feeling, what the other wanted to say. But things had changed. Circumstances — or perhaps life itself — had happened, Avik thought, and let out a faint, almost ironic chuckle.

“How are you, Nandini?” he asked gently.

“I’m okay,” she replied softly.

Was she really okay? Nandini wondered.

Was this what being okay felt like?

Perhaps for someone like her, this was all life had to offer.

“You don’t sound okay,” he said quietly.

Nandini kept walking. The evening breeze brushed past her face, but it did nothing to ease the restlessness within her.

“How is Ayush?” she asked, changing the subject.

“He’s doing fine. I met him last month,” Avik replied, letting out a faint breath.

After a pause, he asked, “You met Abir”

Nandini didn’t respond. After a brief pause, she said, “Are you asking me or telling me?” “The anger was evident in her tone.

“I meant...I heard you did,” Avik said, sounding defensive

“So, are you keeping tabs on me? Is that it?”

Avik didn't respond.

Nandini had stopped walking.

“What is it that you expect from me, Avik? Why are we even having this conversation?” she asked. She could feel her heart racing.

“I just want you to know you don’t have to go through this alone, Nandini,” he said softly.

“I am alone, Avik. And I can manage my life just fine. Why do you still want to talk to me?”

“Because I want to,” he said simply.

“After everything?” she asked, her voice rising slightly.

“Yes... and also because I lo—”

“Don’t,” she cut in sharply. “Don’t say it.”

She took a breath.

“I don’t love you, Avik. Why don’t you understand? What we had was not love. How could it have been love?”

She closed her eyes for a moment. A tear rolled down her face.

“You can call it what you want, Nandini. You can deny it. Maybe you feel you don’t love me... but I know what I feel. And I’m not ashamed to say it. I love you,” he said.

“It’s so easy for you to say that” she said, her voice trembling. “Do you even know what I have to go through? What do I go through every day?”

“Then tell me,” he said softly. “At least open up to me. Tell me what I can do for you. I’d do anything for you.”

“No, Avik. There’s nothing you can do. Nothing anyone can do.”

She paused.

“I have to face my sins. Please... just let me be.”

And before he could respond, she disconnected the call.

The line went silent.

Avik stayed still, the phone still against his ear.

Chapter 41 – Denial

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim

Sometimes, however aware we are of our vulnerability, we choose to ignore it.

We fear uncertainty, and yet we run towards it.

But why do we do that?

Why do we deny that quiet voice within us that tells us something isn't right?

Why do we override it?

Perhaps for some, the need to be accepted... to be loved... to feel worthy... becomes stronger than those inner warning signals.

Was Raktim an eternal optimist?

Or was he simply in denial?

Did he really have the answers?

Chapter 42 – Something in Her Eyes

Kolkata, 2023

Rhea & Raktim

The sky had been overcast when she stepped out. She wasn't carrying an umbrella, and by the time she reached the Shobhabazar metro station, it had started to rain.

She got down from the auto and ran to take cover under the shade of the metro entrance. Even then, she got wet.

She had her Bluetooth headphones on — something she always did while travelling. She was listening to one of her favourite artists, Arnob, singing a Rabindra Sangeet.

From under the shade, she saw Raktim's car approach.

She raised her hand and waved from amidst the small crowd waiting there.

Raktim pulled up close to the entrance, quickly stepped out, and opened the passenger-side door for her.

She walked briskly towards the car.

The rain had picked up, and by now Raktim was almost drenched.

She looked at him.

“Why did you have to do this? Now you’re completely wet,” she said, a hint of embarrassment in her voice.

“It’s okay,” he replied, smiling.

She looked at him for a moment.

“You’re crazy. Now get back inside,” she said, smiling faintly.

Once inside the car, Raktim said, “I’ll take you to a nice café,” still smiling.

“Okay... give me your phone. I want to play a song,” she said, reaching for it.

Raktim looked at her with a slight smile, a hint of curiosity in his eyes.

“What? You don’t trust my choice of music?” she asked.

“No... go ahead,” he said, starting the car.

Rhea searched for the song she had been listening to and pressed play.

The soft guitar interlude filled the car.

“O je mane na mana...”

Neither of them spoke.

Rhea sat looking at the road.

Raktim glanced at her for a moment and then looked ahead.

She looked distant. It felt like she was there, and yet not there.

The rain had picked up, and Raktim switched on the wipers.

He loved driving in the rain, with the wipers moving in rhythm.

Rajeev used to love driving in the rain, too.

How many of these idiosyncrasies had he inherited from his father, Raktim thought, and smiled.

He remembered his father driving their old Fiat on days like this.

Raktim stole a quick glance at Rhea. She was still looking out of the window.

Something about her unsettled him.

He wanted to reach out and touch her hand, but he held back.

“Hey... you okay?” he asked.

She turned to him, a faint smile on her face, and nodded.

There was something in her eyes.

Chapter 43 – An Unwelcome Memory

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim & Rhea

The sudden heavy rain had caused traffic jams across the city, even on a Sunday. Raktim took a left onto Park Street from Chowringhee Road, which was jammed with cars.

“Every time it rains, there’s this damn traffic...” Raktim said, annoyed. “Can you imagine how incompetent the cops are? Today is a damn Sunday,” he added, his fingers drumming on the steering wheel.

The rain had abated, but a steady drizzle persisted.

“I feel like having adrak wali chai,” Rhea said, glancing at Raktim. She had a faint smile.

“Sure... I guess we’ll get it at the café,” Raktim replied.

“No, no... not a café. I want to have a bhaar-er chaa,” she said, touching Raktim’s hand. Her hands felt cold.

“Okay... so let’s go to Balwant Dhaba,” he said.

Her hand was on his, and he made no effort to remove it.

They were stuck in traffic.

“Not Balwant Dhaba... let’s go to Vivekananda Park.”

For a moment, Raktim felt a cold shiver pass through him. Vivekananda Park was close to Fillers. A flash of images appeared in front of him — Fillers, a cup of milk coffee, his car parked outside, and the face of Rahul... his face suddenly turning sombre.

He withdrew his hand from beneath Rhea’s and placed it on the gear knob, looking straight ahead.

Rhea, surprised by his sudden behaviour, asked, “What happened, Raktim? Are you okay?”

Raktim didn’t respond and kept looking ahead.

“What is it?” she asked, her voice rising slightly.

Raktim took a deep breath and gathered his thoughts.

“Nothing, nothing... just remembered something... something to do with work. Let’s go to VKP,” Raktim said with a smile.

Chapter 44 – We Were Both Wrong

Mumbai, 2023

Abir & Avik

Abir was at the Yacht Club with his friends, chilling on a Sunday evening. They were at the bar, drinking beer.

During their conversation, Abir took out his phone and checked his WhatsApp. The message he had sent to Avik the previous night still had two grey ticks.

“Guys, I’ll just step out to make a call,” he said, before stepping out of the bar and dialling Avik’s number.

After a few rings, the call disconnected.

He dialled again. This time, after a few rings, Avik answered.

Before Avik could say anything, Abir cut in sharply, “Where the hell are you? Why haven’t you been replying to my messages or answering my calls?” he said, sounding annoyed.

“Sorry, Dada... I am very sorry for everything...” Avik said, his speech slurring.

“Are you drunk again?” Abir asked sternly.

“Sorry, Dada... I don’t know what to do...” he said, his voice trembling.

“You stay put. I am coming over.”

Before Avik could respond, Abir disconnected the call.

Avik was living in a small 1 BHK apartment in Andheri East, near Sacred Heart Church. This was the fifth house he had shifted into since moving out of the Bandra Union Park Road bungalow. It was also the place where he had been staying the longest.

Every evening, he would visit the church, most often in an inebriated state. For the past six months, he had been unemployed.

Avik was drunk when Abir reached his house.

“What have you done to yourself?” Abir said angrily, seeing Avik with dishevelled hair, an unkempt beard, a faded white T-shirt, and shorts.

The house smelled of alcohol.

Avik stood by the window overlooking the church courtyard, smoking a cigarette, while Abir looked around the house.

The paint was peeling off the walls. There was a worn-out, sagging sofa in the living room. A pillow lay on the floor. A wooden table with a glass top stood nearby, the glass stained with dirt. A cross hung on the wall above the sofa.

The kitchen had a dirty gas stove, and some utensils lay dumped in the washbasin.

The bedroom had a mattress on the floor and a wooden cupboard with one door missing.

“What kind of place is this?” Abir said, his voice filled with shock and disbelief.

Avik didn’t respond.

“What... speak, man!” Abir snapped.

“I had called her...” Avik mumbled.

“What? I can’t hear you,” Abir said, his anger rising.

“Dada, I have been living with this guilt for years. I know what I did was a sin. But...” Before he could complete his sentence, Abir cut in.

“Stop living in the past. Whatever happened back then happened. It’s been many years now. Yes, I was upset and angry. But the real problem was me, and you know that. I shouldn’t have agreed to marry her. It’s just that... I didn’t know about my problem.”

“But in spite of that, my actions were sinful. I... I know... I shouldn’t have. I fell in love, Dada!” Avik said, breaking into tears.

Abir gently hugged him.

“It’s okay. I understand. Now come home.”

“No, Dada... I can’t face Ma and Baba. I ruined Namita and Ayush’s life... and...”

“Avik... whatever you did, you probably did out of ignorance. You didn’t do it deliberately. Circumstances played a huge role in it. Somewhere in all of that, you lost your way.

I say ‘probably’ because I don’t have all the answers... and more importantly, I am no one to judge. Didn’t I go wrong too? If you

think about it, I was the one who set things in motion. Had I not wronged Nandini?

You could say I acted out of ignorance, too. And maybe that is partly true. But I also said yes to the marriage for reasons that weren't right.

But yes, you have wronged Namita and Ayush. There's no denying that. You need to make your amends. I don't know if she will ever forgive you, but you still need to do what you have to do.

And then... You have to move on. Start again.

Is that a future with Nandini? I don't know. Do you? Are you imagining a life with her because you truly want it... or because of guilt? Or because you feel the need to save her?

You need to think about these things. But to do that... you must stop drinking.

You can't waste your life like this."

Chapter 45 – A Line Crossed

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim & Rhea

Raktim parked his car under the shade of a tree on the side opposite the tea stalls, since there was no space on the other side of the road. The rain had reduced to a light drizzle, and the road was dimly lit by a few streetlights. Where Raktim had parked, it was darker.

The area held too many memories for him. Across the park stood Fillers.

“I’ll get the tea,” he said, opening the door.

“I’ll come with you,” Rhea replied.

They both stepped out and walked towards the tea stalls in the drizzle. The shops were covered with heavy blue plastic sheets to keep out the rain, forming makeshift shelters for customers sipping hot tea.

Raktim ordered their tea and lit a cigarette.

“Give me one,” Rhea said.

He handed her one. She lit it.

They stood side by side, each holding a cup of tea in one hand and a cigarette in the other, watching the rain.

A loud crack of thunder split the sky.

Raktim tried to appear composed, but the flashes of lightning and the rumble of thunder only deepened his unease.

Within moments, the drizzle turned into heavy rain. People around them scrambled for cover. The plastic sheets weren't enough—both Raktim and Rhea were drenched.

“I think we should get back to the car,” Raktim said, tossing aside the empty clay cup.

Rhea nodded.

They ran towards the car. Raktim unlocked it quickly and got in; Rhea followed.

“Shit... what a mess,” Raktim muttered.

“Yeah,” Rhea said softly, looking out at the rain.

Raktim started the engine.

“No... wait,” she said.

“What? Wait... why?” Raktim said, a hint of irritation in his voice. He wanted to leave.

“I just want to sit here for a bit,” she said quietly.

“You'll catch a cold,” he replied.

“What is it, Raktim? Since the time I mentioned VKP, you haven't been yourself. What happened? You can tell me,” she said, turning towards him.

Raktim turned off the ignition and stared straight ahead.

“I can sense something’s wrong... and it’s bothering me that you’re not sharing it with me,” she said.

Raktim didn’t respond.

“Fine... don’t tell me. Let’s go then,” she said, a trace of hurt in her voice.

“Rahul used to love coming here with his friends,” Raktim said quietly, still looking ahead. “This place... and Fillers... that was their hangout.”

Rhea slowly turned towards him. “Rahul... who is he?”

“He’s not there anymore...” Raktim said, his voice beginning to tremble. “He left me many years ago... he was my elder brother... he was my everything.”

His eyes filled with tears.

“I’m so sorry, Raktim... I didn’t know...” she said softly, moving a little closer.

“It’s okay... how would you know... I’ve never told anyone... I still can’t believe he’s gone...” Raktim said, tears now streaming down his face.

Rhea reached out and gently touched his face, turning it towards her. Her own eyes were filled with tears.

“That must have been... really hard for you...” she said softly.

They sat in silence, looking at each other.

They could hear each other’s breath.

For a moment, neither of them moved.

Raktim leaned in and kissed her.

She didn't pull away.

For a few seconds, they remained like that—close, unsure, suspended in the moment.

Then Rhea slowly pulled back and looked away.

“I'm sorry, Rhea... I don't know why...” he said, his voice low.

Rhea didn't look at him. Her heart was racing, her body trembling.

“Raktim... please drop me home.”

Chapter 46 –

The Print of a New Life

Kolkata, 1970's

The Ghosh Family - Sanjay & Sumita

Sanjay Ghosh belonged to an affluent Bengali family with their ancestral home in Alipore. His family owned a printing press in Kolkata, but during the 1970s, Bengal witnessed severe economic decline, stagnation, and deindustrialisation. Trade unionism was rampant, leading to frequent lockouts that disrupted operations. Many businesses were forced to shut down or move out of the state.

Production at the Ghosh family's factory had halted due to prolonged labour disputes. Faced with mounting uncertainty, the family decided to leave Kolkata. They settled the trade union's demands, sold their machines and factory premises, and prepared to relocate.

Sanjay, the only son, moved to Mumbai to explore the possibility of setting up a printing business. At his parents' insistence, he married Sumita, who also came from an affluent family in Kolkata before leaving.

Sanjay and Sumita were married in 1975 and moved to Mumbai the same year.

The first two to three years were a period of struggle for Sanjay, Sumita, and the Ghosh family as a whole. In 1978, Sumita became pregnant and returned to Kolkata to stay with the family.

Meanwhile, Sanjay's efforts, driven by sharp business acumen and relentless perseverance, began to bear fruit. In early 1978, he managed to set up their first printing press in Mumbai.

And on the 27th of May 1978, Abir was born.

Chapter 47 – A Life Taking Shape

Kolkata & Mumbai: 1970 - 1999

The Ghosh Family - Sanjay, Sumita, Abir and Avik

Sanjay Ghosh had arrived in Mumbai with a single dream. With determination, a never-say-die attitude, and relentless perseverance, he turned that dream into reality. Soon, he had built a roster of prominent clients, for whom he printed labels, packaging boxes, and various printed collaterals. In the early eighties, the Ghosh family sold their bungalow in Alipore, and Sanjay's parents moved to Mumbai. The family of four—Abir, then just three years old—settled into a large 3 BHK apartment in Pali Hill, Bandra.

Abir, the firstborn, was the centre of his parents' and grandparents' affection. The Ghosh family's affluence was steadily rising, and Abir was growing up in a home that knew abundance. Sumita was the epitome of a doting mother, and Sanjay was a loving father who made a point of spending time with his family despite his demanding work schedule.

Abir was a happy, joyous child growing up in the loving, protective, and secure environment of the Ghosh family. The first word he uttered as a child was “Baba.” Sanjay took immense

pride in that, often joking with Sumita that Abir loved him more than her. As he began to speak more clearly, Abir would often ask Sumita why his Baba went to work, and what work he did. Seeing his curiosity, Sanjay took him to the factory one day. Abir's happiness knew no bounds. As Sanjay showed him the printing machines, his eyes remained transfixed. He watched the machines in action with rapt attention.

Abir loved drawing and would spend his afternoons with his crayons and drawing book. Soon, he began sketching factories and machines. After completing his drawings, he would neatly pack everything away, placing his drawing book and crayons back in their designated cupboard.

He cleared the interview and secured admission to a reputed school in Mumbai. Neither Sumita nor Sanjay ever had to ask him to sit with his books. Abir loved to study, and mathematics—and later, physics in his senior classes—were his favourite subjects. When Abir was ten, Avik was born. He was thrilled to have a younger brother. Each day after school, once his studies were done, he would sit beside Avik's cradle—talking to him, cuddling him, quietly keeping him company. At night, before going to bed, he would sometimes read stories aloud to him.

Abir began excelling in his studies and cricket. By the time he reached Class 12, he had become the captain of the school cricket team. He had many friends at school, and his juniors looked up to him. His school was co-educational, and his circle of friends included both boys and girls. However, he had a smaller, closer group—mostly boys—with whom he shared a deeper bond. They, too, came from affluent families. They would meet on weekends, have sleepovers at each other's homes, play cricket, make midnight

Maggi, sit on terraces and chat for hours, and sometimes watch old VHS films late into the night.

These friends would often talk about girls—who they liked in school, who they wanted to be friends with. Abir enjoyed these animated conversations, but on his own, he had very little to contribute. When his friends teased him, he would say—truthfully—that he was too occupied with his studies, cricket, and reading.

It was with this group that he first watched a pornographic film. There was a certain thrill in watching it secretly, and around the same time, a quiet, private curiosity about his own body began to take shape. He realised he did enjoy it, but unlike some of his friends, he wasn't too obsessed with it either.

After Class 12, he prepared for engineering entrance examinations and secured admission to a top engineering college in Delhi. The environment there was very different from what Abir had imagined. He did make a few friends but largely remained focused on his academics. Over time, two of them became his closest friends. Both had girlfriends, who were also students at the same college, and they would often hang out together.

Abir would sometimes feel a little out of place when he was with them and their girlfriends. His friends would often tell him that they could set him up with someone, but he wasn't comfortable with the idea.

He did become friends with a girl from his class—she was academically strong, well-read, and articulate. However, his friends found her boring and introduced him to another girl. The group went out together, and though Abir was initially hesitant, he gradually began to talk to her. They met a few times, and on

one such occasion, they kissed. It was Abir's first kiss, and he did feel excited. But that was as far as he was willing to go. He wasn't keen on taking things further. He simply didn't feel comfortable.

Many of his friends—from college and back home in Mumbai—spoke about losing their virginity. Abir would listen with interest, but he had nothing to contribute. At times, he wondered why he didn't share the same excitement or eagerness. He felt as though he was following the motions, without quite feeling what others seemed to feel so naturally. Yet, an inner voice reassured him—there was no need to rush. It would happen when he met the right person.

The relationship didn't last long, and soon Abir was single again. He began avoiding spending time with his friends when they were with their girlfriends. He found himself drawn instead to the girl from his class. Her name was Nivedita, though everyone called her Nivi.

Abir and Nivi began spending a lot of time together. They went to movies, visited libraries—both shared a love for reading—attended seminars, and watched plays. Over time, she became his closest friend and confidante.

During a short break from classes, the two of them decided to travel to Manali. They booked separate rooms. On the last night of their trip, they sat together in Abir's room, talking late into the night. Abir loved horror stories, while Nivi hated them. Teasing her, he narrated one he had heard from his grandmother.

By the time he finished, it was quite late, and Nivi returned to her room. But the story lingered in her mind, refusing to let her sleep. A little while later, Abir, who was reading in his room, heard a

knock on the door. He was surprised to find Nivi standing there, visibly shaken.

He burst out laughing. Nivi was furious—angry with him for making her listen to the story. She walked into his room and announced she would sleep there that night. Abir found the whole episode amusing. Nivi settled into the bed, while Abir offered to sleep on the high-backed chair in the corner of the room. She immediately objected, insisting he sleep on the bed instead. After a brief exchange, he gave in.

They lay side by side, still awake, talking softly. Gradually, almost without noticing, they found themselves drawing closer. It was Nivi who leaned in first. Abir hesitated for a moment, unsure of how to respond, and then allowed himself to go along with it. One moment led quietly to another. And though Abir felt a certain discomfort, he did not want to hurt Nivi.

What happened that night was something Nivi considered very special. For Abir, however, it felt different. Within him, something didn't feel right. It wasn't that he hadn't liked the experience; he just wasn't truly comfortable with it, and it didn't hold the same meaning for him. He had given in that night because he didn't want to hurt Nivi.

They remained together, but Abir gradually began to pull away. Nivi sensed the change in his behaviour and confronted him. Abir avoided the conversation and insisted that they remain friends—as they had been before—and continue doing the things they used to do. Nivi found his behaviour odd and was, in fact, hurt by the casualness of his speech.

Abir, on the other hand, felt relieved that he had expressed his true feelings. He began focusing more intensely on his studies and

secured a distinction in the second year of his engineering course. Over time, he and Nivi drifted apart.

He completed his engineering degree and went on to qualify for IIM Bangalore. Even there, he topped his class and received offers from several blue-chip companies. However, Abir chose to join his father and take their printing business to greater heights.

Chapter 48 – A Quiet Beginning

Shantiniketan, 2013

Abir & Nandini

Abir and Nandini first met in the middle of 2013. While Abir felt there was a perfect alignment between them, Nandini was drawn to his clarity, composure, and progressive outlook towards life. However, she wanted to be sure and asked her father for some time to think it over. After all, it was one of the most important decisions of her life, and she did not want to rush into it.

Her father—and, somewhat surprisingly, her mother too—agreed and suggested that she meet Abir a few more times and speak with him more often to get to know him better. Nandini agreed, realising that both needed time to understand each other better.

Nandini and Abir began interacting more frequently, most of their conversations taking place over calls. Around December 2013, Abir suggested that they go on a short trip together. He had always wanted to visit Shantiniketan. Nandini's parents were open to the idea, and her father made all the arrangements.

Abir flew down to Kolkata, and from there, the two of them took a train to Bolpur. Nandini's father had booked two rooms at a luxury resort in Shantiniketan. It was December, and quite cold.

Abir fell in love with Shantiniketan—the weather, the quiet, the unhurried pace. He wasn't used to experiencing winter in Mumbai. There was also a deep sense of belonging as he reconnected with his Bengali roots.

They spent their days exploring the various heritage sites around Shantiniketan. Abir bought several books and collections of Rabindranath Tagore's poems.

He couldn't read Bengali, so Nandini was a little surprised.

"You can't read Bengali, right?" she asked.

Abir nodded, smiling.

"Then why not buy the English translations? That way you can read them," she said, smiling.

"English translations won't carry the essence," he said quietly.

She looked at him. "So, you'll learn the language?"

He shook his head, a faint smile playing on his lips.

"No... you'll read them out to me."

What appealed to Nandini was Abir's candid way of speaking. It reflected a certain simplicity in him. She could see that his connection to his Bengali roots was sincere, not something he was putting on to impress her. She found his childlike enthusiasm endearing, and most importantly, he came across as an authentic individual.

On one such day during their stay, it had been raining in Shantiniketan all day, and the mercury had dropped further. Both were in Nandini's room. There were two wooden chairs and a small coffee table. Over hot cups of coffee, Nandini was reading out *The Postmaster*, a short story by Tagore, to Abir.

Abir listened attentively, but he was equally enraptured by her voice—it seemed to bring the story to life. Nandini looked up. Their eyes met. There was something so beautiful in his eyes—the childlike innocence, the respect, the quiet affection, she thought.

She slowly closed the book and placed it on the table. Rising gently from her chair, she walked up to him and sat on his lap, wrapping her arms around him. Her heartbeat quickened. She drew her face closer to his. For a moment, they could hear nothing but each other's breath.

Nandini kissed him softly. Abir held her closer, the kiss deepening, growing more intense with each passing moment.

After a while, Nandini rose from his lap and, taking his hand, gently tried to draw him towards the bed. Abir paused, still seated, looking at her—mesmerised.

“We shouldn't rush this,” he said softly, standing up.

A few strands of her hair had fallen across her face. He gently brushed them aside, his fingers lingering for a moment.

“Please... let's not stop,” she said softly.

“We should wait till we're married,” he said. “Let's make this special. This isn't the right time or place.”

Abir leaned in and gently kissed her.

Nandini looked at him, her eyes steady. “I've fallen in love with you, Abir.”

He held her gaze. “I love you too.”

Chapter 49 –

The Shape of Belief

Kolkata, 2013

Nandini & Abir

Nandini's wedding was the epitome of a quintessential Bengali celebration. The rituals, décor, and cuisine were steeped in the very ethos of Bengali culture and tradition. That was exactly how Nandini had wanted it, and her parents, Arun and Rina, were meticulous in ensuring that their only daughter's wedding would be one to remember. There was little deliberation over the wedding venue. Shobhabazar Rajbari, with its old-world charm, grandeur, and symbolism of Bengali royalty, was the unanimous choice.

Winter had made its quiet entry, with a slight nip in the air and foggy mornings. A gentle, cool breeze, soft sun rays, and the sound of rustling leaves created an ambience of peace and added to the slow glide of time—so unique to Kolkata.

The preparations for the wedding had begun six months earlier, which, by usual standards, was perhaps a little late—most families start preparing almost a year in advance. Arun, however, was confident that everything would be arranged on time, though Rina was a little tense and apprehensive. Nandini, for her part, offered

to help her parents, but Rina had categorically told her to focus on her work and leave everything to them.

As the days moved forward in that same quiet, unhurried rhythm, bringing the wedding closer with each passing moment, something else was taking shape—less visible, but just as significant.

A strong belief had taken root in Abir. He was convinced that, in Nandini, he had found the perfect companion. Behind the façade of the busy entrepreneur was an individual who, he felt, was perhaps lonely—lonely in the sense of lacking someone with whom he could share his feelings, someone who wouldn't judge him, someone with the maturity and empathy to truly understand him.

The only other person with whom he had shared a similar bond was Nivi. There were times he regretted his decision to consciously move away from her. It was the only thing he thought he could do at the time. Something about their relationship—especially after their Manali trip—had deeply unsettled him.

Was it his perception of their physical intimacy that had caused him to withdraw? Why was it that it hadn't meant much to him—or rather, had made him uncomfortable? he wondered. Why had he given in to it? Just to please her? He still remembered—it hadn't felt right. It wasn't just discomfort. It was the absence of something he couldn't quite name—the absence of a pull that seemed so natural to others.

Perhaps it had been the same for Nivi. Maybe she had seen through the façade—his lack of passion, his absence in the moment. Perhaps, at some point, she would have left him anyway.

Over all these years, he had never truly understood what it was about him—within him—that made him uncomfortable with sex.

And yet, at a deeper level, he knew it was okay. It was okay to be who he was.

Perhaps it would be different with Nandini. Or perhaps he only wanted to believe that.

Nandini's life, too, had taken a new turn. She had initially been unwilling to get married—until she met Abir. The thought had crossed her mind several times: *Am I rushing this?* At times, she found herself questioning how and why she had moved from not wanting to get married immediately and focusing on her career, to agreeing to marry Abir. *Am I making a mistake?* she would wonder.

“I’m sure Baba and Ma think I was just putting up an act of defiance,” she thought to herself. More importantly, she wondered what it was about Abir that had drawn her towards him. What was it about him that had carried her away in that hotel room in Shantiniketan?

And yet, what had stood out from that moment was the restraint he had shown. To her, it reflected his deep respect for her. Or was it something else?

What she liked—perhaps what she had begun to love—was his genuineness. The clarity of his thoughts, his respect for his roots. Abir was erudite, successful in every sense of the word, and yet remarkably grounded. She felt that in him, she had found the right partner.

“I guess this is how love happens... it just happens,” she smiled at the thought.

Chapter 50 – The Unsaid

Kolkata 2013

Abir & Nandini

The auspicious time for the wedding was late in the evening. Nandini had to wake up before sunrise on her wedding day for the Dodhi Mangal (or Dahi Chura) ritual. The Ghosh's were staying at a bungalow owned by a relative in Alipore.

Abir had been awake all night. There was a feeling within him that he couldn't quite articulate. Was he making the right decision? He wondered. If he was, why did he feel so tense?

"Perhaps it's normal to feel this way," he murmured to himself with a faint chuckle. "After all, this is one of the most important... or should it be *strategic*?" He paused, almost amused at his own choice of words. "Well... perhaps the most momentous decision of my life." He nodded to himself, as though settling on the right phrase.

"What would Nandini be feeling now?" he wondered.

It was almost two in the morning when he dialled her number. After a few rings, she answered.

"Hmm..." she murmured, still heavy with sleep.

“Were you sleeping?” he asked softly.

“Hmm... what else?” she replied. “Why aren’t you?” Her voice was slow, drowsy.

“I can’t sleep,” he said.

“Why?”

“I don’t know... I guess I’m a little tense,” he replied, uncertain.

“Don’t be... go to sleep, baby,” she said, stifling a yawn.

“Nandini... I really love you... but—”

Before he could finish, she cut in, “I love you too, baby. Now, please let me sleep.”

“But there’s something...”

He stopped. The line had gone silent.

“Hello? ... Nandini? ... you there?”

Chapter 51 – In a Parallel World

Kolkata 2013

Abir, Nandini & Avik

It was like being transported back in time—to the era of Bengali royalty. Perhaps quantum physics had something to do with it, Abir thought. Perhaps he had been transported into a parallel universe. How else would he rationalise what he was witnessing?

He was awestruck, mesmerised, astounded, spellbound—he had run out of adjectives. It felt surreal.

Draped in a deep red Banarasi saree, her forehead adorned with delicate *chandan* patterns and a *shola mukut* resting lightly on her head, Nandini looked like the divine queen of a timeless empire - almost unreal, as though she belonged to a world just beyond his reach.

Avik, standing next to him, was equally dumbfounded—and so were all the *bor jatri* (groom's party).

“Dada, are you feeling okay?” Avik asked, standing beside Abir. Namita, Avik’s wife, stood nearby, collecting the gifts and placing them carefully into a suitcase.

Abir was seated on an elevated chair—almost like a throne—in a large hall at the venue. Elders approached him one by one, blessing him, touching his forehead, murmuring quiet words. Around him, family members from both sides and photographers formed a loose arc. Camera flashes went off every second. It felt like being a celebrity in the middle of a photoshoot.

Abir sat there, dazed in the glare of the lights. It felt as though he was still living in a surreal parallel universe—one he hadn't quite anticipated and wasn't sure he belonged to.

The unsaid words from the previous night kept replaying in his mind.

What was I trying to say anyway? He thought.

Or how was I going to say it?

Am I just overthinking this?

And yet, that gnawing thought—the weight of what remained unsaid, of what he could not even name—refused to leave him.

“Dada, are you okay?” Avik asked again.

“I’m fine,” Abir replied, without looking at him.

A few minutes later, an elderly uncle from Nandini’s family walked up to Avik and whispered something in his ear. Avik smiled and nodded. The uncle turned to Abir.

“You’re looking like a raja,” he said warmly, shaking his hand.

Abir offered a faint smile. As the man walked away, he looked at Avik, a question in his eyes.

“The auspicious first glance—the *Shubho Drishti*—is about to begin. We need to go,” Avik said, smiling.

“Oh...” Abir murmured, still sounding distant.

“Now?” he asked.

Chapter 52 – Between Logic and Ritual

Kolkata 2013

Abir & Nandini

The venue for the *Shubho Drishti* was packed with relatives from both sides—the bride’s and groom’s families. Abir walked towards the centre, flanked on one side by Avik and on the other by one of his friends. Avik was of moderate build, while his friend Ajay had the physique of a bodybuilder. He had a special role to play—to lift Abir during the ritual.

A part of the entourage included Namita, along with some of Abir’s close friends from Mumbai, who were experiencing a Bengali wedding for the first time. His father walked a few paces ahead. In a Bengali wedding, this was the showstopper moment. The venue glowed under warm lights, punctuated by constant flashes.

Abir could feel a mild tremor in his hands. Was it anxiety? Or was it excitement? He wasn’t quite sure.

At the centre stood Abir and Nandini—she seated on a *piri* (a low wooden stool)—both under a sharp spotlight. It felt almost like an arena. The men carrying Nandini seemed charged with a strange, collective energy. A *purohit* stood nearby, guiding the

ceremony—almost like a referee in a match. Football... or perhaps rugby? Abir chuckled to himself.

The moment of reckoning was seconds away. With a loud cheer, Nandini's side lifted her up. Almost instantly, Avik and Ajay—with some help from Abir's Mumbai friends—hoisted him up as well.

Abir felt a sudden surge of panic. His dhoti might tear—or worse, come undone. The fabric was silky, and he could feel the grip of those lifting him slipping slightly.

For a moment, everything blurred—the lights, the noise, the movement.

Nandini was clearly raised higher by her team than he was.

Amidst the cheering, flashing cameras, and the charged energy of the crowd, Nandini sat steady on the *piri* (wooden stool), carried by her cousins and friends. Abir, on tenterhooks, feared his dhoti might suddenly come undone—or that those carrying him might lose their grip. His anxiety heightened; his hands trembled, and he was perspiring profusely as he tentatively reached out to garland Nandini.

At that precise moment, Nandini's cousins lifted her higher. Abir's side tried to raise him further, but they couldn't match her height. Eventually, Nandini's team brought her down to his level. Abir silently thanked God for small mercies.

Finally, the garland exchange happened. Abir had assumed that once would be enough, but the *purohit* and the crowd insisted it had to be done three times—that was the ritual, they said.

For a moment, Abir zoned out. Was this who he truly was? The successful entrepreneur who took strategic decisions—someone

who relied on logic and data? What was the logic behind exchanging garlands three times? He wondered.

At last, the ceremony concluded, and both he and Nandini were led towards the *mandap* for the Yagna, where the real rituals would begin.

Chapter 53 – What Was Seen

Kolkata 2013

Abir, Nandini & Avik

Abir had travelled in his uncle's BMW from the bungalow in Alipore to the wedding venue. He was delighted to learn that his uncle had recently bought the car and had, in fact, suggested that he drive himself to the venue. The idea had sparked a round of laughter among his family and relatives. *Abir had lost it*, most of them had thought.

In the end, his uncle drove, with Abir seated in the rear alongside his father, and Avik in the front passenger seat. The rest of the groom's party travelled in rented cars—most of them luxury vehicles. A long cavalcade of cars moved down Central Avenue towards Shobhabazar.

Avik had managed to smuggle two bottles of whisky from his uncle's bar and had hidden them in the boot of the car carrying Ajay and some of Abir's friends. Just as the yagna began, Avik and a few of Abir's Mumbai friends slipped away towards the car. He had also arranged for a few plastic cups and a bottle of soda.

Two of Abir's friends poured themselves drinks—two pegs each—and soon headed back to the venue. Avik told them to carry on. Once they had left, he poured himself four pegs.

By the time he returned, he was drunk, though still coherent and steady on his feet. He stood near the mandap, facing the bride and groom. The *purohit* chanted the mantras as the sacred fire burned steadily, its warm glow reflecting off Nandini.

In that light, she looked even more enchanting—almost unreal. Avik's gaze remained fixed on her. For a moment, everything else seemed to recede—the chants, the fire, the people.

At one point during the rituals, Nandini looked up. Their eyes met. She smiled—an innocent, fleeting smile—and then turned her gaze towards Abir, who sat listening intently to the mantras.

Namita, standing on the other side of the mandap behind the bride and groom, noticed Avik across from her. Her instinct told her he had been drinking. Having lived with him for almost two years now, she knew him well—almost too well.

And then she caught him staring at Nandini.

The *Saat Pheras* were about to begin when Namita walked over to the other side of the mandap and stood beside Avik. Standing close to him, she could smell the alcohol.

“You're a shameless jerk,” she said, her voice laced with spite, staring straight ahead, avoiding eye contact.

“Oh... you realised that today, did you?” Avik replied, mocking her, his speech slightly slurred.

“You had said you wouldn't drink,” she said, her tone softening just a little.

“I lied,” he replied with a smirk.

Namita glanced at him briefly, her eyes burning with rage. “You deserve to rot,” she said, her voice low and steady.

“Right,” he said. “For once, you’re right... Why do you think I’m still married to you?”

“Bastard... you should thank your lucky stars that, in spite of everything, I am still with you,” she said. “You think I don’t know what kind of individual you are? You think I didn’t notice what you were doing just now?”

“Notice what?” he replied, in a casually dismissive tone, lighting a cigarette.

Namita stepped closer to him and muttered angrily, “She is your *bhabi*, for heaven’s sake. Spare her, at least.”

“Will you spare me?” he said, folding his hands in mock surrender.

Chapter 54 – Take Five

Mumbai, 2013

Nandini & Abir

Nandini had back-to-back meetings and was not in the right frame of mind to work. But taking a day off would not be responsible, she told herself. It doesn't matter how I feel. I need to work. Period. No discussions.

Almost a week had passed since the night she had spoken to Avik. She hadn't been herself since that call. Had she ever really been herself anyway? she asked, a faint smirk appearing on her face.

There was a strange comfort in self-mockery — in blaming herself, in beating herself up.

Suddenly, she remembered Abir. The thought appeared out of nowhere and caught her by surprise. Her thoughts began pulling her backwards.

She remembered a weekend getaway to Lavasa just after their marriage. She had loved the drive. The wind against her face and the music filling the car.

Abir was a connoisseur of jazz music. One of his favourite pieces was *Take Five by The Dave Brubeck Quartet*. The tune began playing softly in her head.

They were staying at a beautiful and luxurious resort. Two other friends of Abir had also joined them, each with their wife. They checked in around the afternoon and, after meeting their friends, retired to their room. Nandini entered the shower while Abir ordered beer and sat beside the glass window, sipping it and facing the beautiful scenery. Nandini had expected him to join her in the shower without explicitly mentioning it to him, and had knowingly kept the door open. After waiting for a while, drenched in the shower, she called out to him. Abir responded, “Yes... I am here...chilling with chilled beer”, he said, smiling to himself.

“Come here... I need some help”, she said

“What help... geyser not working?” he asked, genuinely concerned.

“Just come here now”, she said, almost commanding him.

Abir gingerly walked towards the washroom and was surprised to see the door open. He tentatively opened the door. Nandini grabbed his hand and tried to pull him in. Abir stepped back and quickly released her hand.

“What happened?” she asked, now walking up to the door.

Abir looked surprised. “You crazy or what?” he said, stepping back.

Nandini was surprised to see his reaction. Before she could say anything, Abir’s phone started ringing.

Chapter 55 – The First Anniversary

Mumbai, 2014

Nandini & Abir

Nandini was ready for the evening. It was their first anniversary. The previous weekend, Abir and she had picked a beautiful red halter-neck dress from the Zara store at The Palladium Mall in Mumbai. Abir also gifted an exquisite diamond necklace to match her dress. The plan was for them to have dinner at the Souk at The Taj Mahal Palace Hotel. In fact, it was Abir who had booked the table and a suite to spend their anniversary night at the Taj. The suite was specially decorated for the occasion, to mark their first anniversary. Abir returned home from the office early, and then they set out for The Taj. Unbeknownst to Nandini, Abir had also bought a Solitaire Diamond Ring. He had ordered the finest champagne. The waiter poured them their drinks and gently stepped away. Nandini raised her glass, but Abir knelt in front of her instead, drawing the attention of all the other guests.

“I am terrible at this. I had thought of writing this down first but failed at it miserably. Even if I could write, I wouldn't find the words to express my feelings for you”. Abir said.

He took out the box containing the solitaire diamond and opened it, turning it towards Nandini.

Nandini stared at the ring, overwhelmed. Her eyes welled with tears.

Abir gently removed the ring from the box and slid it onto her finger.

“I love you, Nandini... forever and ever,” he said.

They finished their dinner and went to the suite reserved for them. Nandini was astounded. Abir was standing behind her. She turned around and kissed his lips. Abir was slightly taken aback. But her passion drew him in. The kiss grew more passionate with every passing moment. Abir gently moved away. Nandini did not want to stop. She held his hand, drawing him towards the bed. Abir didn't move; instead, he gently freed his hand.

“What happened?” Nandini asked

“Hmmm...nothing....” Abir said, trying to look away.

“Then?” Nandini said, there was a trace of disappointment in her voice.

“I am too tired, Nandini”, Abir said, walking away.

“Today is our first anniversary, Abir”, Nandini said, lowering her tone.

“And there will be many more anniversaries, sweetheart. Didn't we have such a lovely dinner?” he said, opening a bottle of beer.

“But what about this moment?” she said. “Doesn't this mean something to you?” she asked.

“Of course it does. It's just that I am too tired,” he said.

“Can you tell me the last time we made love?” she asked.

“Come on, Nandini. What kind of discussion are we having?” he said, taking a large sip of beer.

“No, tell me...” Nandini said.

“Well.... ah....I..fine...I don't remember...so what?” he said.

“I know.....I can actually count the number of times...4 or no, 3 times... and that too it seemed I was forcing you...there was nothing from your side,” she said.

“It can't be that.... there were many more....” he said.

“No.... all other times you said you were tired or something else”, she said. After a brief pause, she continued, “Is there someone else in your life?” This time, her arms were folded.

“What rubbish, Nandini...how can you even say that?” Abir said, raising his voice.

“No.... you have to hear it...Do you remember what you did on our wedding night? ... I bet you don't.... I'll tell you.... you spent the night drinking with your friends....”

“That's because I wanted to ensure that Avik doesn't drink too much....I didn't want him to create a scene,” Abir said.

“Oh really....?” she said, her tone laced with sarcasm.

“Don't pretend you don't know his problem”, he said.

“Don't change the topic.... that is not the real reason”, she said.

“What makes you think that there is some other reason?” Abir said, sounding nervous.

“Then what is it? You don't find me attractive....is there something wrong with me....you think I can't satisfy you?” she said

“Nandini...I am not having this conversation now....” he said, walking towards the door.

“But I want to....and where do you think you are going?” she said, raising her voice.

Abir paused for a moment. Looked at Nandini and went out, slamming the door behind him.

Chapter 56 – The Confidant

Mumbai, 2015

Nandini & Avik

It had been raining since the early hours of the morning. Nandini hadn't slept all night, even after taking two sleeping pills. Abir had left for the office. The previous night, they had argued about Nandini wanting to return to work. She had applied to a bank and received an appointment letter. His point of view was that if she wanted to work, she should join the family business. This was more his parents' perspective than his own, but he presented it as his. She needed someone to talk to about her feelings. Aparna was out of town, and she didn't want to trouble her father, as he had recently suffered a cardiac arrest. Other than Aparna, Avik was the one she trusted.

Avik was at the office, in a meeting, when his phone buzzed.

“Hey... need to talk... Can I call?”

“In a meeting... something urgent?” he replied.

“Yes...” she replied.

“We can meet in two hours, if that works for you...” he replied.

“Where?” she asked.

“Bandra... some coffee shop...?” he suggested.

“No... not Bandra... let’s meet at the Starbucks in Powai,” she replied.

“Done,” he replied.

Avik reached Starbucks and took a seat.

“I have reached,” he texted.

“I’m here, paying the Uber,” she replied.

Avik had already ordered green tea for Nandini and a strawberry shake for himself.

“Avik... I can’t take this anymore...” she said.

“So now you’re not being allowed to take the job?” he said casually, sipping his strawberry shake.

“Yes...” she replied.

“This is why I hate my family... they feel they own the exclusive rights to everyone’s life... everyone who is in their family.”

“I can’t go on like this, Avik...” she said.

“Neither can I... that makes two of us,” he said, smiling.

“It’s not a joke, Avik...” she said, slightly annoyed.

“I’ve told you a million times, you and Dada are not meant for each other,” he said casually.

“Right... and the next thing you’ll say is that you and I are meant for each other,” she said, smiling.

“Right... see... You already have the answer...” he replied.

“And what about Namita and Ayush?” she asked.

“Namita can go to hell for all I care... Ayush is staying with me... he’ll be with us,” he said.

“Enough fooling around... now tell me, what should I do?” she said, gently touching his hand.

“Run away with me,” he said, smiling.

“Avik... uff...” she replied.

Chapter 57 –

The open door

Mumbai 2016, 2023

Nandini & Avik

It was a Sunday, and the Ghosh family was getting ready for their ritualistic Sunday dinner. Nandini had stayed back because she was down with a cold and a cough. Abir had wanted to cancel, but Nandini insisted they go. Avik was not there, and his phone was switched off.

“Must be drinking with some friends,” Namita told her mother-in-law.

Abir, his parents, Namita, and Ayush left for dinner at their usual time of 7:30 p.m.

Avik was drunk when he reached home, soon after his family left for dinner. He had been drinking since morning, but somehow managed to drive back. He entered Namita's and his bedroom and found it empty. They lived on the first floor. In fact, the entire house was empty. He asked the butler where everyone was. The butler replied that they had gone for dinner, and that's when Avik remembered it was Sunday.

“So, everyone has gone for their fake family dinner... wow...” he muttered.

“Nandini is at home. She isn't well,” the butler said.

“What happened?” Avik asked.

“Don't know, sir,” the butler replied.

Avik nodded. “Let me check on her.” He climbed the stairs to Nandini's room. The room was dark, and she was standing on the balcony, overlooking the sea. Avik tiptoed toward the balcony and stood next to her.

“Avik, you scared me... you're drunk again,” she said.

“Yes... and I love you,” he replied.

“Shut up, Avik. Go to your room and sleep,” she said, slightly annoyed.

“Why are you getting annoyed? It's the truth,” he said, reaching for Nandini's hand.

Nandini quickly released her hand from his grip. “Avik, go and sleep,” she said softly.

Avik moved closer, gently pulling her toward him, and kissed her lips. Nandini wanted to move away, but she didn't. She found herself responding. Perhaps it was her feeling of being physically unloved. Abir's nonchalance about the lack of physical intimacy. His attitude came across as a cold rejection. Avik kissed her gently. For Nandini, the tenderness felt different—almost unfamiliar. Their kiss grew slowly more passionate. They moved into the bedroom. He gently took off her T-shirt, and she unbuttoned his shirt. They kissed again, slowly moving toward the bed. The bedroom door remained open.

At that moment, the housemaid was on her way to Nandini's room to check if she needed any medication.

Chapter 58 – The End of Us

Mumbai, 2016

Nandini & Abir

Nandini and Abir were in their room.

“How could you do this to me, Nandini?” Abir said, almost in tears.

“I am sorry, Abir.... I know there can be no forgiveness for what I have done...I know I have committed a sin....but I don't know how this happened...” Nandini said, sobbing.

Abir remained silent, staring at Nandini.

After a pause, he said, “Was it just about sex?”

“How can you say that, Abir...?” she said, sobbing.

“What else can it be...what was it about then?” he said.

“I don't know....I said it was a mistake....a sin,” Nandini said, slightly raising her voice.

“Is sex the only thing that matters to you.... isn't the love that I have for you enough?...” he said.

“Let's not go there, Abir...” she said, now wiping her tears.

“Let’s not go where Nandini...is it because I can't satisfy you? You think I have a problem?” Now, Abir raised his voice.

“Well.... you do have a problem, right? Can you deny that....” she said.

“Then why don’t you divorce me...why do you want to stick with someone like me.... go away.... Avik, anyway, is leaving the house....”

“No, no.... don’t do this to him... I'll leave.... but don't do this to him....” she said, now almost pleading.

“This is not for me to decide.... I suggest you leave too.... we can't possibly stay under the same roof,” he said, lighting a cigarette.

“Fine.... I’ll go.... give me a divorce....” she said.

“No.... I need to talk to my parents...talk to your parents as well,” he said.

“No, no.... please don't tell my father all of this.... he is not well...” she said.

“Fine....my family or I won't.... but you leave our home....and you talk to your parents....”

“Ok.... I'll leave tomorrow.”

Chapter 59 – The Silence After

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim & Rhea

That evening, she had not spoken a word during the drive back. He had apologised, but she hadn't said a word. Near the Shobhabazar metro station, at a signal, Rhea got out of the car. He had insisted on dropping her off at home, but she remained silent.

When the car stopped at the red light, she said, "Don't follow me, Raktim... please," before getting down and walking away.

There was nothing he could do—he knew that. Too many thoughts raced through his mind. His heart pounded in his chest, and his head felt jammed. He could feel his hands trembling. All he could do was watch her walk away into the crowd.

In a moment, his mind seemed to shut down. For a few seconds, nothing registered—not the noise, not the movement, not even himself.

Cars began honking behind him. A traffic police inspector approached his car and knocked on the window. Raktim stared

blankly at him. The officer was saying something, but Raktim couldn't understand.

He rolled down the window.

"Put the car on the side and show me your licence," the officer said sharply.

"Sorry, sir..." Raktim replied, his voice trembling.

"No, sorry. Park on the side and show me your licence," the officer repeated.

Raktim had no choice but to follow his instructions. He pulled over and took out his licence.

The officer examined it for a moment and then asked, "Why weren't you moving when the signal turned green?"

"Sorry, sir... I wasn't feeling well. But I'm okay now. Please let me go."

The officer's tone softened. "Where do you stay?"

"Ballygunge," Raktim replied quietly.

"Okay. Go," the officer said, handing back his licence.

Chapter 60 – The Quiet Struggle

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim

That night, Raktim called Rhea many times, but she didn't answer. The messages he sent went unanswered.

Ishita could sense that something was amiss. Raktim had come home, gone straight to his room, and locked the door. That night, he didn't step out for dinner. Ishita knocked on his door several times, but he didn't respond.

Rajeev began to panic. "What's happened to him? Why isn't he opening the door or responding?" he said, worried. "I hope he's not drinking or..." he trailed off, looking at Ishita.

"Rajeev, relax. He won't drink or take drugs—I know him," she said gently, placing a hand on his shoulder. "I'll talk to him tomorrow morning."

Raktim didn't sleep that night. He thought of calling his AA sponsor but didn't.

Early the next morning, he stepped out of his room to drink water. Ishita was in the living room.

"What's happened, Raktim?" she asked softly.

Raktim looked at her for a moment and replied, “Nothing, Ma. I’m fine.” He walked into the kitchen and took a bottle of water from the fridge.

“Why didn’t you respond when I knocked on your door yesterday evening?” she asked.

“I wasn’t feeling well, Ma... just a little tired,” he said.

Ishita looked at him with a soft smile. “You know you can tell me. We’re buddies, right?”

“It’s nothing, Ma. I was just in a bad mood... something work-related. I’m fine. Trust me,” he said.

“Fine, if you say so. But always know I’m there for you—whenever you want to talk, about anything,” she said.

Raktim slowly walked up to her and hugged her. “I know, Mumzie. I love you.”

Throughout the day, Raktim called Rhea many times from work. Each time, the phone rang once and then switched to a busy tone. He sent messages, but none were answered. He understood that she had blocked his number.

He thought of calling her from Shreya’s phone, or from a colleague’s, but decided against it.

He couldn’t concentrate on his work. Restless, he kept stepping out for cigarette breaks. Shreya sensed that something was wrong. His head felt heavy, there was a tightness in his chest, and a constant unease he couldn’t shake off.

He called his boss, Deepika, who worked out of the Mumbai office and was very fond of him, and asked if he could leave early.

Deepika sensed something was off. “Sure, Raktim. Is there anything you want to talk about?” she asked.

“Nothing as such... just feeling unwell,” Raktim replied.

On the way back, he had to concentrate hard to drive. He kept repeating the Serenity Prayer. It slowed his thoughts a little, but the feeling of loss and pain continued to claw at him.

Near Ballygunge Phari, while stuck at a traffic signal, he found himself staring at a wine shop to his left. He kept looking at it. His hands began to tremble, and for a moment, he almost convinced himself to pull over and walk in.

Something inside him held him back.

He began mouthing the Serenity Prayer again.

The signal turned green. He drove on.

Chapter 61 – In Quiet Absence

Kolkata, 2023

Nandini

The rain had returned to Kolkata. It had been pouring all morning. Roads were waterlogged, and most areas were facing power cuts.

Nandini was in her room, lying on her bed, her phone beside her. She stared at the ceiling. Her face looked pale, as though the colour had drained from it. Her eyes brimmed with unshed tears.

She reached for her phone and stared at the screen for a moment. Then she dialled Avik's number. The phone rang a few times before disconnecting. She tried again, but the call went unanswered once more.

A teardrop rolled down her face and fell onto the bed. She placed the phone beside her and turned to her side, facing the window. The rain had intensified.

After a while, she got out of bed and stood by the window, watching the rain. Her expression was blank, tears streaming down her face. She opened the window slightly. Rain splashed in,

and a gust of wind rushed into the room, blowing strands of her hair across her face.

There was nothing—just her and the sound of the rain.

When she was in school, she used to attend singing classes after lessons. She had a beautiful voice, and her teacher had begun training her in Rabindra Sangeet. When she and Abir were together, he had encouraged her to start practising again.

There was one song she loved deeply. In that silence, with the rain as her only companion, she found herself singing it—*Tumi Robe Nirobe*.

She had not sung in a long time. The words seemed to soothe her. She slowly immersed herself in the song, becoming oblivious to everything around her.

Chapter 62 – Between Pain and Pretence

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim

It had been a week since that evening. He had no way of reaching Rhea. Raktim got himself a prepaid connection and dialled her number, only to find that her phone was switched off. There was no other way of getting in touch with her. Raktim didn't know where she lived.

He had stopped going to work. Deepika knew something was amiss, but since Raktim didn't want to speak about it, she chose not to push him.

Ishita and Rajeev were worried. What made things worse was that Raktim had stopped communicating altogether. He told them he was too tired and wanted to take a break from work. Beyond that, he said nothing.

How does a person react when they are in deep shock—when despair settles in so completely that even words begin to feel distant?

The one question he had no answer to—the one that haunted him and kept him awake at night—was: *why had she done this to him?* And then there was the self-loathing—for having crossed the line.

There were moments during the day when his thoughts became too overwhelming to bear. His breath would grow short. There was a constant heaviness in his chest. He barely ate, surviving instead on black coffee and cigarettes.

The feeling of losing someone he loved kept tearing him apart. Memories of the night of Rahul's accident returned again and again, refusing to leave him. He began talking to himself. At times, he imagined Rahul's presence in his room. Many nights, he cried himself to sleep.

"This is my destiny, and I know it. I am meant to lose whoever I love," he said.

"Thank you, God... Thank you for never letting me be happy. You win again... I lose again," he mumbled to himself.

"First, it was Dada... then you made me an alcoholic... took Shristi away... took away my career... and then, when I cleaned up—when I got my life back on track—you... yes, you made me meet Rhea... and now you've taken her away as well... wow... you've really kept up your record. Who's next? My parents, perhaps? But you know what—I won't let you win this time..."

That night—well past midnight—he knocked on Ishita and Rajeev's bedroom door.

Ishita was awake. She rushed to open it. Raktim stepped in and hugged her, breaking down.

Rajeev woke up, and the three of them sat together in the living room. Raktim said nothing. He sat beside Ishita, holding her hand.

“What’s wrong with you? Please tell us. We’re here to help you,” Rajeev said, almost pleading.

“Nothing, Baba... nothing. I’m just going through a terrible phase... You know how it happens sometimes... missing Dada...” Raktim said, his voice trembling.

Ishita held him close. “Is it just that or is there something else?” she asked gently.

Rajeev looked on, waiting for his answer.

“Nothing else, Ma... nothing else, Baba. I know you’re both worried... but I’ll be okay. I just need some time. Don’t worry... I’ll be fine,” Raktim said, wiping his tears.

“Are you sure?” Rajeev asked, holding his hand.

“Yes, Baba... don’t worry. We’ll jam tomorrow...” Raktim said, forcing a faint smile.

Chapter 63 – The Moment Before

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim

Raktim retired to his room. He switched on the night lamp, its red light casting a dim glow. He played *Riders on the Storm* and set it on repeat.

The built-in cupboard in his room had a mirror; behind the mirror was the section where he kept his toiletries. He opened the cupboard, took out a set of blades, and walked back to his bed.

Sitting on the bed, his back resting against the wall, he took out a blade and stared at it for a while. Images from his past began to flash through his mind.

Holding the blade in his right hand, he gently placed it against the wrist of his left.

The keyboard solo of *Riders on the Storm* played in the background.

He closed his eyes.

Chapter 64 – Between Fear and Faith

Kolkata, 2023

Ishita & Rajeev

Ishita and Rajeev were in the nursing home's waiting room. There were only a few people—family members of other patients. Most of them were asleep on the chairs. Just outside the waiting room was the reception area, where two hospital staff members were seated.

Ishita sat with her head resting on Rajeev's shoulder.

"It's all my fault," she said. "If only I had been more watchful, this wouldn't have happened. I am such an irresponsible mother..."

She broke into tears.

"No, Ishita...It's not your fault," Rajeev said softly, trying to comfort her. After a pause, Rajeev continued, "I should have spoken to him that day"

"Which day?" she asked, wiping her tears.

"The eighteenth," Rajeev replied. "I could sense something was wrong...I felt it was an outburst because he had never been comfortable with us having any prayer meetings for Rahul... or

was it something else? I should have spoken with him” He exhaled slowly.

“But he just walked away... and locked himself in his room,” she said. “Exactly the same thing he did the other day after returning from the office. I don’t understand what he gains by shutting himself in like that...” There was a trace of anger in her voice.

“Something was bothering him... and we... I mean... we tried talking to him, but he didn’t tell us,” Rajeev said, his voice carrying a similar edge.

“You know, I’m a little angry with him too... why couldn’t he tell us, Rajeev?” she said, echoing his tone.

Rajeev was silent for a moment. “We can’t lose our son... he is all we have...” he said quietly. Then he closed his eyes and looked up.

“God... please save our son... I’ll do anything... anything... just please...”

It had been almost two hours since Raktim was taken into the operating theatre. A nurse walked into the waiting room and informed Ishita and Rajeev that the procedure was over and that the doctor wanted to meet them on the operating theatre floor.

“Is my son okay?” Ishita asked anxiously as they both stood up.

“Yes, ma’am. He is fine,” the nurse replied softly.

Ishita and Rajeev looked at each other. Ishita burst into tears, and Rajeev held her close.

He remained silent for a moment, then closed his eyes and softly murmured, “Thank you, God... thank you...”

The doctor was waiting outside the operating theatre.

“The cut wasn’t deep enough to cause serious damage,” he said.
“He did lose some blood, but not to a dangerous extent. The wound has been cleaned and stitched, and he’ll need to be kept under observation.”

Chapter 65 –

The Morning After

Kolkata, 2023

Ishita, Rajeev & Raktim

The next morning, when Ishita and Rajeev went to visit Raktim, he was awake.

Ishita walked up to him slowly and gently ran her hand through his hair. Raktim's face was blank. He looked at her for a moment and then turned away.

"I thought this was the end... and here I am, still alive," he said, frowning.

"Perhaps that's what your Higher Power wants. He has plans for you, my son," Rajeev said softly.

Ishita didn't speak. She watched Raktim closely.

"Don't sound like a priest, Father," Raktim said, almost mocking.

"I don't believe in any Higher Power or whatever."

"Fine... you don't believe in a Higher Power," Ishita said quietly.

"But do you at least believe that we love you?"

Her eyes brimmed with tears.

Raktim looked at his mother but didn't answer.

A nurse approached Rajeev and Ishita and informed them that the on-duty doctor wanted to speak with them.

“Raktim is in a state right now where he may not be able to process everything that has happened,” the doctor said. “He might come across as angry, but that anger isn’t directed at you. It’s important that you see it in that light.”

He paused before continuing.

“It would help if he could speak to someone—by that, I mean a professional. A therapist. Someone who can listen to him and help him make sense of what he’s feeling.”

“Can you recommend someone?” Ishita asked.

The doctor nodded and shared the contact details of a therapist he knew.

Chapter 66 – By his bedside

Mumbai, 2023

Avik

They found him passed out outside a bar on Marol Military Road around 2 a.m. The police on night patrol tried to revive him, but when he didn't respond despite repeated efforts, they took him to the nearby hospital. The doctors on duty said he had consumed too much alcohol and would need to be kept under observation. They were hopeful that he would regain consciousness once the effects wore off. In his pocket, they found only his wallet. It had no cash but contained several ATM cards and credit cards, along with his Aadhaar card, which listed his residential address.

The police informed the Bandra Police Station.

Abir was awake when the security guards informed him that the cops from the Bandra Police Station were at the gate. His parents were asleep.

On hearing the news, Abir rushed to the hospital.

Avik was in the general ward at the hospital. An IV drip was running into his arm. Abir walked up to him and gently ran his fingers through his hair. The doctor on duty mentioned that his

heart rate and breathing were normal. Abir mentioned he would like to sit beside him. The doctor, however, suggested that he wait in the ground-floor waiting room. However, on Abir's insistence, the doctor arranged for a chair next to Avik's bed, where Abir could sit. Abir's parents were unaware of the developments. Abir decided to call his father in the morning.

It was around noon when Avik regained consciousness. Abir was there by his bedside. Their parents had refused to come to the hospital. Their instruction to Abir was clear - Avik was to be admitted to an Alcohol Rehabilitation Centre immediately.

Avik began crying. Holding Abir's hand, he kept apologising.

"I am sorry, Dada....I again let you down..." he said, his voice breaking.

"You need to fix your life, and the first thing you need to do is to stop drinking", Abir said, his tone stern.

"Yes, Dada....I will do anything you say," Avik replied.

"Fine...from here we will go straight to a Rehabilitation Centre", he said.

Avik knew he had no other option. He knew if left to himself, he would drink again. The insidious nature of the disease of addiction and alcoholism would surely catch up with you sooner or later, and next time, there might not be another chance.

Chapter 67 – The Weight of Silence

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim

Raktim refused to speak to a counsellor. “I will figure out my life... I don’t need some counsellor to tell me what to do,” he told Ishita and Rajeev.

“What makes you think the counsellor will tell you what to do?” Ishita responded. There was a trace of anger in her voice.

“We just want you to speak... tell someone what’s going on inside you,” Rajeev said, his voice softer.

Raktim didn’t respond. He seemed uninterested in the conversation.

“Will you please give this a thought? We think it will help you,” Ishita said.

Raktim’s eyes met Ishita’s. “Fine, Ma... give me some time to think about it.”

Then, looking at Rajeev, he added, “Okay, Dad?”

“Okay, Son,” Rajeev said.

Raktim was alone in his room after dinner. Ishita and Rajeev had asked him not to lock his door, and Raktim complied. The bedsheet had been changed, and the floor scrubbed clean.

He switched on his laptop. The desktop wallpaper was a picture of Rahul. He remembered having changed the wallpaper that night.

Raktim kept staring at the screen. His eyes began to fill with tears. Soon he was sobbing - tears streaming down his face. There was a sense of unease Ishita couldn't shake off. She got out of bed and walked to Raktim's room. He was sitting with his head lowered over the desk, the laptop open in front of him. He heard the door open and looked back. He didn't wipe his tears. Ishita rushed towards him, and Raktim held on to her, crying silently. Rajeev followed her into the room.

"I am sorry, Ma....I am sorry..." Raktim said, his voice breaking.

Chapter 68 – Before the words

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim & Anuradha Roy

Ishita and Raktim were at Anuradha Roy's chamber on Lake Road, not far from their home. Anuradha was in the middle of a session, so they were asked to wait at the reception. Raktim had been quiet since the moment they stepped out of the house.

When the ongoing session ended, Anuradha stepped out of her chamber along with her client. She had already been informed that Raktim had arrived.

Anuradha was a woman in her late forties. She wore a saree, had glasses, slightly greying hair, and a warm smile. Ishita and Raktim both stood when they saw her. Anuradha greeted them warmly.

“Hi... Anuradha,” she said, reaching out her hand to Ishita. Ishita shook her hand. Raktim glanced at his mother.

Anuradha then looked at Raktim. With a warm smile, she gently extended her hand. Raktim hesitated. He looked at Ishita for a moment, then slowly reached out and shook Anuradha's hand.

“Shall we?” Anuradha said, gesturing toward her chamber door. Raktim looked at Ishita again.

“It’s ok...” Ishita said softly, gently placing a hand on his shoulder.

Anuradha Roy’s room was simple and spacious. There was a wooden desk with a chair in front. Behind the desk was her chair—functional and unassuming. The room was softly lit, with a few plants creating a serene ambience. In one corner, a floor-to-ceiling dark wood book rack held neatly stacked books.

Raktim sat in the chair in front of the desk and looked around, his gaze settling for a moment on the book rack.

“You like reading?” Anuradha asked in a soft voice.

Raktim didn’t reply but nodded. He kept looking down.

Anuradha sat quietly, watching him.

A long silence followed. Neither of them spoke.

“I...I can't speak now....I need some time... maybe another day,” Raktim said softly

“That’s Okay, Raktim. Whatever you are comfortable with,” Anuradha replied gently.

Chapter 69 –

The things we hide

Mumbai, 2023

Nandini & Aparna

Nandini had returned to Mumbai and resumed work. Over the weekend, she dropped in to see her friend Aparna, who was three years her senior in school and the only real friend Nandini had. Aparna had moved to Mumbai after graduating in sociology and had pursued her master's degree at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, where she was now on the faculty.

Aparna had recently bought a flat in Versova, overlooking the sea. She was in her early forties, single, and an academic.

Her flat was a modest 1 BHK, and she had kept the interiors minimal. In the living room, a wooden rack covered an entire wall, stacked with books. Next to it stood a small wooden study table with a lamp. Along the opposite wall was a low seating area lined with cushions.

Nandini was standing by the window, looking at the sea, while Aparna sat on the low seating, drinking tea. Nandini had not spoken much since arriving.

“How’s Mum?” Aparna asked.

“She is okay. Recovering,” Nandini replied, looking at the sea.

“And how are you?” Aparna asked, taking a sip of her tea.

Nandini didn't respond. She was wearing denim shorts and a T-shirt. She reached into her pocket, took out a pack of cigarettes, and lit one.

“You don't seem to be okay,” Aparna said. “Has something happened?”

“Do good things ever really happen to me?” Nandini asked, still not making eye contact with Aparna.

After a brief pause, she said, “You know Aparna.... the universe never forgets... it all comes back.”

She paused briefly again.

“And now suddenly I have this awakening.... Suddenly, I have become spiritually enlightened...” she said, her tone laced with sarcasm.

“And what do I do now? I, the great Nandini Bannerjee, who has always considered herself infallible, am suddenly contemplating confession... what exactly am I expecting? Forgiveness?”

Nandini shook her head slowly.

“No.... I shouldn't be forgiven... and there can be no excuses for what I have done...because I was the one who did those things... knowingly.....I ruined the lives of so many people, and I never really stopped to repent... I just kept running away...” she said.

Nandini let out a hollow laugh.

“Sounds like a soliloquy, doesn't it? Wow... bravo... keep going...” she said sarcastically.

Nandini stubbed her cigarette on the window grill and threw out the cigarette butt. There was a moment of silence when neither of them spoke.

“I can feel what you are saying.... we have known each other for so long now...I know life hasn't been entirely fair to you...The things you have faced... the things you have gone through... would have broken anyone... but you have kept moving on... and even if you want to call it running away... well, yes...at times we need to run away.... we need to protect ourselves....why wouldn't you...? Aparna said, breaking the silence...

“I can't blame life.... I did make wrong choices...I did take wrong decisions....and I destroyed lives...”

“Is it about Avik?” Aparna asked gently.

“I don't know where he is, Aparna.... We spoke one evening... and...I...I hurt him so much. I know he was drunk when he called... I am so worried. I called him again a few days back, but he didn't answer...” Nandini started sobbing.

Nandini knelt, hugged Aparna, and started sobbing silently.

Nandini then sat back against the wall, wiped her tears, and lit another cigarette. “And you know that's not where it ends... I feel there is nothing I can do right... and God, or the universe, whatever there is, will never forgive me,” she said.

“What's happened, baby?” Aparna said

“You will hate me if I tell you what I did,” Nandini said.

Chapter 70 –

The second session

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim & Anuradha Roy

The next session with Anuradha was a week later. Raktim wasn't keen on going, but when Ishita requested, he complied. He sat quietly in Anuradha's room, not having spoken a word since entering. Anuradha watched him in silence.

Raktim turned his gaze towards the bookshelf and said, "I got the reading habit from Mum. Although our tastes in reading are very different," he added with a faint smile.

"Would you be comfortable sharing the kinds of books you like to read?" Anuradha asked with a soft smile.

"History. My favourite genre is World War II, as well as other conflicts. Other than that, I like reading about conspiracy theories, books on spirituality, and other stuff," he replied.

Raktim started fiddling with his phone. Anuradha paused, observing him. Suddenly, Raktim put his phone aside and looked at her.

"Since you like reading. Can you tell me what it is you like about it?" Anuradha asked.

“I feel at peace. I feel removed from everything that is happening around me,” Raktim said.

“So, when you are reading, you feel peaceful... almost removed from everything happening around you?” she asked softly.

“Yes... something like that,” Raktim responded.

A silence followed. Neither of them spoke.

“I know why my parents want me to talk to you,” Raktim said.

“What about you?” she asked

“But...It’s not that easy for me to talk about what happened that night,” Raktim admitted.

“I... I don't know what to say because I don't know what happened or why I did what I did. It's just that... you know... I was so helpless, I was also angry, and I realised I couldn't go on,” Raktim said.

“You still don't fully understand what happened that night, but you remember feeling angry, helpless, and unable to go on feeling that way,” Anuradha said softly.

“And what else could I do in that situation? I had reached an end... I wanted to end my life—a life which is anyway a failed life... and even in trying to end it all, I failed.”

“You described your life as ‘a failed life.’ Would you feel comfortable telling me a little more about what was happening then?”

Raktim lifted his gaze and met Anuradha’s eyes. There was something in her voice and the way she looked at him that made him feel she truly understood what he was going through.

“It’s a long story...” Raktim said.

“Would you like to share that story with me?” she asked gently.

“Is it ok if we continue another day? I need to gather my thoughts,” Raktim said.

“Okay, Raktim. Whatever you are comfortable with,” Anuradha said.

Chapter 71 – The things we hide

Mumbai, 2023

Nandini & Aparna

Aparna gently touched Nandini's hand.

"I met someone in Kolkata", Nandini said... "A few colleagues at work had made a profile in Blume...I told you about that"

Aparna nodded with a soft smile.

"But I messed up...messed up big time...again..." Nandini said, her face now looking grim.

Nandini stood up, looked out the window at the sea, and lit a cigarette.

Aparna took a sip of her tea and waited for Nandini to speak.

"We met a few times... he genuinely seemed like a good person...but... but...I wasn't honest with him," Nandini said, taking a long drag.

Aparna stood up, walked over to Nandini, and gently placed her hand on Nandini's shoulder.

“I have been very cruel with him too, Aparna.....and I am feeling so bad....” Nandini sobbed quietly, “How could I do this to him? How many lives am I going to ruin?” she said.

Aparna held Nandini’s hand. She turned around and hugged her. Nandini continued sobbing.

“I don't know why I even considered meeting someone.... knowing my past.... how could I ever imagine a new beginning.... new beginnings are not meant for me....every time I think of making a start I end up ruining everything much more....ruining another life.....I hid my past from him.....lied to him....lied to him about everything.....and he had actually started liking me....”

Chapter 72 – A life without him

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim & Anuradha Roy

Ishita dropped Raktim off at Anuradha's chamber and headed out to the Tolly Club, where she was meeting her friends.

"I'll take an Uber back home. You don't need to pick me up," Raktim said.

Ishita nodded with a smile as Raktim got out of the car.

Anuradha was waiting for him to arrive, and the receptionist led Raktim in.

"What I have struggled with all my life is to understand how one accepts, in quotes, the loss of someone they love", he said. There was a tinge of sarcasm in his voice.

"It's difficult to understand how to accept the loss of someone you love, and I sense, along with confusion, there is also some anger in you", Anuradha said.

"Yes....I mean, am I supposed to be okay with losing my brother?...and go on with life as if nothing happened?" he asked.

“It feels like acceptance to you means being okay with losing your brother and simply moving on in life?” Anuradha asked gently.

“Yeah...what else does Acceptance mean?” Raktim asked.

“If acceptance doesn't feel right to you, then what does?” Anuradha asked.

“I don't want to accept that he is no more. I am not willing to accept it....and....it really puts me off to see how my parents have actually.....you know....are okay to have a life without him,” Raktim said.

“See, I know my parents feel the grief and the pain...but what I don't understand is how they have accepted the reality of a life without him?” he said.

After a brief silence, Anuradha spoke softly, “The last time you were here, you described your life as ‘a failed life’; you also mentioned there was a long story behind it. Would you be comfortable sharing some of that with me?”

Chapter 73 - The Routine

Pune, 2023

Avik

For the first two weeks, Avik stayed at the detoxification unit of the rehab. The detoxification unit was housed in a two-storey bungalow, with the reception area on the ground floor and the clients accommodated upstairs. Family visits were not allowed for the first two months. Avik went through terrible phases of withdrawal. The medication helped ease the withdrawal to some extent. Avik spent most of the time sleeping. The day started with the morning prayer. All meals were prepared for clients at the men's rehab and distributed to the other units, including a ladies' unit and a unit for children at risk.

After two weeks at the detox unit, Avik and a few others were shifted to the men's rehab, where he was introduced to the Twelve-Step Programme. There were activities throughout the day, starting with Morning Prayer at 6 a.m. The morning prayer was followed by a Devotion Session and breakfast. After breakfast, the clients were given a ten-minute break to smoke bidis. Cigarettes were not allowed in the rehab. That, in itself, was a huge shock for Avik. But he knew he had to adapt. Occupational Therapy followed the bidi break and consisted of cleaning the entire two-

storey bungalow. The tasks were divided among the forty clients by the senior residents, those with a stay of more than six months. One of the tasks was cleaning the common washroom. Avik dreaded the day he would be assigned the duty. The Occupational Therapy was followed by a bidi break and time for everyone to shower. Senior clients had the privilege of showering alone. The Input session, which was the classroom session, covered different aspects of addiction and alcoholism. After the Input session, the clients gathered for lunch. Afternoons were usually a time to rest, other than once a week when Yoga classes were held. Evenings were reserved for games, followed by an in-house AA or NA meeting. The day ended post-dinner with a counting session, during which a senior client took attendance. Clients needed to make their own beds on the floor. At 10 pm, the lights were switched off.

Chapter 74 –

The Sea and the Silence

Mumbai, 2023

Nandini & Aparna

Nandini and Aparna were at Versova Beach. The sun had set, and a warm glow filled the air. They were sitting next to each other, watching the sea.

“Abir had called yesterday,” Nandini said softly. She continued, “He mentioned that Avik has been admitted to rehab.”

“That seems like a wise decision, doesn't it?” Aparna asked.

Nandini took a deep breath “Yes. Hopefully he will stop drinking. I would be happy if he did. You know he is such a nice human being, just that when he drinks, he just becomes someone else.”

Aparna gently touched Nandini's shoulder. Nandini looked at her “Thank you for always being there for me”, she said.

Aparna smiled and nodded.

“The other day, you mentioned someone you had met in Kolkata and that you messed up. What happened?” Aparna asked.

“I actually don't know what exactly I was thinking....I mean...I was very unsure about it... But he seemed like a really nice guy....I

actually liked talking with him...but then..." Nandini said, and her words trailed off.

Aparna waited for Nandini to continue.

After a brief pause, Nandini spoke again, "I really don't know what I had expected from him...I mean, it isn't as if I fell in love with him or anything...But I was fond of him...I don't know if I am making sense... If there is one thing my experiences have taught me, it is not to make future plans... I am scared... and I think it is right for me to be...but there was something that happened...something that I am unable to understand..." she said.

Nandini lit another cigarette. "We were together in his car.... he was really upset.... because the place where we had gone to, he used to frequent with his brother....his elder brother who passed away in a bike accident....and then....in that moment.... I don't know how I got carried away.... we kissed..."

"Do you feel like speaking with him? Do you think that would help?" Aparna asked.

"No...it won't help....I don't want to give any false hopes. I was fond of him, but not in love. You said something the other day, remember? she asked.

"Not really...what was it?"

"Well, you said something about it being okay to run away...to protect ourselves....I would say it is not always about protecting oneself, but also about protecting the other person...Sometimes we need to walk away quietly... because explaining such moments is futile...it only adds to the weight we all carry anyway....and I for one don't want to carry any more of the unnecessary weight..."

Chapter 75 – Like I always do

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim & Anuradha Roy

“I lost my brother in a bike accident. I was fourteen then... I still remember that evening: the sound of the phone ringing, my mum weeping... it keeps coming back to me. It tears me apart.” Tears streamed down his face.

“Would you like a glass of water?” Anuradha asked softly.

Raktim mumbled, “No, I’m fine.”

“Life hasn’t been the same for me since then,” Raktim said after a pause, wiping away his tears.

“You asked why I describe my life as a failed life... What else can I say? I have been a terrible son. I have hurt my parents so much. My alcoholism has caused them so much pain. They have seen me self-destruct. It must have been so painful for them that they just couldn’t stop me from drinking. The helplessness would have torn them apart. And then Shristi—I ruined her life. Thank God she left me. I single-handedly destroyed my career. Is there any other word, or even an adjective, that can define my life, other than ‘failed’?”

Raktim started sobbing softly. Anuradha kept her gaze on him.

“You know... after everything I went through... my Higher Power, the Twelve Steps programme, my sponsor, and the AA fellowship have helped me get sober and stay sober... I got a good job here in Kolkata... I knew my life was slowly getting back on track... I met Rhea... you know, this time it was so different... I... I can't quite explain it in words... There was something about her that drew me close... There was also an air of mystery about her... but I felt that was probably me overthinking... I knew she was the one I had been waiting for... I know it may sound very filmy and silly... but to me, that was the truth... and then, like I always do... I messed it up... and then she, too, went away...”

“I just want to pause for a moment and see if I understand you correctly. You seem to carry a lot of guilt about the pain your alcoholism caused your parents... and at the same time, you also recognise how hard you worked to rebuild your life through sobriety, AA, and the support around you. Then you met Rhea... and something about that connection felt deeply meaningful to you... but somewhere, you also feel you ruined that relationship and lost her too...”

Anuradha paused briefly before continuing.

“Would you feel comfortable telling me a little more about that?”

“I was impulsive, selfish and insecure. Perhaps what she wanted was a friendship, someone she could speak with, share her life... But I was only thinking of myself... I hurriedly expressed my love for her, which she was not prepared for... she told me she needed time... she needed to sort out her mess first... and then I crossed the line... I acted impulsively.

Raktim paused briefly before continuing.

I kissed her... that was the last time we spoke... she blocked my number..."

"Looking back now, what do you feel you wish you had done differently?" Anuradha asked gently.

"The fact is, I am impulsive—and I know that," Raktim said. "But what I'm trying to say is that because of my impulsiveness and the fact that I crossed the line, she went away. I feel really guilty."

"It seems to you that she went away because of your impulsiveness?" Anuradha asked.

"Yes, to me, that seems to be the reason. But... you know... I don't know what she actually felt. I was always good to her—I mean, I never disrespected her or spoke rudely to her. And when I said I crossed the line, it just happened. It wasn't something I had pre-planned. It's not like I forced it on her. And I also have to say this, she was always very good to me and upfront about her feelings. She did seem a little mysterious, like I said—which could have just been me overthinking. Or maybe there were things she would have shared with me in due course."

"Raktim, we will stop here today, if that's ok with you", Anuradha said.

"Sure....." Raktim said, looking somewhat distracted.

"You okay?" she asked.

"I am fine....thank you..." Raktim said, getting up from the chair.

Chapter 76 – 90 Days

Pune, 2023

Avik

“Hi, I’m Avik. I’m an alcoholic,” Avik began, speaking at the AA meeting held at the rehab every evening.

“Hi, Avik,” replied the other clients and rehab staff present.

“Today is a special day for me. I’m completing ninety days of sobriety,” Avik said, and the room erupted in applause.

“It’s been very difficult for me. Every day has been a struggle. I remember the terrible withdrawals—I desperately wanted alcohol. The obsession was driving me mad. I had thoughts of running away. Here at the rehab—making my bed, washing clothes, cleaning the floor, cleaning the washrooms, the simple, bland food we get here, and the bidis—I had never smoked bidis before. All of it has been very difficult for me. But I’m trying to adapt.”

Avik paused briefly before continuing.

“There are a lot of people I hurt during my drinking days, mostly my family. I let them down. I committed many sins. Because of my alcoholism and my infidelity, my wife left me and took my son. I miss my son a lot. I was also thrown out of my house—not only

because of my alcoholism, but also because I had a relationship with my brother's wife."

The room was silent.

"Yes, I committed adultery, but the truth is, I fell in love. I feel that she loves me too, even though she denies it. Whatever the case may be—whether she loves me or not—I know I do."

Avik lowered his gaze for a moment.

"I hated my brother for a long time because I felt he hadn't been honest with her, but today I understand that it wasn't intentional. He wasn't sure what the problem was, and he was scared, too. He couldn't discuss this with anyone. Maybe he, too, loved her... but what he felt for her was very different from what I felt."

He took a deep breath.

"Today, I am able to share all this with you because I am sober. I have slowly started recognising my feelings instead of running away from them. And if I don't share, I know I won't heal. So I thank all of you for listening, and thank you, Chairperson, for giving me the opportunity to share."

There was a round of applause as Avik ended his sharing.

Chapter 77 –

The Day She Lost Her Father

Mumbai, 2023

Nandini & Aparna

Nandini had taken a day off from work, since it was the day she had lost her father. In her house, she had a photo frame of her father. She had put a flower garland around the frame and lit an incense stick. Aparna had dropped in to see her and spend the day with her. Nandini had cooked lunch consisting of everything her father loved to eat.

“It’s because of me and my sins that Baba had to go away”, Nandini said.

“Why are you saying that, Nandini? Uncle had heart problems, and he had had a heart attack earlier as well.” Aparna said.

“But it was after hearing about what I had done that he had the second attack. It had hurt him immensely. He could never imagine that his daughter could do something like that,” Nandini said.

“Why do you keep blaming yourself? I don't understand. What about what you went through? You think he didn't know that? What was your fault?” Aparna said.

“But it still doesn't justify what I did? I cheated on Abir”. Nandini said.

“And what about what he did? Didn't he cheat you? Didn't he hide the truth? Are you saying just because he is a man, it is ok for him to hide?” Aparna asked.

“But I committed adultery, Aparna”, Nandini said, raising her voice.

“No, Nandini, you fell in love,” Aparna said.

“A married woman isn't supposed to fall in love with another man”, Nandini said.

“Who says that? And you call your relationship with Abir a marriage?” Aparna said.

“We were married, and that is the truth. I agree that our marriage was different,” Nandini said in a softer tone.

“Glad you at least acknowledge that,” Aparna said.

“Anyway, let it be. Let's not talk about it,” Nandini said.

Aparna nodded and mumbled, “Ok.”

There was a long silence, during which none of them spoke.

“I remember your father used to pick you up from school,” Aparna said with a faint smile.

Nandini nodded and smiled.

“What was it that he used to call you?” Aparna asked.

“Rhea”, Nandini said. Her expression turned grim, and she fell quiet.

Chapter 78 – Black Coffee

Kolkata, 2023

Raktim

Raktim completed his fourth session with Anuradha and headed down the stairs towards the car park. It had been overcast all day, and the moment Raktim stepped out into the open, it started raining. The rain came as a relief from the sweltering heat. Raktim ran to his car, but still got completely drenched. He decided to take a detour and, from Lake Road, drove down to Southern Avenue. Rain splattered against the windscreen as the wipers moved back and forth. Lightning flashed across the sky, followed by distant thunder. The wet roads glimmered under the streetlights and the glow of illuminated hoardings. Raktim rolled down the window and lit a cigarette. He was beginning to feel lighter. The anxiety, dread, and fear that had consumed him for days were slowly tapering off. He had started talking to his parents again. He drove down Southern Avenue and stopped at Fillers. He jumped out of the car and ran into Fillers.

“One black coffee”, he said at the counter.

Raktim lit a cigarette and stood watching the rain.

Chapter 79 – The Beginning:

Mumbai, 2025

Raktim & Avik

Two years had passed, and Raktim had completed eight years of sobriety. Over the past two years, he had done fairly well at work, but what gave him immense happiness was that his band, 12 Bar, had regrouped and released their original music on Amazon Prime and other platforms. He had travelled to Mumbai for a television commercial shoot for one of his brands. It had been a while since he had met his sponsor, Roland H, and attended a meeting at his home group, New Beginnings at Bandra West. His sponsor was also at the meeting and served as the Chairperson, and invited him to share. The meeting room had the regular home group members, as well as a few new people whom Raktim didn't know.

“Hi...I am Raktim... an alcoholic...” he said.

The other members welcomed him with “Hi, Raktim.”

“With the Grace of God, the Twelve Steps programme, my sponsor and my fellowship, I am sober today. This year in May, I completed 8 years of a happy, joyous and free life....”

There was a round of applause, and along with members saying, “Keep coming back. It works if you work it”

“The last few years have been an interesting journey....I have seen some good times and some really not-so-good... rather terrible times...but in spite of the obsession to drink, I have managed to stay sober....and for that I am grateful to my Higher Power to have given me the wisdom to stay away from alcohol or drugs...These few years have also been years of learning... very valuable learning...I have learnt what it means to be powerless...I have known insanity, and I have also seen my life change once I have turned my will and life to my Higher Power.....One, a very important thing I have learnt, and it has not been easy.... It's actually very tough....I am talking about Letting Go.....It's only when I let go...that I let God....Thank you....

There was a round of applause when Raktim completed his share.

The chairman then invited the man sitting in the first row to share.

“Hi, I am Avik....an alcoholic.....” he said.

The other members welcomed him with “Hi Avik...”

“Well....I want to start by congratulating Raktim on his eight years...Thank you for your sobriety...” he said, addressing Raktim. Raktim nodded in acknowledgement.

“Life has been a rollercoaster ride for me.....I have probably seen more lows than highs... but today, two years into sobriety, I am happy with that...I would not trade my worst day today for my best day during my drinking days....during my drinking days, like a tornado, I ravaged through the lives of all those near and dear to me....I committed many sins....I reached a point where I believed I was beyond forgiveness...my family kicked me out of my house,

my wife left me with our son, and worst of all, I committed adultery....yes...I had a relationship with my brother's wife....I believed back then, and even now, some part of me still believes I fell in love... among the many things in life where I don't have an answer, this is one of them... and today I am not seeking an answer any longer...I am seeking God....and it is through the grace of God today I am allowed to see my son, once a month....and also my parents have allowed me to return home....and my brother....what do I say about him....it is he who brought me to this program and saved my life.....I want to thank all the members here for being so supportive....I am forever grateful to you.....Thank you all.”

There was a round of applause when Avik completed his share.

The members had gathered outside the meeting room after the meeting. Raktim was talking with his sponsor, Roland H, when Avik crossed by. Raktim gently touched Avik's shoulder. Avik stopped and looked back.

“Keep coming back, Avik....”

Avik nodded, smiled faintly, shook hands with Raktim and Roland, and walked on.