

The Joy of Getting Lost

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BlueRose ONE .com
S t o r i e s M a t t e r

New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

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+91 8882 898 898

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ISBN: 978-81-6744-149-2

First Edition: August 2026

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road, with a secure future, seem to be our compulsory accomplishments. This hardly leaves a scope for taking unnecessary risks of being adventurous. I had become complacent in my life. It never crossed my mind that the universe was there--waiting to be explored and marveled at.

Healthy, free, the world before me,

The long brown path before me leading me wherever I choose,

Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good-fortune,

Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing,

Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms,

Strong and content I travel the open road.

– Walt Whitman, from Song of the Open Road

*"The world is a book, and those who do not travel
read only one page." - **Saint Augustine***

Contents

Chapter 1: The Stillness and The Stirring	1
Chapter 2: Clouded by Smoke	21
Chapter 3: Echoes of Sarabha.....	62
Chapter 4: The Chandigarh Conundrum.....	78
Chapter 5: The River, The Road, and The Revelation ...	97
Chapter 6: The Unplanned Detour	124
Chapter 7: The Road Returns	154

Chapter 1

The Stillness and The Stirring

Life turns into a stagnant pool when we remain static, much like the roots that metaphorically entwine beneath our feet, anchoring us to the small patch of earth we call home. This realization hit me hard one evening during a casual chat with a friend. He shared a curious fact: many folks in small English villages live their entire lives within the confines of their parish boundaries, their knowledge of the world outside gleaned solely from geography books or the rare tale from a traveler. It was a revelation that unsettled me. Until that moment, I'd assumed such insular living was unique to our own context, where many of us thrive in the comfort of narrow grooves—weaving families, carving out cozy existences, rarely daring to venture beyond.

But life, as unpredictable as ever, has a knack for shattering those stagnant cycles. For me, that shift arrived with Tirthankar's arrival in Dalhousie. It was a crisp March morning as the school campus, emerging from the stillness of its winter hiatus, awoke with a flurry of activity. A new session was commencing, bringing the familiar hum of students, the soft rustling of textbooks, and a wave of fresh faces—teachers from across the country, each carrying a sliver of their regional culture.

The dining hall, our sanctuary for unguarded conversations, was where I first encountered Tirthankar. Vikas

Kedia, the accounts teacher, introduced us over lunch. "This is Tirthankar. He's the new English teacher," Vikas announced, his voice tinged with its usual mix of enthusiasm and curiosity.

As I extended my hand, Tirthankar greeted me with a warm smile that felt instantly disarming. His appearance was as intriguing as his persona—standing six feet tall, with a lean and athletic frame, his features bore a quiet intensity, softened by the glimmer of humility in his eyes.

What truly caught everyone's attention, however, wasn't just his demeanor but his story. Tirthankar hailed from Puducherry but had spent several years in England, where he pursued his Master's and Doctorate degrees. His academic credentials alone should have easily positioned him in prestigious institutions across metropolitan cities, yet here he was—choosing to teach at a school nestled in the quiet hills of Dalhousie.

Curiosity, as you might expect, got the better of us. "Why Dalhousie?" someone asked at the table, voicing the collective question that lingered unspoken.

Tirthankar responded with a smile, his tone reflective. "Suhasini and I always wanted to live close to the Himalayas. There's a simplicity to this place that resonates with us."

It was a reply that left more questions than answers, but none of us pressed further. Over the following days, my acquaintance with Tirthankar grew comfortable. In our free moments, we often found ourselves in animated discussions—sometimes about literature and philosophy, other times about the absurdities of school life. His wife, Suhasini, joined him in Dalhousie, and together they seemed to embrace the tranquility of their new home with a quiet resilience I found inspiring.

"You seem too young for marriage," I teased one day, noting the way his face lit up whenever he mentioned Suhasini.

He chuckled. "We've been married for five years now."

My surprise must have been evident. Tirthankar elaborated, sharing glimpses of their journey. They had met at university in England; he was studying English Literature and Suhasini was pursuing Accounts. It was during a university-organized trek that their shared love for travel sparked a connection. A series of adventures later, they decided to tie the knot, gently defying the expectations of their respective families back in India.

While most conversations at school revolved around students, syllabus deadlines, or campus anecdotes, Tirthankar seemed to inhabit a world of his own, one that he invited me into gradually. Spending time with him was like discovering a well-crafted novel—unfolding layers of thought and character that left me eager for more.

Our mornings became ritualistic in their rhythm. Over steaming cups of chai in the dining hall, we exchanged insights, laughter, and the occasional philosophical musing. But one Monday, Tirthankar's usual seat at the table lay conspicuously empty. The dining hall felt a shade quieter, his absence carving out a void I couldn't ignore.

"Where's Tirthankar?" I asked Romi, the Maths instructor, as we walked to our classes.

"He's on leave," Romi replied nonchalantly.

"Leave?" I repeated, surprised. "He didn't mention anything."

Romi shrugged, clearly uninterested in the matter, and turned his focus back to his breakfast.

As the day unfolded, I found myself preoccupied with a nagging sense of unease. Tirthankar was new to Dalhousie, and the unpredictable weather here was known to catch even seasoned locals off guard. Thoughts of his safety began to gnaw at me, though I hesitated to inquire further—perhaps out of respect for his privacy or the fear of seeming overly concerned. By evening, my concern had blossomed into quiet anxiety. Not having his phone number felt like an oversight, one that now seemed glaringly significant. I debated reaching out to their room but decided against it, reasoning that I might come across as intrusive. Instead, I found solace in a silent prayer, a heartfelt hope for his well-being and a swift return.

That night, as the cool winds of Dalhousie whispered against my window panes, I realized how much Tirthankar's presence had come to mean to me in such a short span of time. His absence wasn't just noticed—it was felt. It was as if the novel I had just begun exploring had been paused mid-chapter, leaving me yearning for the continuation of the story.

The next day started with a mix of worry and hope as I walked toward the dining hall. It had become a place where we shared meals, stories, and laughter, but today, my thoughts were heavy with concern. I kept wondering if Tirthankar would take another day off, leaving me guessing about his absence.

As I entered the hall, my eyes quickly scanned the room, and I felt a wave of relief when I spotted him at our usual table. He was sipping tea, looking calm and relaxed, with a soft smile on his face. When he saw me, he waved, inviting me to join him.

I sat down across from him, letting out a quiet sigh of relief. The sounds of the dining hall—cups clinking, quiet conversations, and the general hum of daily routines—felt comforting. Pouring myself a cup of tea, I looked at him, glad to see he was okay.

"How are you?" I asked, my voice edged with the concern I'd been carrying since the day before.

"I'm doing well," he said, smiling warmly.

"And Suhasini?" I asked, eager to know they were both fine.

"She's fine too," he replied, sounding confident and at ease.

I hesitated for a moment before finally asking the question that had been bothering me. "Why did you skip classes yesterday?" I blurted out, my tone sharper than I intended, the frustration of a day's worry bleeding through.

He looked at me, slightly surprised, then said, "We went on a countryside visit on Saturday."

His answer caught me off guard. "Where?" I asked, my surprise plain to see. I had spent the whole day imagining he might be unwell, while he had been out exploring.

"Bharmour," he said with a bright smile. "It's a beautiful place—the mountains, the fresh air, everything about it was amazing."

As he spoke, his excitement was clear, and I felt my annoyance dissolve. He described snow-covered peaks, quiet temples, and the peaceful charm of the place. I realized my worry had been unnecessary, and a small part of me felt a sting of envy at his adventurous spirit.

"Let's talk more about it later," he said with a friendly nod as he stood up to leave. The bell had rung, signaling the start of the next class.

I stayed at the table for a while, staring into my cooling tea and thinking about what he had said. Tirthankar seemed to have a knack for balancing professional life with his curiosity about the world. It made me reflect on my own rigid routines and whether I could allow myself to be a bit more open to exploring life beyond my usual path.

Bharmour, a serene and scenic destination near Dalhousie, had always held a certain fascination for me. Just a four-hour drive away, it was known as the gateway to the famous Manimahesh trek and carried a deep spiritual significance. Despite hearing countless stories about its charm, I had yet to visit it myself. Whenever I thought about Bharmour, my mind would drift to lush valleys, ancient temples, and the tranquil vibe of the mountains. But those thoughts had always remained as mental pictures, untethered from any real-life experience.

Driven by a surge of curiosity, I slipped into the ICT lab after classes, opened my system, and decided to take a virtual tour of Bharmour. I spent a good while online, scrolling through photos that captured the place's stunning landscapes and vibrant culture. I could almost feel the cool mountain breeze and hear the distant rustle of pine trees. Yet, I couldn't help but imagine Tirthankar and Suhasini taking it all in firsthand—breathing that crisp air, soaking up the raw beauty—while I was stuck with pixelated images on a screen. I read that Bharmour was once called Brahmpura—a name that sounded as though it had been plucked straight from an ancient Sanskrit text. The more I read about it, the more I realized this little town, tucked deep in the Chamba district of

Himachal Pradesh, wasn't just another dot on the map. It was history resting quietly in the lap of the mountains.

Long before the present-day Chamba town ever existed, Bharmour served as the capital of the Chamba kingdom. That was during the reign of Raja Meru Varman, sometime around the 6th century AD. The place was steeped in legends, shaped by kings and sages, and wrapped in a kind of silence that spoke louder than words.

What fascinated me most was the Chaurasi Temple Complex—a cluster of 84 ancient temples standing right at the heart of the town. Some of these stone shrines were believed to be more than a thousand years old. Among them, the temple of Lord Manimahesh, dedicated to Lord Shiva, stood as the spiritual pulse of Bharmour. People said the deity himself resided in these hills, and every year, hundreds of pilgrims walked for days just to catch a glimpse of the sacred Manimahesh Lake, high up in the mountains beyond.

Reading about it made me feel like I had discovered a forgotten chapter of time. The town wasn't just old—it was alive, breathing through the beliefs of the Gaddis, the indigenous shepherding community that still called the high pastures home. Their traditional woolen robes, weather-worn faces, and quiet dignity seemed to carry the weight of generations who had lived in this challenging terrain.

Bharmour wasn't flashy. It didn't shout for attention. But in its silence, in its stillness, it told stories that busy cities could never whisper. And now that I had read them, I felt an undeniable pull to see it for myself.

During a break at school, my curiosity got the better of me once more. I found Tirthankar and asked, "So, when did you plan this whole trip?"

"It was all Suhasini's idea," he replied with a casual shrug, a smile playing on his lips. "She took care of everything. She found us a bike on rent and even booked a stay at a local village through Airbnb." His tone carried a mix of gratitude and admiration for her knack for organizing things so effortlessly.

"A bike?" I repeated, intrigued by their choice of transport. The thought of maneuvering a two-wheeler on the winding mountain roads was both thrilling and nerve-wracking.

"Yes," he confirmed with a grin. "We almost always travel on a two-wheeler when we can. In the hills, nothing compares to the feel of fresh air against your face. It's a different kind of freedom, you know? And it's not heavy on the wallet either."

His words painted a vivid picture in my mind—two adventurous souls riding through the hills, the rhythmic thrum of the bike blending with the rustling leaves and distant bird calls.

"You're lucky," he added, looking at me with a hint of envy. "Living so close to places like Bharmour, surrounded by such beauty—it's a blessing."

His comment made me pause. It was something I'd heard before from travelers, yet I rarely reflected on it. Life's routines had a way of dulling the wonder of even the most beautiful surroundings. Tirthankar's perspective made me realize that I might have been taking the charm of these hills for granted.

In the comfort of my routine, I had lived my life cocooned within the boundaries of familiar surroundings, a place that gave me a sense of peace and security. The thought of venturing beyond these well-trodden paths never seemed

necessary. It was in this safe haven that I had unknowingly shut myself off from the allure of distant horizons. Yet, Tirthankar's presence had a way of breaking through the walls I had built. His smile, always warm and full of contentment, spoke volumes about the joy he found in living life on his own terms. His enthusiasm for exploration was contagious, and it made me question whether there was an aspect of life I had overlooked, a world I had yet to discover. Until Tirthankar's arrival, my life had been a gentle rhythm of predictability.

Dalhousie, with its breathtaking views and pleasant climate, had become my sanctuary. The vibrant flowers in spring and summer, the cool breeze, and the quiet serenity of nature were my comfort. The trek to DainKund, which I had made countless times, always filled me with a quiet joy. I've been to Dainkund more times than I can count, yet each visit feels like the first. It's strange how some places do that to you—pull you back, not with promises of something new, but with the comfort of something deeply familiar.

They call it the "Singing Hill", and rightly so. The first time I heard the wind sweep through those towering pine trees, I finally understood the name. It wasn't just wind—it was music. A soft hum that wrapped around you, as if the mountains were whispering secrets too old to be written down.

At 2,755 meters, Dainkund sits high above Dalhousie, watching over the hills like a quiet guardian. I remember standing there, just before sunset once, the sky smeared with strokes of orange and pink, and thinking—this is what stillness feels like.

There's an old legend tied to the place. Dainkund, they say, was once haunted by witches—dains—until a goddess descended and cleared them out. Whether the story is myth or memory, I don't know. But the Pohlani Mata Temple near the

top still stands, flags fluttering and bells chiming in that ever-present wind, as if keeping the mountain's spirit awake.

Every time I walk that narrow trail toward the peak, flanked by open skies and rolling hills, I feel lighter—as if the mountain quietly takes away whatever weight I've been carrying. From the top, you can see everything—valleys deep below, snow peaks in the distance, and sometimes, if you're lucky, clouds moving beneath your feet.

Dainkund never tries to impress. It doesn't shout for attention. But once you've been there, you carry it with you—like a song stuck in your memory, soft and eternal. But in all my years here, the thought of exploring beyond these familiar hills hadn't even occurred to me until Tirthankar shared his stories.

His tales of distant places, of landscapes and cultures unknown, opened my eyes to a world far beyond the limits of Dalhousie. Every Monday, whether he returned from a trip or stayed behind to rest, I found myself eagerly awaiting the stories he would share. His adventures weren't just about the places he visited—they were about the experiences that shaped him, turning him into a storyteller who brought distant lands and new perspectives to life.

As I listened to him, a quiet restlessness stirred within me. The routine that had once brought me peace now seemed too small, too narrow. Tirthankar's stories had awakened something in me—a desire to see more, to experience life outside my own little bubble. It wasn't just the physical act of traveling that intrigued me; it was the transformation that seemed to occur with each journey. Traveling, I realized, wasn't just about going somewhere new. It was about discovering parts of yourself you never knew existed. It was

about gathering experiences, returning with stories that added color to the dull routine of everyday life.

One day, Tirthankar shared something that momentarily shifted the tone of our usual conversations. "The Principal called me to his office," he said, and immediately, my curiosity piqued.

"What did he say?" I asked, my interest growing.

"He knows about my Monday leaves," Tirthankar replied, a touch of sadness in his voice. "He asked me not to take any more days off without informing him."

I could hear the disappointment in his words, but it didn't take away from the positive energy he carried with him. Despite the challenges, Tirthankar remained a source of inspiration, a reminder of the importance of living authentically and embracing the joy of new experiences. His outlook on life was a stark contrast to others who, despite speaking of wanting more, never seemed to take the essential steps beyond their comfort zones. Tirthankar didn't just talk about exploring life—he lived it.

Undaunted by the altered circumstances, Tirthankar simply adapted his approach. Although he stopped taking Mondays off, his unyielding passion for travel persisted. The only change was that, instead of spending Sunday nights in the villages, he now embarked on late-night journeys, ensuring his timely return to school for Monday classes. His fierce commitment to his pursuits not only demonstrated a steadfast resilience but also underscored a simple truth—true passion renders fatigue meaningless.

Reflecting on Tirthankar's unwavering determination, a profound realization surfaced: it emphasizes the significance of instilling a love for one's passions from early childhood.

Children should be nurtured to focus on activities they genuinely love. Such early guidance not only lays the foundation for a more seamless career path but also ensures they live perpetually in a zone of contentment and joy—an invaluable lesson that far transcends the confines of any classroom.

"When are you planning to start a family?" Vishal's question hung in the air, a sudden weight that broke the rhythm of our casual lunchtime conversations. As the physical trainer and a newly married man himself, his curiosity mirrored the common societal expectations that often surround a new union.

In response, Tirthankar calmly stated, "We don't plan to have one," his focus remaining steadfastly on the meal before him. The simplicity of his words disrupted the unspoken norms prevalent in our region. Here, the mere act of getting married instantly triggers a cascade of familial expectations for the imminent arrival of "good news." These societal pressures, often treated as unwritten rules of post-marriage life, shape the narrative for many. Yet, there are always those who choose to challenge these norms, opting for a path less traveled.

"Are you serious?" Vishal, visibly taken aback, voiced his offense at this deviation from the expected trajectory.

"Yes, it is a mutual decision. We feel we have different goals in life," Tirthankar responded, his demeanor cool and composed, almost nonchalant. In a region where conformity to established norms is the order of the day, Tirthankar's response was akin to a quiet rebellion. It conveyed a choice to prioritize individual aspirations over societal expectations, a decision that resonates with the courage required to forge one's unique path in the face of conventional pressures.

Vishal, who hailed from Punjab, couldn't quite process Tirthankar's response. To him, it was almost equivalent to blasphemy, a deviation so far from the norm that it seemed incomprehensible. In his world, where family and children are an integral part of life's narrative, Tirthankar's choice felt like a challenge to everything he had been taught. To reject the path that most people around him followed was almost unthinkable. The idea of marriage without the expectation of children didn't fit within the framework of what he believed was "normal," and the shock on his face was impossible to miss. His worldview had been so shaped by societal expectations that Tirthankar's words had shaken the very foundation of what he understood to be a natural progression in life.

As my free time often matched Tirthankar's, our shared moments became a window into the interesting details of his life. The more I learned about his experiences, the more I admired him. His family, spread out across different places, added layers to who he was—his younger brother lived with their parents in Puducherry, and Suhasini, his wife, was the only child of her parents in Mumbai.

One day, while we were chatting in the library, I couldn't resist asking him about his views on the countryside. Tirthankar, focused on his laptop, shared stories that painted a clear picture of his past adventures. He talked about their time in Paris, but one experience stood out to me: when they went to see the Aurora Borealis in Iceland. They had rented a small cottage far from the busy crowds to enjoy the spectacle.

Curious about it, I asked, "Aurora Borealis?"

"It's the northern lights. We were in Iceland and stayed in a cottage just to watch them," he explained. His eyes lit up as

he remembered the magical experience of watching the vibrant curtains of light dance across the dark sky.

I admired how easily Tirthankar moved between different places and experiences. Each story he told opened up a new part of the world, and I couldn't help but feel fascinated by his life, filled with exploration, curiosity, and a strong connection to the wonders of the world.

"Want to see some pictures?" Tirthankar asked with genuine excitement.

"Yes, definitely," I replied, eager to see more.

He quickly angled his laptop toward me, and within seconds, stunning pictures appeared on the screen. Tirthankar and Suhasini were bundled in heavy jackets, standing beneath the swirling green and purple lights. "This is in Iceland," he said, showing me the breathtaking scene.

Looking at the pictures, I couldn't help but remark, "You've traveled a lot, Tirthankar."

"Yes, but there's still much more to see. We haven't explored most of Asia properly. We've covered Europe and North America mostly," he said, always ready for the next adventure.

Curious, I asked, "How many countries have you traveled to so far?"

"About forty-two," he answered, a subtle hint of pride in his voice. I realized that while I had never even been to another country, Tirthankar had journeyed through so many places and still felt an urge for more exploration.

From that conversation, I understood how deeply Tirthankar's travels had shaped his life. The sheer number of countries he had visited told a story of continuous adventure.

As I listened to his experiences and looked at the pictures, I felt inspired by the idea that geography was just a small detail; the real joy came from exploring the world itself.

"How do you manage the costs of all your trips?" I couldn't help but ask. I knew his school salary wouldn't cover such frequent travels.

"Suhasini works as a freelancer for a company in England," he said with a laugh. "She makes enough for both of us to travel. My salary definitely wouldn't be enough for all of it."

I found myself questioning the life I had built. Was the stability I enjoyed, the sense of contentment I had so carefully cultivated, merely the result of following what society expected of me? The thought gnawed at my mind, lingering in the background as I struggled to compare the choices Tirthankar had made with my own. I could not ignore the growing realization that there was a subtle, yet profound difference between simply being content with life and genuinely experiencing happiness in its truest form.

As Tirthankar continued to unfold the layers of his unconventional lifestyle, I felt a mixture of admiration and awe. Each conversation with him seemed to take me on an unplanned journey across the globe, offering a glimpse into different cultures, traditions, and the varied flavors of life. It was as though I had enrolled in a living, breathing Geography class, guided not by textbooks or academic theories, but by someone who had experienced these places firsthand. He had lived in a way that was not confined by the narrow boundaries of routine or expectation. Tirthankar had become my personal guide to the world, and with every new piece of knowledge he shared, I felt my worldview expanding. It was as if he had

opened the door to a new realm of possibilities, challenging me to reconsider the limitations I had placed on myself.

I began to feel that my life, which had once seemed like a well-planned and predictable path, was starting to look increasingly like a mere existence. The more I engaged with Tirthankar's stories, the more I began to see how he had woven the threads of his life into an intricate tapestry of experiences, each one rich with meaning. With each new story, I found myself not just listening, but questioning whether I, too, was missing out on something much larger than the life I had chosen. It was clear that he had found a way to integrate his passions with his purpose, while I had settled into a routine that, though stable, lacked the vibrancy and excitement that came with pursuing what truly brought him joy.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that the contrast between us was not about success or failure, but simply a difference in perspective. Tirthankar had chosen a life of exploration and freedom, and in doing so, he had freed himself from the expectations society places on individuals. His life was an ongoing adventure, a journey of constant discovery, while mine felt like a well-worn path I had walked for too long without questioning its direction. I realized there was a subtle, but critical difference between being content and being truly happy—a distinction I had never considered before. I had been content with my life, but had I truly been happy?

Tirthankar's presence in my life had forced me to confront these questions head-on. His way of living challenged the very foundations of my routine existence, and as I listened to his tales, I couldn't help but feel a sense of longing for something more. Each of his experiences, whether it was a solo trip to an unknown destination or a shared adventure with Suhasini, had contributed to a broader, richer life, one that

seemed to have no boundaries. I started to wonder if my own life had been confined by invisible walls I had built around myself, walls that limited my ability to experience the world as he had.

As the mid-term break approached, bringing the summer to a close, Tirthankar sought me out on the last day before our temporary separation. It was a casual goodbye, yet it carried an undercurrent of finality I hadn't expected.

"See you after a few days, Titu," I said, thinking nothing of it.

But Tirthankar's response was far from casual. "Sir, I've resigned. I've got a job in Solan. I won't be coming back," he said quietly, his words like a thunderclap that left me stunned. The news hit me with such force that I had to pause, struggling to understand the suddenness of it all. The thought of losing the engaging conversations we'd had, the intellectual stimulation he had provided, was hard to digest.

"What?" I stammered, unable to grasp the depth of what he had just said. The idea of him leaving was unthinkable. Tirthankar's presence had become a source of inspiration for me, a catalyst that pushed me to think beyond the conventional. The thought of never again sharing those moments with him left me with a sense of loss, even though I tried to keep my composure.

"I was advised not to tell anyone, but I couldn't hide it from you," he explained, his voice calm as always. A brief conversation followed, but I found it difficult to process the information. The reality of his departure began to sink in slowly. As he gathered his things, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of sadness at the thought of no longer being able to rely on him for those thought-provoking discussions.

Before he left, I pulled him into a hug. "We'll go on a trip together one day," I promised, as if saying the words could somehow ease the disappointment I was feeling.

"Definitely," he replied, his usual optimism shining through. "A road trip. We live in good times. Guru Nanak Dev Ji traveled the world when transportation was scarce. Now, we have better options."

"Travel, Sir, it will liberate you," he added.

As Tirthankar made his way to the hostel to pack, I found myself standing still, contemplating the weight of his words. His departure left an emptiness, not just in our conversations but in the realization that life could be lived differently—more fully, more freely. He had become a symbol of liberation, a living embodiment of the idea that there is more to life than just following the predictable, safe path.

Listening to his stories and reflecting on the choices he had made, a sense of restlessness quietly crept into my thoughts. His adventures had painted vivid pictures of a life that was constantly unfolding, alive with discovery and exploration. In the quiet moments that followed, I began to wonder what it would be like to live more like him—to embrace the uncertainty of the unknown and pursue a life that was driven not by anyone's expectations, but by a deep, personal desire to experience the world on my own terms.

I began to realize that I had spent so much of my life trying to conform, to fit into a mold that society had set for me, that I had forgotten how to break free. Tirthankar had shown me that there was so much more to life than just playing by the rules. There was a world waiting to be explored, not just in the physical sense, but in the deeper sense of exploring new ideas, perspectives, and experiences.

When the schools reopened after the break, I found myself missing Tirthankar even more. His absence was palpable, a stark reminder of the way he had enriched my life. The routine of teaching and the predictable pace of daily life seemed to have lost their vibrancy without him. I felt like I had fallen back into the monotony I had been living before, but this time, it felt different. I knew that I was no longer the same person I had been before our conversations. I had been changed, stirred by the possibilities that Tirthankar had introduced into my life.

In an attempt to reconnect, I began reaching out to him more regularly. Our calls were no longer just about checking in; they were lifelines, tethering me to the world of possibilities he had shown me. Each conversation was a bridge between the life I had known and the one I now imagined for myself. It was as if he had opened a door, and while I couldn't yet step through it fully, I could at least stand at the threshold, gazing out at what lay beyond.

A few months later, my friend Amit, full of surprises, posted a status on WhatsApp. The image of snow-covered mountains in the background with the caption "Coming Soon" piqued my curiosity. Known for his friendly nature and easygoing personality, He was someone who could connect with anyone effortlessly. Naturally, I reached out to him, eager to learn more about his plans.

To my surprise, he revealed that he wasn't coming to Dalhousie. Instead, he and a few friends were planning a road trip to Nepal. The thought of embarking on such a journey in the middle of December immediately sparked my interest. The memories of Tirthankar's captivating stories and his emphasis on travel and exploration came flooding back to me. It felt like a sign, as if the universe was presenting me with an

opportunity to step out of my comfort zone and experience something new.

“I want to join you,” I told Amit directly, knowing our bond allowed for such bluntness.

“It won’t be easy, bhai. Travelling on bikes takes a toll,” Amit said, well aware of my preference for a comfortable life.

I felt an undeniable pull to join him on this journey. It was as if the universe had orchestrated this moment to nudge me in the direction of change. Perhaps this was my chance to break free from the confines of routine, to experience the world in a way Tirthankar had encouraged me to. The idea of becoming a modern-day Marco Polo, exploring new and unknown lands, suddenly seemed like the most natural next step in my own journey of self-discovery.

“I will go,” I said with newfound authority in my voice.

“As you say,” he replied, and we disconnected.

Chapter 2

Clouded by Smoke

The idea of venturing into new territory was exhilarating, but it also came with a fair share of apprehension. As the conversation about the trip unfolded, one fundamental question loomed large: How would we travel? Amit's response was as straightforward as it was intriguing: "Bikes."

The mere mention of bikes stirred up a blend of excitement and hesitation within me. Memories of Tirthankar's numerous biking adventures came rushing back. I had often marveled at his ability to explore distant corners of the world, each trip marked by its own set of challenges and discoveries. However, this time the stakes felt higher. Traveling to Nepal wasn't just about crossing state borders; it was about stepping into an entirely different world, navigating unfamiliar landscapes, and dealing with the unpredictability of a foreign country.

The very thought of such an adventure awakened a sense of longing within me, a desire to break free from the predictable rhythm of my life. Yet, my mind, ever cautious and practical, began to analyze the risks and challenges. This internal conflict was nothing new; it mirrored the timeless struggle that so many of us face: the heart urging us to chase our dreams and the mind cautioning us to stay within the bounds of safety and familiarity.

Despite the whirlpool of doubts swirling in my head, I found myself saying, “I’ll go with you.” There was a firmness in my voice that surprised even me. Amit, who had known me for years, didn’t appear shocked but heard me intently, as if assessing the seriousness of my resolve. After a brief pause, he asked the inevitable question: “Are you sure?”

His question wasn’t just a formality; it came from a place of understanding. Amit knew me well enough to recognize the sheltered and secure environment I had grown up in. My family, especially my parents and Grandpa, had always gone to great lengths to ensure I was surrounded by stability and comfort. A spontaneous, cross-border bike trip was far from what they would consider a sensible plan. Convincing Grandpa, in particular, seemed like a daunting task, one that loomed over my newfound determination like a shadow.

Still, I nodded and replied softly, “Yes.”

“It won’t be easy to convince them, Gaurav,” Amit said, his tone carrying both concern and encouragement.

“I know,” I responded, the weight of his words sinking in. “But I’ll talk to them. I’ll figure it out.”

Amit gave a small nod, a gesture that conveyed his belief in me but also his understanding of the uphill battle that lay ahead. With that, the call ended, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

As the hours passed, I found myself lost in a web of emotions and questions. Breaking free from the cocoon of familiarity and comfort wasn’t going to be simple. The idea of living like a nomad, even for a short while, had ignited something within me—a flame of inspiration, a yearning to experience life beyond the ordinary. But I couldn’t ignore the

obstacles in my path, not just the external ones but the internal ones as well.

My mind became a battleground of conflicting thoughts and desires. On one hand, there was the excitement of embarking on a journey that promised adventure, self-discovery, and a break from the mundane. On the other hand, there were the doubts, the fears, and the practical considerations that kept creeping in. The mind, restless as ever, seemed to want the best of both worlds: the thrill of exploration and the safety of the familiar.

In the midst of this internal struggle, I began to question the very essence of the journey. What was driving me to consider such an unconventional step? Was it a genuine thirst for adventure? A quest to discover a different side of myself? Or was it simply a response to the monotony of daily life, a way to escape the predictable and embrace the unknown?

As these thoughts swirled in my mind, I turned to the one person who always offered clarity and perspective: my wife, Swati. She listened patiently as I shared my thoughts, my doubts, and my aspirations. Swati had heard me talk about Tirthankar's free-spirited lifestyle on more than one occasion. She knew how much I admired his ability to embrace life with an open heart and an adventurous spirit.

When I finished speaking, Swati looked at me with a knowing smile. "This is exactly what you've been waiting for, isn't it?" she said, her words cutting through my doubts like a beam of light piercing through a cloudy sky.

Her statement caught me off guard. She was right, of course. This was the kind of opportunity I had been yearning for—a chance to step out of my comfort zone, to challenge myself, and to open new dimensions in my thinking. Swati's

insight and encouragement became the catalyst I needed to take the next step.

Her assertive remark about seizing this opportunity resonated deeply with me. It wasn't just about going on a trip; it was about embracing a chance for growth, for transformation, and for seeing the world—and myself—in a new light. Swati understood the potential impact of such a journey, even if it meant stepping into the unknown without the guiding presence of someone like Tirthankar.

In that moment, I realized that the road ahead, uncertain as it was, held the promise of something extraordinary. It wasn't just about crossing geographical borders; it was about crossing the invisible borders within myself, breaking free from the constraints of routine, and embracing the vast possibilities that lay beyond.

With a sense of newfound determination, I decided it was time to bring my plans into the open and discuss them with my family. I chose the dinner table as the perfect setting for this conversation, a place where we often shared moments of warmth and togetherness. The cheerful presence of Kannan, the youngest member of our family, added a lighthearted touch to the atmosphere. His innocent, endearing smiles and carefree demeanor seemed to diffuse any tension, creating the perfect backdrop for what I was about to share.

"Dad, I've been planning something for a while now," I began, carefully gauging everyone's expressions as I spoke. "I want to take a trip with my friends towards the end of December," I continued, trying to sound casual yet sincere.

My father immediately asked, "Where do you plan to go?" His question came as no surprise, and I responded with a sense of conviction, "Nepal." The name alone seemed to catch

him off guard. It was clear he hadn't anticipated such an unusual destination.

At that moment, Swati's words from earlier echoed in my mind. She had reassured me that my father was more likely to approve if he knew it was a group trip. That small spark of optimism encouraged me to remain confident as I explained my plans. The dinner table felt charged with anticipation, the air thick with curiosity as my family tried to process my unexpected announcement.

To lend credibility to my plan, I decided to casually mention some of my friends, like Amit, who would be joining me. I thought this might make the trip seem more structured and responsible. However, when Grandpa, whose curiosity was clearly piqued, asked how we intended to travel, I found myself blurting out, "By car."

As soon as the words left my mouth, I noticed Swati's reaction. Her eyes widened in surprise, and her expression spoke volumes—she knew I had just fabricated that part of the plan. It was an impulsive move, and I could tell she was shocked by how easily I had lied.

Grandpa didn't miss a beat. He immediately suggested we consider public transport instead, pointing out that it would be safer and more economical. Eager to keep the conversation moving in my favor, I nodded and agreed without hesitation. His suggestion seemed to satisfy him, and the discussion came to a close, at least for the moment.

To my surprise, gaining their approval wasn't as challenging as I had initially feared. But I couldn't ignore the fact that their permission was based on a story I had spun. I hadn't even dared to mention the possibility of traveling on bikes, knowing full well that it could complicate things.

Later that evening, as Swati and I retired to our room, she couldn't hold back her astonishment. "You lied!" she said, her tone a mix of surprise and mild reproach. It was clear she hadn't expected me to resort to such tactics, especially since honesty had always been a cornerstone of my approach with the family.

I tried to explain my reasoning. "It wasn't really lying," I said, attempting to justify my words. "It was just a strategic move. If I had mentioned bikes, Daadu would've started worrying right away, and the whole discussion could have taken a different turn."

Swati didn't seem entirely convinced, but she let it go, probably understanding the delicate balancing act I was trying to pull off. I reassured her that there were still a few months before the trip and that things might fall into place naturally as the date approached.

In the days that followed, the topic of the Nepal trip seemed to slip into the background. It wasn't actively discussed, but I could sense an unspoken understanding within the family. It felt as though everyone was silently processing the idea, allowing it to settle in their minds. There was an unvoiced belief, a subtle hope, that time might change my perspective. Perhaps they thought what seemed like an exciting plan now might lose its charm as the weeks passed. It was as though my parents were quietly betting on my enthusiasm fading, leaving the idea of the trip to dissolve naturally into the fabric of everyday life.

Amid this unspoken understanding, life continued to move forward at its usual pace. The days seemed to blend together, and I found myself completely engrossed in the responsibilities and demands of schoolwork. The pressure of assignments, deadlines, and classes took precedence, quietly

pushing any thoughts of the Nepal trip further into the background. It wasn't that I had forgotten about the journey, but rather, it had become a distant thought, one that I occasionally revisited in passing but never fully entertained. This period felt like one of waiting, observing how things would unfold naturally, without actively pushing for anything to happen.

It was as if my family, too, had settled into a comfortable silence about the trip. No one brought it up again, and there was a shared, unspoken understanding between us all. It was as though we were allowing time to work its quiet magic, letting the idea mature on its own. My family didn't openly discuss it, yet there was a certain feeling in the air—an awareness that something might change as time passed. The idea of the trip wasn't dismissed, but it was allowed to simmer in the background, like a seed waiting to sprout. I wasn't sure if the trip would eventually come to fruition or if, with time, it would fade into the past like so many fleeting dreams.

Time, in its silent and unpredictable way, continued to shape the circumstances around us. It had the power to influence our perspectives without us even noticing. As the days stretched into weeks and the weeks into months, life carried on. The trip to Nepal, once a vivid possibility, now seemed more like a distant dream, something that could either blossom or remain dormant. The excitement I had felt at the beginning was tempered by the practicality of daily life, and the once-clear path now felt like a road hidden under fog, its direction uncertain. My family, too, seemed to be waiting, perhaps in the hopes that the trip would lose its appeal over time. It almost felt as if everyone was silently betting on the idea losing its charm, believing that as days went by, the excitement would naturally fade.

Then, one day, I received a call from Amit that shattered the silence. His voice came through the phone, filled with enthusiasm and energy. "All set for the journey?" he asked, his tone upbeat and confident.

"Absolutely," I responded, trying to match his energy, even though deep down I hadn't really given the trip much thought. My mind had been occupied with school, and the idea of the Nepal trip had drifted further away. Yet, I didn't want to admit any reservations, so I smiled and kept up the appearance of excitement. It felt easier to go along with the conversation and pretend that I was as eager as ever.

Amit quickly followed up with a cautionary note. "Gaurav, just wanted to give you a heads-up. Traveling by bike might be a bit tough. The journey is going to be long, and with the harsh winters setting in, it could get really challenging. We'll have to be prepared for the cold and the discomfort." His words were grounded in reality, and as I listened, I realized how right he was. A part of me understood the truth in his words, but another part of me started to wonder if he was subtly hinting that the whole trip might be a bit much. I found myself entertained by the thought of him potentially thinking about calling the whole thing off. It felt like a relief, yet I also knew that this wasn't a decision to take lightly. A small part of me didn't want to give up on the adventure before it had even begun.

Then, as if to break the suspense, Amit revealed an unexpected change in plans. "We've been talking about it, and we're thinking of switching from bikes to cars for the journey. It seems like a more practical option, especially for the long distance and the cold weather."

A sense of relief flooded through me at this new development. Traveling by car seemed the more sensible

choice. The idea of a long ride in the freezing cold on a bike had never felt appealing, and the prospect of a more comfortable, enclosed space was a welcome thought.

Curious about this sudden change, I asked, "Cars? But there are only a few of us. Are we really going to need cars for such a small group?"

Amit explained the reasoning behind it. "Well, after you said you were in, we had another discussion, and Trilok suggested that cars might actually be a better idea. Given the weather and the distance, it just seemed like a more viable option. We all agreed that it might be the best way to go."

This shift in plans brought a sense of reassurance, and with it, a renewed excitement for the journey. The idea of traveling in cars instead of bikes made the whole trip feel more manageable, less daunting. The convenience of a car offered a level of comfort that hadn't existed in the original plan. We could enjoy the journey without worrying too much about the harsh conditions or the fatigue. It was a small change, but it opened up a whole new perspective, making the trip seem more feasible and much more enjoyable.

This change in plans didn't just settle my nerves; it also made the trip feel more grounded in reality. What had once seemed like an impossible, extreme adventure was now taking shape into something far more achievable. The comfort and practicality of cars offered the right balance between the adventure I had been yearning for and the realities of the long journey that lay ahead.

Trilok, who was deeply involved in education in Ludhiana, held a special place not just as a professional colleague of Amit, but also as a close friend and a passionate biking enthusiast. Together, they had not only worked but had also founded a successful bike club, Motorista, in Ludhiana.

This bike club had become a thriving community of like-minded individuals, embarking on numerous biking expeditions over the years. These trips were not just about biking; they were about shared experiences, stories, and memories that would last a lifetime. My personal interactions with Trilok had occurred during their camping trips in Dalhousie.

As Amit began to unfold more details about the evolving plans for the trip, he casually mentioned, "Vikas is also joining us from Shillong. He's quite eager for a lengthy journey." Vikas, a childhood friend of Trilok, had recently moved to Shillong for his government job. Their friendship, forged in childhood, had only grown stronger with time. Recently, the two of them had ventured to the Ziro festival in the North-east together. Their exploration of the festival had been documented on social media, and I had followed their adventures through the vibrant photographs they had shared. Though I recognized Vikas through these images, we had never met in person, and I was looking forward to finally crossing paths with him during this trip.

Amit then continued with more information about the growing group of travelers. "As for our squad, we've rallied our friends for the trip. Shubham, Abhishek, and Tarun are all set to join." Tarun, who had once worked with us in Dalhousie, had since taken a different path, driven by his responsibilities toward his family. Despite that, the idea of reconnecting with old friends, people with whom I shared a history, was an exciting prospect. It added another layer of anticipation to the upcoming adventure.

"Tarun? From Delhi?" I asked, confirming the details with Amit. There was a sense of excitement in the air as I tried to visualize how our group was shaping up.

"Yes," Amit confirmed, and I could hear the reassurance in his voice. "You'll be in excellent company, Gaurav." His words brought a sense of comfort, and the thought of sharing this adventure with such a dynamic group made the trip even more promising.

With seven of us now preparing for the journey, Amit laid out the logistics for the trip: two cars would be involved. Amit would drive his trusty Swift, and Tarun would navigate the adventure in his reliable WagonR. These details began to provide a clearer picture of how our road trip would unfold.

As the conversation continued, my mind started to wander. It's funny how the mind works; no matter how exciting a prospect, it can often find room for doubt and hesitation. My thoughts drifted to an analogy I had once read that resonated with me deeply. It was a quote from Lord Krishna, spoken to Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra: "The mind is like horses; when saddled, they are under your control, but left unchecked, they will take you places." This metaphor struck me as incredibly accurate. The mind has a tendency to take us in different directions, sometimes to places we may not expect, especially when faced with big decisions or exciting opportunities.

"Are you there?" Amit's voice brought me back to the present, interrupting my thoughts. I quickly refocused on the conversation.

"Yes, I'm here," I replied, not wanting to seem distracted. "When are we planning to leave?" My eagerness to know the timeline for the trip grew stronger as the details began to unfold.

Amit gave a tentative response, saying, "Tentatively, we're thinking of leaving around the 25th of December. Don't worry; we'll keep you updated with all the specifics." His voice

was calm and assured, which helped ease some of the lingering uncertainty in my mind. "I'm setting up a WhatsApp group where we'll share all the details, so you won't miss anything," he added.

With that, the call ended, leaving me with a feeling of anticipation, mixed with the excitement of what was to come. The plans were shaping up, and the trip to Nepal seemed more and more real.

As I absorbed all the details, a realization gradually took hold—what had initially been a vague idea in my mind was now evolving into something much more concrete. The excitement was now tangible, and I could see the effort my friends had invested in organizing everything. Every adjustment, every change in the plan seemed to underline their commitment to making this journey a reality. They were clearly doing everything they could to ensure my comfort. Amit, in particular, had been attentive to my earlier concerns about biking, and these changes in the plans felt like a personal gesture to make sure I would enjoy the trip.

"Swati, it's finalized. I'll be traveling to Nepal," I said one evening, trying to keep my voice neutral, as I knew the news would be significant. This trip was different from the usual getaways we'd had before. The prospect of being away for nearly three weeks was a big change from our normal routine. I was eager to hear what Swati thought about it, especially since it meant we would be apart for a much longer time than usual.

"Great!!!" she exclaimed, her voice bright and full of excitement. Her enthusiasm was genuine, and it didn't take long for me to realize how much she understood the importance of this trip to me. Swati, who had been part of all the recent discussions I'd had with my friends, knew exactly

what this journey represented. It was clear she wasn't just happy for me to go, but also fully supported the idea of me being a part of such an adventure. She recognized that doing it alone wouldn't have been practical or safe. Instead, she saw that traveling with a group of friends, who were all equally eager and prepared, would be the best way to ensure the trip went smoothly and was enjoyable.

With the winter break quickly approaching, the excitement for the Nepal trip continued to grow. Amit, who had taken on the task of organizing everything, had already created a WhatsApp group and added everyone joining the journey. The group's first message was welcoming and set a warm tone for the planning process. Each new update from Amit brought the trip closer to reality, and with every detail, we felt more connected and excited for what was to come.

One of the more practical messages in the group was a detailed list of essential items we would need to pack. Amit made sure nothing was overlooked, from toiletries and clothing to specific medications for the cold weather and the long journey. The list was thorough, ensuring we would be prepared for anything. However, the packing situation was a challenge, as the space in the cars was limited. We would have to fit all our belongings into just one bag.

"How am I supposed to pack all your stuff in one bag?" Swati exclaimed when I shared this packing dilemma with her. She seemed overwhelmed by the thought of trying to condense everything we might need into such a small space. Her concern was understandable, and I could feel her frustration mounting as we discussed how to handle it.

"We'll have to manage," I replied, though inside, I was just as uncertain about how we would actually make it work. The packing task felt daunting, and part of me wondered how

we would handle it when the time came. Still, I knew we'd figure it out. Swati, as always, would find a way to make it work, and together we would come up with a solution. The fact that we were facing such challenges only made the trip feel more real, as it was clear that, while exciting, this journey would require careful thought and some practical problem-solving along the way.

As the reality of the trip began to settle in, my mind became a whirlwind of emotions and thoughts. I couldn't help but imagine the various ways the journey could unfold. Vivid visions of adventure and scenic vistas alternated with the occasional twinge of anxiety about the uncertainties we might face. The sheer unpredictability of the trip played out like a reel in my mind, feeding both my excitement and apprehension. Instead of trying to suppress these conflicting emotions, I let them coexist, embracing the mix of anticipation and preparation that was now part of my daily life.

Meanwhile, Daadu's demeanor was a reflection of his concerns about the trip. His apprehension was evident in the way he frequently brought up the topic of safety. I hadn't disclosed the mode of travel to him yet, carefully avoiding the details that might cause unnecessary worry. For now, he continued to believe we would be using public transport, an assumption I let linger for the sake of peace at home. The truth—that we planned to embark on this adventure in our own vehicles—remained unspoken, tucked away for the right moment.

Lies, or rather omissions of truth, have a peculiar way of weighing on one's conscience. As I navigated the delicate balance of keeping Daadu reassured while preparing for the trip, I often found myself grappling with questions of morality. Was it justifiable to withhold certain details to ease the minds

of loved ones? The dilemma wasn't lost on me. Honestly, I realized, was not always black and white. Sometimes, practicality demanded that truth be shared in increments, and this was one of those times. I convinced myself that revealing everything at once would only lead to unnecessary anxiety for Daadu, especially since the journey was already set in motion.

In the midst of these musings, the group chat for the trip was buzzing with activity. Messages popped up every few minutes, creating an atmosphere of excitement and shared anticipation. The chatter ranged from logistical details to light-hearted banter, each message strengthening the bond among the soon-to-be travelers. Trilok, ever meticulous in his approach, had taken it upon himself to share a detailed map outlining our route. His precision and attention to detail were evident in the way he had marked potential stops, scenic detours, and essential landmarks. Each new update added to the thrill of the upcoming adventure, making it feel more real with every passing day.

As the countdown to the journey continued, Amit reached out to check on my readiness.

"Gaurav, ready for the trip?" he asked, his voice tinged with the enthusiasm that had been driving the entire plan.

"Yeah, I think I've got everything in the bag, and if anything's missing, we can always buy it on the way," I replied, trying to project confidence despite the lingering uncertainty about whether I had truly prepared for every aspect of the journey.

"No worries. Have you gone through the route we'll be following?" he pressed, ensuring I was well-informed.

"I've had a look at it," I assured him, even though I knew Trilok's map would likely serve as our primary guide.

“Great. Now, pick a place you'd like to visit in the vicinity. We're asking everyone on the trip to choose such a place; it'll add a special meaning to our journey,” Amit suggested, adding an intriguing twist to the adventure.

"Sounds fantastic!" I responded, my interest piqued. The idea of each person contributing a unique destination to the itinerary gave the trip a personal touch, making it more than just a group expedition.

Reflecting on this new task, I couldn't help but think back to my school days when Geography was merely another subject, a tool for securing marks in exams. At the time, maps were just diagrams in a textbook, devoid of any personal connection or excitement. But now, as I pored over Google Maps to calculate distances and travel times, I found a newfound appreciation for their utility and insights. Maps had transformed from mundane academic tools into gateways to adventure, sparking curiosity and fueling my enthusiasm.

While I was engrossed in these preparations, Swati played a vital role behind the scenes, ensuring that everything I needed was accounted for. Her quiet diligence provided a sense of reassurance that eased some of my pre-trip anxieties. Meanwhile, Grandpa (Daadu) remained a steady presence, offering sage advice during our evening conversations. “Be careful,” he would say, his tone a mix of concern and affection. His reminders, though repetitive, were a comforting ritual, a testament to the bond that tied our family together.

"Don't disembark from the train at stations," Daadu cautioned once again, his voice tinged with the wisdom of years and the concern of someone who cared deeply. His protective instincts were on full display, and it struck me that I had still not mustered the courage to reveal the truth about our travel plans. I had let him believe we would be taking the

train, avoiding the mention of the two cars we had lined up for the journey. The thought of shattering his sense of reassurance kept me silent. Rather than dwell on the uneasiness of this omission, I decided to let things unfold naturally.

As the countdown to our departure ticked away, I found myself navigating unfamiliar emotional terrain. The realization that this might be the first time I would truly be away from home began to sink in. The comfort and familiarity of my surroundings had always been constant, and now, the thought of stepping outside that bubble filled me with a mix of excitement and trepidation. Negative thoughts crept in, subtle but persistent, whispering reasons why this journey might not be the best idea. Doubts about safety, the logistics, and even my readiness threatened to overshadow the thrill of the upcoming adventure. But I made a conscious choice to persevere, to push aside the doubts and focus on the promise of new experiences. Each passing day brought me closer to the start of the journey, and the anticipation mixed with apprehension grew stronger as the day of departure, the much-awaited D-day, approached.

Just as I was beginning to feel some semblance of calm amidst the preparations, Amit threw an unexpected twist into the mix. "Gaurav," he said during one of our conversations, his tone hinting at something important, "I'll have to head back to Ludhiana as Vikas is arriving from Shillong on the 22nd. You can take a train till Ludhiana, and I'll pick you up from the station on the 24th evening."

His words took me by surprise. Until now, the plan had been clear: we would begin the journey together from Pathankot, where Amit was currently at home, and head to Ludhiana as a team. The sudden change in plans left me

feeling unsettled, a wave of panic creeping in as I tried to process the implications of this new arrangement.

I couldn't hold back my thoughts. "Amit," I said, the unease evident in my voice, "we were supposed to travel together." I hoped my tone would convey the discomfort I felt without needing to spell it out.

"Amit, Vikas arrived a few days earlier than expected, and he really wants me there," he explained, his voice steady, as though he had anticipated my reaction.

"But..." I began, the words hovering on the edge of my tongue. I was torn between expressing my reluctance to travel alone and the desire not to burden him with my insecurities. The hesitation won, and I let the sentence trail off into silence.

Journeys, I realized, often came with their own set of challenges before they even began. The first leg of this trip now seemed more daunting than ever. The idea of a 6-hour journey from Dalhousie to Ludhiana loomed large, amplified by the prospect of navigating multiple bus and train transfers on my own. The very thought of starting this adventure solo sent a chill down my spine.

Sensing my unease, Amit tried to offer a solution. "Why don't you travel with me?" he suggested, his enthusiasm almost infectious. For a moment, I thought he had found a way to ease my worries.

But the logistics of his plan brought their own complications. "It would mean spending two more days away from home. What will I do in the meantime?" I asked, my mind grappling with the practicalities of his suggestion.

Undeterred, Amit countered with a note of determination. "We'll take a small trip to Dharamshala or Bir. Don't worry about it—just reach Pathankot, and we'll leave

together." His voice carried a sense of finality, as if he was trying to reassure me that everything would work out. Before I could respond, he ended the call, leaving me to mull over this new twist in our plans.

As I placed the phone down, I found myself staring into space, trying to reconcile the growing excitement for the adventure with the unexpected hurdles that had cropped up. Each moment of doubt was countered by the thought of the experiences that awaited—a delicate balance of hesitation and hope.

The thought of being away from my family for two extra days kept running through my mind. It was a mix of excitement and hesitation as I considered whether I should step in and try to control the situation or just let things happen naturally. In the end, I decided to let go of my need to control everything and trust the process. Sometimes, allowing things to unfold brings more peace than trying to manage every detail.

I remembered a lesson from the Bhagavad Gita, where Lord Krishna explains that "the mind is like a horse. If you control it, it becomes a faithful servant. But if you don't control it, it can lead you in any direction." This simple but profound teaching resonated with me. I needed to apply this wisdom in my own life: to control my mind, to direct my thoughts toward calm and focus, instead of letting them wander into doubts and worries.

When I shared the updated travel plans with Swati, her response was exactly what I needed to hear. Her natural positivity shone through. "Make the most of this trip. Two extra days means more time with your friends and more time to explore," she said with a smile. Her optimism reminded me of how often I get caught up in small setbacks and forget to look at the bigger picture. Her words gave me a fresh

perspective, helping me realize that the additional days were not a burden but an opportunity.

As the day of departure finally arrived, I packed my rucksack, ready to start this new chapter. I felt a strange mix of excitement and nervousness. Swati stood by with a bright smile, radiating confidence. In contrast, my parents and grandpa were visibly concerned. Their reminders to be careful and stay safe echoed in my ears. I knew they cared deeply, but a part of me felt ready to take on the challenge. Kannan, completely unaware of the complexities of the situation, was all smiles and excitement. She was still in that blissful stage of life where everything felt simple and carefree. Watching her, I found myself wishing I could keep that childlike innocence, free from worry, as I grew older. I bent down to kiss Kannan goodbye, savoring the innocence of her smile, before heading to the bus station, knowing this would be the start of something new.

Leaving behind the familiar comforts of home and heading for Ludhiana and beyond filled me with a whirlwind of emotions. It was more than just a physical journey; it felt like I was stepping into a new phase of my life. It was a journey not just of distance but of personal growth, exploration, and change. It represented a departure from the routine, an entry into new experiences that would challenge me in ways I hadn't expected. I knew I had to take control of my thoughts and emotions, allowing myself to grow and adapt, no matter what lay ahead.

The journey from Dalhousie to Pathankot unfolded over a bumpy, three-hour bus ride, offering a sharp contrast to the lively crowd of travelers heading towards the popular hill station. The bus rattled along, its path winding through the rugged terrain. My own journey was driven by a sense of

purpose that felt different from theirs, taking me far beyond the familiar, into a land I had never before explored.

The road between Dalhousie and Pathankot was a challenging one, characterized by sharp twists, hairpin bends, and constant bumps that made the journey strenuous. As the bus navigated these difficult stretches of road, I found my thoughts drifting to the adventure that awaited me in Nepal. The thought of traveling to a country that seemed both mysterious and slightly intimidating weighed on my mind. At that moment, an odd realization struck me—I didn't possess a passport. It had completely slipped my mind that I might need one, but then it dawned on me that Nepal's special status for Indian citizens meant I could travel there without one. This small detail now felt inconsequential in the context of my journey.

We made a brief stop in Dunera, a town that seemed to come alive with the hustle and bustle of everyday life. As the bus idled at the station, I took the opportunity to stretch my legs and indulge in a delicious serving of Dahi Bhalle from one of the oldest shops in the area. It was one of those experiences that instantly connected me to the place. Local delicacies like these often have stories of their own, passed down through generations and crafted by unsung heroes who spend years perfecting their recipes. Their contributions may go unnoticed by many, but for those who take the time to appreciate them, the flavors linger long after the meal is over. This Dahi Bhalle, with its perfect balance of tanginess and sweetness, became a symbol of the simplicity and authenticity of the region, offering a taste of something truly special.

As the bus continued its journey, the temperature gradually became milder, a sign that we were descending from the cool hills into the plains. The air felt fresher, and the

landscape began to change, offering a new kind of beauty. While the scenic beauty of the hills was majestic in its own way, I found myself enjoying the open expanses of the plains, the horizon stretching endlessly in front of me. Amidst the breathtaking views of the changing landscape, however, I couldn't help but feel a tinge of concern for the family I had left behind. The distance, both physical and emotional, started to settle in as I realized how much I would miss them during this trip. Though the excitement of the adventure ahead was overwhelming, the thought of them lingered in my mind. I had made arrangements for a few friends to check in on them regularly, ensuring that I wouldn't need to worry too much. It was a small comfort, one that allowed me to focus on the journey ahead.

About an hour into the journey, we passed through the town of Bungal, a small but bustling place that seemed to be an intersection of different lives. I couldn't help but feel a sense of connection to the people here, even if only for a fleeting moment, as I had done my Post Graduation from this place. I sent an update to Amit, letting him know I was on my way.

"Amit, just crossed Bungal," I texted, marking the progress of my journey.

His reply came swiftly, as expected, "I'm starting from home now. I'll be at the bus stop in fifteen minutes." It was comforting to know that he was on his way, eager to meet me and continue the journey together. The exchange was brief, but it helped me feel a little less distant from the world I was leaving behind and a little closer to the friends who would accompany me on this adventure.

As the bus made its way from the winding mountain roads to the smooth plains, the scenery underwent a dramatic transformation. The sharp curves of the hills faded away,

replaced by the wide, open stretches of a four-lane highway that seemed to stretch endlessly into the distance. With the change in landscape came a change in pace, as the bus was able to pick up speed on the flat road. The transition from the rugged mountains to the flat plains felt like the end of one chapter and the beginning of another. The end of the hills was only the beginning of something far greater—a journey that promised both challenges and revelations.

As the city welcomed us, it took only a few minutes to reach the bus stand. I disembarked with my trusty rucksack, immediately sensing the notable shift in weather from Dalhousie. The cool, crisp air of the hills that had necessitated a heavy jacket now felt stifling in the warmth of the plains. The jacket, my shield against the cold, quickly became a burdensome weight, and I felt the need to shed it. Setting my rucksack on the ground, I slipped out of the jacket, glad to feel the freedom of movement as I reached for my phone to dial Amit. However, before I could punch in his number, a familiar sound broke through my thoughts—a car engine revving, followed by the familiar screech of tires as Amit skillfully parked his car right in front of me.

Stepping out of the car, he greeted me with a warm hug, one that instantly made the transition from the cool hills to the bustling city seem less jarring. It had been months since we last met, and the reunion was a poignant reminder of the blessing that true friends are. In that moment, I realized how much I had missed his presence and the bond that we shared. Amit was more than a friend; he was a companion on life's journey, someone who had stood by my side through the highs and lows, offering support and laughter when it was most needed. Having shared countless experiences during our bachelor days, I knew that no matter where life took us, our friendship would remain an unshakable constant.

Emotions ran high as he effortlessly picked up my bag, as if the weight of years apart had never existed, and placed it in the trunk of his Swift. The gesture felt so natural, and yet, so meaningful—like no time had passed at all.

"What would you like to eat?" he asked as he slid into the driver's seat and started the car.

"Nothing right now," I replied, still adjusting to the sudden shift in pace and climate. "What's the plan?"

"I need to pick up the insurance from the nearby office," Amit explained, his voice calm and matter-of-fact. "Then, we're on our way to Ludhiana."

We drove for a short while, the familiar hum of the car's engine creating a comforting background as I took in the changing landscape. The city seemed to have its own rhythm, one that contrasted sharply with the laid-back tempo of Dalhousie. Amit skillfully navigated through the streets and soon pulled up in front of an office, parking the car with the ease of someone who knew the city well.

Seizing the opportunity, I made a quick call back home to assure them of my safe arrival in Pathankot. It was important to me that they knew I had made it safely, and the short call provided a sense of comfort.

Within minutes, Amit returned, settling back into the driver's seat. "Time to go," he declared with a grin, signaling the beginning of our journey toward Ludhiana. The car hummed to life once again, and I settled back into the seat. The excitement of reuniting with Amit and the anticipation of the adventure ahead made the rest of the world fade away as we drove toward Ludhiana, the road unfolding before us like a canvas waiting to be painted with new experiences.

The journey to Ludhiana unfolded over three hours, a stretch of time that allowed for a blend of introspection and excitement. We made a brief pit stop at a confectionery store, acquiring snacks to tide us over. The sight of rows of tempting treats—candies, chips, and bottled drinks—offered a small comfort, and I grabbed a packet of chips, savoring the familiar crunch. Once back on the road, the scenery shifted as we ventured onto the National Highway to Jalandhar, the landscape becoming increasingly flat and expansive as the hills faded into the background.

Yet, amid the sights and sounds of the drive, a sense of apprehension about the impending trip lingered within me. I had never been one to embark on such adventures without knowing what lay ahead, and the uncertainty of what to expect from the journey gnawed at me. My mind wandered to the group I would be meeting—people I had never met before. A feeling of unease settled in. Seeking reassurance, I turned to Amit, hoping his calm demeanor would offer some clarity.

"I don't know anyone on this trip, Amit. What should I expect?" I questioned, my voice carrying a hint of uncertainty as the wheels hummed beneath us.

Amit, sensing my apprehension, glanced over with a comforting smile. "You will love all of them. They are wonderful people," he said, his tone warm and reassuring. Still, I couldn't shake my curiosity, wanting more information about these people who would soon be part of my journey.

"Tell me about them," I urged, eager for more details.

Amit's expression softened as he began to share more about the group. "Trilok, you know him. He's a Spanish teacher in Ludhiana, a keen traveler, and the mastermind behind this trip," he explained, his hands expertly maneuvering the steering wheel as we continued on our path.

"And Vikas, he and Trilok studied together during their childhood in Shillong. Trilok's Dad was in the Armed Services and was posted there years back."

Amit's narrative highlighted the fascinating ways people connect, emphasizing the unpredictability of forging friendships and the shared experiences that bind people together. The stories he shared made me realize that while the people on the trip were strangers to me, they were united by a common thread—one that went beyond mere chance. The discussion about Trilok and Vikas sparked an intrigue within me, and a sense of eagerness began to grow. Even before meeting them, it felt as though a connection had already been established through Amit's stories. There was a certain warmth in his words, a sense of shared history that made the unknown feel more inviting.

"We will be meeting Trilok and Vikas today?" I asked, my voice tinged with anticipation as the thought of meeting these intriguing individuals took root in my mind.

"Yes, and a few other friends will be at our place," Amit replied. "Although they won't be joining us on the trip, many are into business and can't spare so many days away. But you'll get to meet them, and they're great people too."

Curious to learn more about the dynamics of the group and the trip itself, I continued the conversation. "When will the rest of the group be joining us for the trip?" I asked, hoping to understand more about the plans and who else would be part of this adventure.

Amit glanced over briefly, his eyes still focused on the road as the car sped down the highway. "They'll join us on the day of the trip," he answered with a hint of excitement in his voice. "We'll head out early in the morning, and by then,

everyone will be gathered. It's going to be quite a trip, Gaurav."

As we drove, I found myself looking forward to the journey ahead. Despite the initial uncertainty, I was beginning to feel more at ease with each passing mile. The promise of new friendships, shared adventures, and the anticipation of what lay ahead made the road to Ludhiana feel less like a distance to cover and more like the beginning of something exciting and unknown.

"Two days later, Tarun will be picking up Abhishek from Delhi. Abhishek, who joined us during our bike ride to Ladakh a few years ago, hails from Gwalior and is an Engineering student," Amit continued to shed light on the members of the upcoming trip.

As Amit spoke, it became evident that these weren't just casual travel companions but friends who had been a part of each other's lives for years, forming bonds that had withstood time and distance. Each one seemed to have their own story, adding to the rich tapestry of their collective experiences. The more Amit shared, the more I found myself eager to meet them all and experience the warmth of their friendship firsthand.

The mention of Tarun, however, triggered a vivid memory in Amit's mind. "Tarun is an incredible individual from Delhi. He joined us at the school as a German teacher in his early twenties. I still remember when he first arrived, his father accompanying him to settle him in. I was standing outside their room, having a conversation with his father, reassuring him that Tarun would be safe and well-cared for at the school. His father's trust in us was palpable. There was something about that moment—the responsibility I felt, the bond forming between us—that made it unforgettable."

Amit's nostalgia lingered in the air, and as he continued speaking about Tarun, the depth of his connection to him was apparent. "Tarun comes from a family of devotees," Amit added thoughtfully. "He's a member of the Radha Saomi sect in Beas. His evenings were often spent chanting and meditating, embodying a devout and pious spirit. In many ways, he was a calm, steady presence in our group."

But it wasn't just Tarun's spirituality that left an impression. Amit's smile widened as he shifted the focus of his story to one of the most memorable and somewhat absurd incidents in their shared history. "Now, let me tell you about the time Tarun had a rather, uh, interesting encounter with Thapa Sir, the tae-kwon-do instructor from Nepal."

The scene that Amit painted was nothing short of cinematic. "Thapa Sir, a big fan of non-vegetarian food, decided one day to bring a live chicken to the hostel, planning to prepare it for dinner. The trouble was, he had no idea about Tarun's staunch vegetarianism. Tarun, as you can imagine, had a deep aversion to anything non-vegetarian. So, one day, Thapa Sir knocked on Tarun's door, a hen in one hand and a Khukri (traditional Nepali knife) in the other, gleaming menacingly."

Amit's voice dropped lower as if he were narrating a suspenseful moment in a thriller. "Tarun opened the door, completely unsuspectingly, when the chaos began. The hen, in a flash of desperation, broke free from Thapa Sir's grasp, flapping its wings in terror and darting around the room. The sound of clucking filled the air, and the poor bird, driven by sheer panic, began to circle the room wildly. And that's when it happened—the hen slammed into the walls, ricocheted off a chair, and dashed past Tarun, who was frozen in shock."

Amit paused for a moment, and I could almost picture the scene in my mind. "In an unexpected turn of events, Thapa Sir, with remarkable speed, managed to corner the hen. Without a second thought, he pulled out the Khukri and, in one swift motion, beheaded the bird. The severed head fell to the floor, its eyes still wide open, and Tarun—well, he nearly fainted on the spot. The head of the chicken twitched for a moment, and Tarun could only stare at it, horrified. But what followed next was even more unsettling—after Thapa Sir placed the head at Tarun's feet, it trembled, as if still holding onto life, and Tarun, in that moment, trembled too."

Amit's face softened with empathy as he continued. "Tarun was so shaken by the entire ordeal that he immediately called his family in Delhi, pleading with them to take him back. I remember getting a call from his father, worried sick. He wanted to pull Tarun out, to bring him home, away from that traumatic experience. But I reassured him. I told him that we would take care of Tarun, and he would be safe here. That was the beginning of our deep connection with him. From that day on, he knew we would always have his back."

Amit let out a soft chuckle, shaking his head at the absurdity of the incident. "Tarun's response was classic. He was so disturbed he was ready to pack his bags and leave right away, but we managed to convince him to stay. And from that day, every time we talked about that episode, Tarun would get a little uncomfortable but couldn't help but laugh along with the rest of us. It became one of those memories we would revisit for years to come."

The moment seemed to hang in the air, and I couldn't help but smile at the ridiculousness and humor of it all. Amit's animated storytelling had brought the scene to life, and I could almost feel the tension in the room, followed by the release of

shared laughter as the absurdity of the situation settled in. It was clear that Tarun, despite the initial shock, had become an integral part of their circle.

"Tarun has a unique sense of humor," Amit concluded with a smile. "He's one of those friends who makes every trip unforgettable. Trust me, you're going to love spending time with him."

I could feel the excitement building up within me. The stories that Amit shared about the group only intensified my anticipation for the upcoming trip. From Tarun's spiritual devotion to his unforgettable encounter with the chicken, it was clear that this journey would be full of unexpected moments and lasting memories. And I was more than ready to be a part of it.

Curious about the last member of our travel group, I asked, "Who is the final addition to the trip?" The highway stretched ahead as Amit responded, "Shubham. He's a broker from Ludhiana and has been a part of many of our motorcycle trips. You'll like him."

As I absorbed the information, I couldn't help but reflect on the challenge of connecting with so many unfamiliar faces. With a trace of uncertainty in my voice, I admitted, "Apart from Tarun, I don't really know anyone else. I just hope I get along with everyone."

Amit gave me a reassuring smile. "Don't worry about that. They're all fun to be around, just like us. You'll fit right in," he said with confidence. His words felt like a comforting anchor, helping me let go of some of the apprehension that had been building up.

The road to Ludhiana was still an hour ahead, and I found myself growing increasingly aware of the changing

environment. The once-calm serenity of Dalhousie felt like a distant memory as we were now surrounded by a cacophony of honking horns and the relentless energy of a busier urban setting. The highway buzzed with activity, and the stark contrast made the transition feel even more pronounced.

To distract myself from the sensory overload, I decided to ask about the logistics of our journey. "What are the plans for where we'll be staying? And what's the budget looking like?" I inquired, eager for clarity.

Amit's response reflected his flexible nature. "We haven't made any bookings yet. The plan is simple—we'll pool some money and figure things out as we go. It's more fun that way," he said with a casual shrug, his tone indicating that this wasn't his first impromptu adventure.

While I had some cash on me, most of my funds were still in the bank. The thought of managing money in unfamiliar territory prompted me to mention my banking options. "I use PNB and SBI. Do you think those will work for withdrawals?" I asked.

"SBI cards work fine in Nepal," Amit assured me. "But don't carry too much cash there. It's better to withdraw when you need it. We read some articles about how carrying large sums might not be safe."

His advice eased my concerns, and I nodded in agreement. "I've kept the cash to a minimum," I said. Amit's practical tips, combined with his calm demeanor, helped me feel more prepared for what lay ahead. His steady presence had a way of making even the uncertainties of travel seem manageable.

As we approached Ludhiana, Amit pulled out his phone to call Trilok. I could sense the anticipation in his voice as he

spoke. "Trilok and Vikas are at Prince's place," he informed me, setting the stage for our upcoming meetup.

The city soon enveloped us with its characteristic buzz. Flyovers and wide roads stretched across the landscape, showcasing Ludhiana's rapid urban growth. Navigating the bustling streets was no easy task, but Amit handled it with ease, skillfully weaving through the traffic. His familiarity with the city became evident as he confidently took every turn, guiding us closer to our destination. The journey felt like a prelude to the adventures that awaited, and Amit's effortless driving only added to the excitement.

Our journey came to a pause as Amit expertly parked the car outside a modest double-story building. The winter chill of Ludhiana greeted us as we stepped out, our breaths visible in the crisp air. We made our way up the stairs, which led us to the terrace that Amit had mentioned.

The sight that met us was nothing short of charming. The terrace was transformed into a quaint oasis, with artificial grass giving it the feel of a serene hillside retreat. A narrow pathway, flanked by neatly arranged potted plants, guided us toward a small tin hut at the far end. The setup exuded warmth and simplicity, standing in stark contrast to the bustling urban landscape that surrounded it.

Inside the hut, dim lighting cast soft shadows on the walls, creating a cozy ambiance. The space was humble yet inviting, with two wooden beds pushed against the sides and a few mismatched chairs scattered around. The air carried a subtle mist, blending with the earthy scent of winter.

We were greeted by the cheerful faces of Vikas, Trilok, and Prince, who stood up as we entered. Their smiles were warm, immediately making me feel welcome.

“Gaurav bhai, we’ve heard so much about you. It’s great to finally meet you,” Vikas said, his handshake firm and friendly. Trilok and Prince echoed his sentiments, their hospitality genuine.

I chose a chair near one of the beds, taking in the surroundings. The hut, though simple, had a charm that reminded me of village homes—a rustic escape nestled in the heart of a growing city. The artificial grass on the terrace, the mist in the air, and the cozy confines of the tin hut created an atmosphere that felt both surreal and comforting.

The next couple of hours passed in a haze of laughter and lively conversation. Amit, Vikas, Trilok, and Prince shared stories, recounting past adventures and cracking jokes that had all of us chuckling. The easy friendship between them was infectious, and it didn’t take long for me to feel like a part of their circle.

As the evening wore on, Amit glanced at his watch and signaled it was time to move. “We should get going,” he said, adjusting his woolen cap. “Let’s meet at Trilok’s place for dinner.”

We all rose, reluctant to leave the warmth of the hut but eager to continue the evening. Prince accompanied us to the car, his friendly smile a fitting farewell. Amit expertly navigated the car out of the parking space, calling out to Prince as we left, “See you at dinner!”

The drive to Trilok’s house was lively, with Vikas and Trilok sharing anecdotes from their childhood. The journey felt shorter in their company, and before we knew it, we were pulling up in front of Trilok’s house, located at the backside of BRS Nagar.

After picking up the dinner order along the way, we unloaded our rucksacks from the car's trunk. Trilok unlocked the main gate, ushering us into the compound. His house stood modestly against the backdrop of the quiet neighborhood, its warm lights spilling out onto the front porch.

Stepping into Trilok's room felt like stepping into a different world. The walls were adorned with posters of iconic revolutionaries, Shaheed Bhagat Singh and Che Guevara, their bold images drawing the eye. The room was filled with personal touches—a testament to Trilok's admiration for those who dared to challenge the status quo.

The poster of Bhagat Singh evoked the memory of the fearless freedom fighter who had laid down his life for India's independence. His sacrifices and vision for an egalitarian society were a poignant reminder of the struggles that shaped our nation's history.

Che Guevara's poster added a global dimension to the room's character. The Cuban revolutionary, known for his relentless fight for social justice, represented ideals that transcended borders. I was reminded of *The Motorcycle Diaries*, a book I had read long ago that chronicled Che's transformative journey across South America.

The room, with its revolutionary undertones, was inspiring and thought-provoking. It felt like a space where ideas were exchanged and ideals were nurtured—a fitting backdrop for the conversations that awaited us over dinner.

Just as we began to settle into the room, the doorbell rang, breaking the rhythm of our discussion. Trilok excused himself and returned moments later, accompanied by three of his friends. Their sudden arrival filled the room with a lively buzz, and all at once, the once-cozy space felt crowded.

Introductions were made, and the newcomers brought with them an air of enthusiasm. They greeted everyone warmly, their energy instantly lifting the atmosphere. With more chairs pulled in and the group now complete, the room came alive with laughter and chatter.

Amid the clinking of plates and the occasional strum of a guitar, the evening unfolded. The once-muted room was now vibrant, brimming with stories and jokes.

The gathering at Trilok's house had set the tone for the adventure that awaited us. It was a reminder that journeys aren't just about the destinations—they're about the people who make the experience unforgettable.

As the evening went on, the atmosphere grew warmer. Laughter filled the room, stories flowed freely, and the guitar became a centerpiece of the gathering. The music connected everyone in a way words sometimes couldn't. Their music was a mix of familiar tunes and fresh melodies. Each note seemed to bring us closer, forming connections that would surely grow stronger.

Among the newcomers, I met Gurpreet, a kind teacher from a nearby school; Sudhanshu, an aspiring writer with a passion for storytelling; and Manpreet, a skilled guitarist whose music was already making the evening special. Their unique personalities and talents added depth, promising interesting conversations and experiences.

Trilok set up snacks and drinks while Gurpreet brought a bottle of wine. We formed a circle on the floor and began talking. Each person had something unique to share, and I enjoyed listening to their perspectives. Manpreet's guitar playing became the highlight of the evening. His music felt like a bridge, bringing everyone closer together.

I found a brief moment to talk with Amit about our plans for the next few days leading up to the Nepal trip. I was eager to hear the details, but before he could share much, the music drowned out his words. A wide grin spread across his face as he gave up trying to explain and joined the dancing crowd with his usual enthusiasm.

Just as the clock struck 11 pm, Shubham arrived, his entry marked by loud cheers from the group. His arrival injected fresh energy into the gathering. Wearing glasses that gave him a thoughtful and studious look, Shubham was greeted warmly by everyone, as if he were the highlight of the evening. While he seemed well-acquainted with the rest of the group, he was new to me.

Vikas took it upon himself to introduce us. “Gaurav Sir, meet Shubham, one of our fellow travelers to Nepal,” he said, his tone filled with affection. Shubham’s warm handshake was accompanied by words that instantly put me at ease. “I’ve heard a lot about you, Sir,” he said before pulling me into an unexpected yet comforting hug. Despite it being our first meeting, there was an odd sense of familiarity, as though we were picking up from where we’d left off in a past encounter.

By then, the long day had started to take its toll on me. My body yearned for rest, but the party showed no signs of winding down. Every corner of the house was buzzing with activity, and every room seemed occupied. Resigned to waiting, I leaned back, watching the celebration unfold around me, hoping the energy would settle soon enough for me to find a quiet corner to recharge.

The mix of talents and passions in the room—music, teaching, writing, and more—brought fresh energy to the evening. Reflecting on my college days, I couldn’t help but recall the persistent health challenges I had faced due to

allergies and respiratory issues. Those years were marked by an endless search for relief, a journey that took me down numerous paths. I started with the most accessible option: allopathic treatments and reliance on asthalin inhalers. While they offered temporary relief, they never provided the long-term solution I so desperately sought.

When conventional methods failed to deliver results, a ray of hope emerged through an unexpected source—a friend's grandmother who happened to be a homeopathic doctor. She introduced me to an entirely different perspective on healing. From walking barefoot on dew-kissed grass every morning to taking slow, deep breaths during the calm of the evening, her advice was rooted in simplicity and nature. Though unconventional, I embraced her suggestions wholeheartedly, driven by the desire to find a remedy.

My quest for recovery didn't end there. I sought diverse solutions, venturing into alternative practices. One such effort was inspired by Saquib's uncle in Meerut, who recommended a peculiar Thursday ritual involving a mixture of ghee and honey. Though skeptical at first, I decided to give it a try, adding yet another layer to the patchwork of treatments I was exploring. Each suggestion, whether grounded in tradition or alternative medicine, became a piece of the puzzle in my recovery. Even years later, I remain uncertain about which specific factors played a definitive role in my improvement. Perhaps it was the cumulative effect of all these efforts that helped me regain my health.

Fast forward to the present, I found myself in an unexpected confrontation with an old nemesis—smoke. It had been years since I had experienced the discomfort it brought, but here I was, sitting in a room filled with it. The closed windows, a defense against the biting chill of winter, trapped

the smoke, turning the space into a suffocating environment. The familiar heaviness in my chest began to creep back, a stark reminder of the struggles I had worked so hard to overcome.

Noticing my discomfort, Amit approached me. “Why don’t you step outside for a bit?” he suggested, his tone both understanding and firm. The cold outside seemed like a small price to pay for the fresh air that awaited me.

Stepping into the cold night, the fresh air felt like a relief from the smoky room. I walked back and forth outside, letting the cool air calm me. It became a pattern—I moved between the suffocating indoors and the open, refreshing outdoors, finding small moments of comfort each time.

By three in the morning, everyone was exhausted. The conversations had slowed, and laughter turned into quiet murmurs. Finally, we decided to end the gathering. The room emptied as people settled into their blankets, leaving behind the scattered remains of the night—glasses, snacks, and a lingering warmth from the earlier fun. Cleaning could wait until morning when we were all rested.

While others quickly drifted off to sleep, I struggled to rest in the unfamiliar surroundings. By six in the morning, I was awake again, greeted by an eerie sight. A thin layer of smoke hung in the room, highlighted by the faint light coming through the windows. It looked strange, almost like a cloud floating inside. Rising slowly, I walked through the haze, and the smell brought back unpleasant memories. I was reminded of the days when I struggled to breathe because of my allergies, a time I thought I had left behind.

For a moment, I stood still, unsure if I had made the right choice to leave home for this trip. The smoke in the room felt like a reflection of my thoughts—clouded and unclear. Doubts

crept in, making me question whether I was ready for this journey.

Hoping to clear my head, I stepped outside again. The dim morning light revealed a quiet, misty world. The cold air was sharp but refreshing, offering a small sense of relief. Inside, I could see Vikas, Amit, and Trilok still fast asleep, undisturbed by the smoke or my inner struggles. They looked so at peace, and I wished I could feel the same.

I returned to my blanket, trying to rest, but my thoughts wouldn't settle. Memories of my past health issues mixed with worries about the trip ahead, making it impossible to relax. Every time I tried to push the thoughts away, they only grew stronger.

As I lay there, I realized this wasn't just about the discomfort in the room—it was about facing my own doubts and fears. The trip hadn't even started, and yet it was already testing me in ways I hadn't expected.

The room remained cloaked in darkness for fifteen minutes, the sun yet to cast its morning light. I sat there, observing my friends lost in the peace of their dreams, and found myself pondering the strange paradox of time. In moments of happiness, time seems to rush by. But in times of unease, every second stretches endlessly, almost mocking the weight of our emotions.

By eight in the morning, Trilok began to stir, breaking the stillness. He greeted me warmly, asking, "How was your sleep?" I gave a simple nod, and he smiled before offering, "Would you like some tea?"

"Yes, surely," I replied, grateful for the gesture.

"Vikas brought some special tea leaves from Shillong. They're excellent. Let me make some for you," Trilok said

with a touch of enthusiasm, and he left with the promise of a delightful brew. The thought of savoring something unique lifted the lingering heaviness from my mind, if only slightly.

The tea arrived, its rich aroma filling the air, and we savored it together. Soon after, Amit stirred awake, his groggy "Good morning" accompanied by a yawn that made us both smile. Vikas, lying nearby, also woke up, his first words being, "Did you sleep well?" I nodded again, and we all moved to the compound, seeking the gentle warmth of the morning sun to shake off the cold.

As we basked in the sunlight, Amit's eyes caught something in my demeanor. His years of knowing me allowed him to pick up on my unspoken discomfort. Without drawing attention, he leaned closer and asked, "What will you have for breakfast?"

"Whatever," I replied curtly, the tension in my voice unmistakable.

Recognizing the need for privacy, Amit gently took my hand and suggested, "Let's take a walk to the market for breakfast."

Away from the others, Amit turned to me, his tone kind but firm. "What's wrong?"

Taking a deep breath, I let my words tumble out. "Amit, you know about my breathing issues. When I woke up this morning, there was smog in the room. I had to sleep under it, and now I can't shake the feeling that this trip might be too much for me." My voice was sharper than I intended, frustration mingling with doubt.

Amit listened intently, his concern evident. I confessed my growing second thoughts about the journey, the fear that my health might falter along the way. The thought of turning

back loomed large in my mind, and I suggested a way out. "Maybe it's better if you drop me at the station. I can catch a train back to Pathankot," I said, the words heavy with disappointment.

Chapter 3

Echoes of Sarabha

The sharp aroma of freshly baked *kulchas* wafted through the air, setting a tone of calm optimism for the morning. The golden rays of the winter sun melted the lingering chill, creating a perfect backdrop for our breakfast get-together. Amit, Trilok, Vikas, and I sat together at the table, enjoying the food and each other's company.

Trilok, carefully savoring his kulcha, shared his thoughts between bites. "Traveling outside Ludhiana before such a long journey might not be the smartest move. Let's save our energy," he suggested, his practical voice carrying weight.

Amit, always brimming with ideas, leaned forward. "True, but we can't just sit idle. We need something to keep Vikas and Gaurav engaged," he said with a mischievous grin.

The idea of exploring Ludhiana began to take shape, sparked by Trilok's insistence on seeing the city itself. "There's a lot more to Ludhiana than we realize," he said, his eyes lighting up. "Why not uncover the hidden gems it has to offer?"

Amit picked up his car keys, the jingle cutting through the hum of the morning. "How about exploring the city? Nothing beats the thrill of riding through Ludhiana's streets," he proposed, tossing the keys in my direction.

I caught them, a mix of excitement and nervous anticipation stirring within me. The thought of navigating Ludhiana's packed, often chaotic roads filled me with equal parts thrill and apprehension. Yet, it was an invitation to adventure, one I couldn't resist.

The breakfast table quickly turned into a planning hub, alive with ideas and suggestions. From historical landmarks to lively local markets, we charted a route that promised to capture the essence of Ludhiana. This wasn't just about killing time—it was about creating moments worth remembering.

"What do you think, Vikas?" Amit asked as we paused to finalize our first stop.

Vikas smiled warmly. "Brothers, it's not about where we go. When we're together, the place itself becomes special. The fun is in the company, not the destination."

His words struck a chord, a simple truth that deeply resonated. Friends don't need a spectacular setting to enjoy themselves—the magic lies in being together.

"Let's start with the fort," Trilok suggested, a spark of enthusiasm in his voice.

"Sounds like a solid plan," Amit agreed, his energy infectious.

With that, we kick-started our day of discovery, weaving through Ludhiana's streets, ready to turn the ordinary into extraordinary.

The winter day was warm and comfortable—perfect weather for exploring. After a twenty-minute drive, we arrived at the edge of the city. Amit skillfully guided the car through narrow lanes before parking near a small clearing. Trilok led

us to a closed gate, but a narrow opening allowed us to slip inside.

The fort stretched before us, its weathered walls telling silent stories of the past. The mix of neglect and occasional maintenance gave it a rustic charm, hinting at a balance between nature and preservation efforts.

As we wandered through the fort, we spotted a grassy patch bathed in sunlight. It looked inviting, so we settled down to rest. Nearby, college students were chilling, enjoying the mild December sun.

Trilok, always ready with a story, pulled out a packet of chips and began sharing a memory. "We camped here once—right out in the open under the stars," he said with a grin.

"It's not like camping in the hills," he added, "but it was still fun."

His stories painted a lively picture of the place, and we could imagine the fort coming alive at night. We enjoyed the quiet moment, soaking up the warmth while planning our upcoming journey to Nepal.

After about an hour, we decided it was time to leave. The fort had given us a peaceful break, and we were ready to continue, eager for the next part of our adventure.

"What's next?" Vikas asked as we climbed into the car.

"Let's grab something to eat first," Amit suggested, already scanning for a good spot.

"We've got the whole day and tomorrow to explore," Vikas added, wondering how we'd fill the time.

"How about visiting Sarabha?" Trilok proposed.

“It’s more of a historical place,” Amit warned, glancing at me, “Gaurav might not be into it.”

Curious, I asked, “Where is Sarabha, and what makes it historical?”

“It’s the birthplace of Kartar Singh Sarabha,” Amit replied.

Feeling a bit embarrassed, I admitted, “I’m not familiar with him.”

“Then let’s go,” Amit said, accelerating the car towards our next stop.

We paused at McDonald’s for a quick bite. The clock was already striking 4, and Trilok reminded us to keep moving. “If we delay too much, we might miss seeing Sarabha before dark,” he cautioned.

Leaving the bustling city behind, I couldn’t help but notice the rapid expansion on its outskirts. The shift from urban to rural was subtle yet striking, and soon we were greeted by a signboard welcoming us to Sarabha village.

“A breath of fresh air,” Trilok remarked as we stepped out. “This place has a certain charm.”

Curious about the significance of the village, I asked, “What makes this place important?”

Their amused expressions hinted I’d made a blunder. Turning to Amit, I sought an answer.

“Kartar Singh Sarabha was Shaheed Bhagat Singh’s mentor,” Amit explained, adding with a smirk, “And don’t tell me you don’t know who Bhagat Singh was.”

Embarrassed, I realized how little I’d explored such an important part of history. Bhagat Singh, though a towering

youth icon, often took a backseat to Gandhi in school curricula. His fiery speeches and unwavering dedication were inspiring, yet I had overlooked their depth.

Amit grinned at my discomfort, and I couldn't help but feel regretful for my ignorance. As we strolled through Sarabha's simple lanes, I resolved to learn more about the revolutionary spirit of these figures.

The paths were unkempt, revealing nothing of the village's historical significance. Trilok eventually stopped in front of a modest, two-story house. I hesitated, unsure of its importance but decided to hold my questions this time.

"Shall we go in?" Trilok asked, breaking the silence.

Still dazed by the experience, I followed Trilok into the house. As I stepped inside, the air seemed to carry an unspoken reverence. The room we entered revealed a powerful truth—this was the residence of Shaheed Kartar Singh Sarabha, one of the youngest martyrs of India's freedom struggle. The ground floor displayed a treasure trove of photographs and memorabilia that chronicled his journey from a curious and playful child to a determined revolutionary. Each frame seemed to echo the fervor and passion of a young boy who dared to dream of a free India, even at the cost of his life.

Born in 1896 in the village of Sarabha, Kartar Singh's life was a whirlwind of inspiration and courage. After moving to the United States for higher studies, he was deeply moved by the plight of Indians under the British Raj. Joining the Ghadar Party at just 17, he became an active participant in its revolutionary activities, spreading the message of freedom through newspapers and public meetings. The walls of this house seemed to carry whispers of those tumultuous times,

reminding us of the sacrifices made by a teenager whose dreams were larger than life.

As I absorbed these visuals, the weight of his sacrifice struck me deeply. At just nineteen, Kartar Singh Sarabha had been arrested, tortured, and ultimately hanged for his role in the Ghadar Movement. The sheer magnitude of his bravery left me in awe. How could someone so young possess such unwavering determination? My thoughts wandered to the well-preserved homes of other freedom fighters in Delhi, places that serve as vibrant testaments to their legacies. In contrast, this humble abode felt neglected, its walls yearning for the same respect and care. It saddened me to think that such an important historical site wasn't receiving the attention it deserved.

After soaking in the powerful imagery of the ground floor, Trilok gestured for us to follow him upstairs. As we ascended the creaking wooden staircase, I found myself reflecting on Kartar Singh's ideals. His fiery speeches, his writings filled with hope and rebellion, and his willingness to embrace death for the greater good—all of it seemed to come alive in this space.

The first floor held a delightful surprise. Balloons, handmade paintings, and colorful tributes to Kartar Singh Sarabha adorned the room. The youthful energy of the decorations contrasted beautifully with the somber history of the house. As I walked around, I noticed names written on the artwork—seventh and eighth-grade children who had poured their creativity into this tribute. Trilok, noticing my curiosity, shared the touching story behind these decorations.

"Our children did all this," he said, his pride evident in his voice.

"Really? That's incredible," I replied, marveling at the effort.

"I had been teaching the kids about Kartar Singh Sarabha during a Spanish class," Trilok explained. "His story moved them so much that they all wanted to visit this place. With the Principal's approval, we organized an excursion. Everything you see here—the balloons, the paintings, the slogans—was made by them as a tribute to his legacy. They poured their hearts into this."

His words resonated deeply with me. It was heartening to see how Kartar Singh's story continued to inspire the younger generation, even a century later. Observing Trilok's pride in his students and his dedication to keeping history alive, I couldn't help but feel a newfound admiration for him. As a teacher myself, I realized how much I could learn from his approach. It made me reflect on my own interactions with my students and how I could foster meaningful connections with them.

We settled on a mattress in the corner of the room. Our discussion soon turned to the countless unsung heroes of India's freedom struggle. While figures like Kartar Singh Sarabha had left a profound mark on history, many other names had been forgotten, their sacrifices buried under the sands of time. Vikas lamented how the education system often glosses over these stories, and we all agreed on the need for a complete systemic overhaul.

As the discussion evolved, we delved into broader societal issues—economic disparities, the growing divide between the rich and poor, and the urgent need for systemic change. Drawing from his expertise in social science, Amit shed light on how many freedom fighters around the world, including

those like Kartar Singh, had favored ideals closer to socialism or communism, believing in equality and justice for all.

Yet, as our conversation deepened, the tug-of-war between idealism and practicality emerged. While we admired the selflessness of figures like Kartar Singh Sarabha, we couldn't ignore the reality of our own aspirations—personal success, financial stability, and the pressures of modern life. It was a sobering reminder of the complex world we live in, where the ideals of the past often clash with the demands of the present.

After nearly half an hour of profound deliberation, we decided to continue exploring. As we descended the staircase, I cast one last glance at the room, now imbued with a deeper understanding of its significance. Outside, we noticed a small shop adjacent to the house. The shopkeeper, spotting us, approached with a warm smile, breaking the reflective silence that had enveloped us.

"It's very rare for people to visit this place, Sir," remarked the shopkeeper, his tone carrying a mix of surprise and quiet disappointment.

Acknowledging the weight of his words, Trilok replied, "You are right, Sir. The sacrifice Kartar Singh Sarabha made at such a young age is beyond comprehension for most. It's a challenge even to grasp the courage it must have taken to stand up to the British at just nineteen." He paused, his voice tinged with sadness. "And yet today, many of our youth are surrendering their lives, not to a noble cause, but to the grip of drugs. It's heartbreaking."

The specter of drug abuse hung heavily over the conversation. It wasn't just Punjab's problem anymore—it was a malaise spreading its roots across the nation. Still, it felt

particularly tragic here, in the same soil that had birthed one of India's bravest sons.

The shopkeeper, introducing himself as Savneet Singh Sarabha, invited us warmly into his shop. A quick exchange of glances was enough for us to agree. A short respite in his company felt appropriate, perhaps even necessary.

Inside, Savneet greeted us with a firm handshake and an engaging smile. My curiosity about his surname compelled me to ask, "Is Sarabha your family name or something else?"

"Sarabha is the name of this village," he clarified patiently. "Many residents here use it as their surname. It's a way of carrying forward the identity of our birthplace." His tone hinted at my lapse in knowledge, yet he spoke without condescension. As we settled into the shop, he began narrating the changes he had witnessed in the village over the years.

"In our childhood," he began, his voice laced with nostalgia, "we would play Kabaddi in the fields, organize cricket matches, and gather as a community. But now, if you go to those same fields, you'll find young boys indulging in drugs. It's painful to see the decline."

Trilok leaned forward, his concern evident. "Are there no efforts to guide them or pull them back?"

Savneet shook his head, his expression solemn. "No, Sir. They don't listen to anyone. Families are being torn apart. Those who realize there's no future here leave as soon as they can, often migrating to Canada and other countries after Grade twelve."

Savneet's words painted a stark picture of the exodus of youth from the region—a departure driven as much by despair as by ambition. Yet, there he stood, choosing to stay, bound by an unwavering love for his roots.

"I wanted to remain close to my motherland, savoring the essence of the village," he explained. "In fact, I've written a few songs inspired by this place. Would you like to hear one?"

His enthusiasm was infectious, and Amit encouraged him, "Yes, please. We'd love to."

With a beaming smile, Savneet gestured for his friend to close the shop door, ensuring no outside disturbances. In the intimate quiet that followed, he began singing. His voice, rich and resonant, filled the room with a Punjabi song that spoke of hope and resilience. Though I couldn't fully grasp the language, the meaning was clear:

"My Beautiful Punjab will rise again, one day when the clouds of darkness will clear. The mothers will have their children back, and Punjab will be free from the shackles of drugs and corruption. The youth will no longer have to leave for foreign lands, for the fragrance of our soil is unmatched. One day, the dreams of Kartar Singh Sarabha and Bhagat Singh will become a reality. My Beautiful Punjab will rise again."

When he finished, the room erupted in applause. The genuine joy radiating from Savneet's face was unmistakable—he had found an audience that truly understood and appreciated his message.

"I wrote it myself," he said, his pride unmistakable.

"Seriously?" I asked, genuinely impressed. "It's incredible."

"And the music?" Amit added.

"All by myself," he replied, his confidence shining through.

"You're doing great work, Savneet," Vikas commended him, the admiration in his voice echoing our sentiments.

As the conversation carried on, Savneet insisted on treating us to tea. "A cup of tea would be good at this time," he suggested.

Though Amit initially declined, saying it was already late, Savneet's insistence won us over. "Please, Sir. There's a dhaba nearby. It won't take long."

With that, we exited his shop, and Savneet locked up before leading the way on his motorcycle. Vikas hopped on behind him while the rest of us followed in the car. The dhaba, a small roadside eatery, welcomed us with its simple charm. Chairs were arranged under the open sky, and the aroma of freshly brewed tea wafted through the air.

As we settled into our seats, I asked Savneet to tell us more about the village. His response was a blend of pride and sorrow. "It's like any other village in Punjab. Most families rely on farming, but now it's mostly elders who remain. The youth move out for better opportunities, and those who stay often fall into addiction."

He sighed before continuing, "Even Kartar Singh Sarabha's birthplace is in a sorry state. It could be so much more—a place of inspiration for generations to come."

"The government doesn't care," he added bitterly. "On his birthday, they organize a token function, take a few photos, and then leave. By evening, it's as if nothing happened."

When the waiter brought tea and pakoras, Trilok remarked, "It's getting late for snacks. Tea alone would've been fine."

"How could I offer you just plain tea?" Savneet replied with a warm smile.

As we finished our tea and snacks, the sun dipped below the horizon, casting the surroundings in a blanket of darkness. It was time to leave. Trilok expressed our gratitude, and Savneet hugged each of us warmly, as if we were old friends. His kindness and hospitality left a lasting impression on me.

Driving back in silence, my mind was awash with reflections. I thought about Kartar Singh Sarabha, a young boy who had given everything for his country, and about Savneet, a man holding onto hope and love for his homeland despite the odds. Amid the darkness of addiction and apathy, people like Savneet shone as beacons of light, reminding us of the resilience and goodness that still exist in the world.

"Is it a good day?" Amit glanced at me. His question carried more meaning than the words. Earlier that morning, I had expressed second thoughts about joining this trip.

"Yes," I replied with a smile. It wasn't just an answer but a reassurance—to him and myself—that the hesitation had faded.

"Let's take Gaurav to BRS Nagar market," Amit suggested, looking at Trilok.

"It's late, and we still need to figure out dinner," Trilok said, glancing at his watch.

"It won't take long. Besides, you're not cooking tonight. We'll grab something on the way back," Amit insisted, already turning the car toward the market.

"Gaurav bhai, there's a small bookstore in the market run by a group of young people. They call themselves the Hindustan Republican Army," Trilok said. His voice carried a

note of excitement as though he was already anticipating my reaction.

“HRA? That’s Bhagat Singh’s group,” I said, eager to contribute something meaningful to the conversation.

“Yes,” Amit added, glancing at me in the rearview mirror. “These youngsters want to carry forward Bhagat Singh’s ideals. You’ll find it inspiring.”

The bookstore, tucked away in a quiet corner of the market, was modest but radiated a unique energy. Trilok greeted the owners, Naveen and Prerna, who stood up to welcome us warmly. “We brought friends from Himachal and Meghalaya today,” Trilok announced proudly. As we shook hands and introduced ourselves, I noticed the spark of passion in their eyes—a kind of conviction rarely seen these days.

Trilok’s admiration for Bhagat Singh was no secret. His home was adorned with pictures of the revolutionary, alongside images of Che Guevara. While Che was celebrated as a symbol of rebellion and freedom, Trilok’s true hero was Bhagat Singh. “Che is iconic for bikers, thanks to *The Motorcycle Diaries*, but Bhagat Singh was more than a revolutionary—he was a thinker,” Trilok once told me.

Naveen seemed to sense Trilok’s passion and quickly steered the conversation toward Bhagat Singh’s ideals. “People often remember Bhagat Singh for the bombs and the slogans,” Naveen began. “But they overlook his immense love for books. He read everything he could get his hands on—philosophy, economics, politics. His vision for India wasn’t just about independence but about equality, fairness, and progress.”

Prerna chimed in, her voice steady but filled with emotion. “He dreamed of an India free from drugs, poverty, and inequality. But look around—so many states are drowning

in drug abuse. We're trying to remind people of his vision, especially the youth."

Naveen leaned forward, his words deliberate. "Our mission is simple but challenging. We go to villages every evening, meeting young people and spreading Bhagat Singh's message. We want them to know that freedom isn't just about politics—it's about self-reliance, education, and standing up for what's right."

As they spoke, I felt a wave of admiration. These weren't just words—they were living their beliefs. Naveen, just nineteen, and Prerna, twenty-three, had dedicated their youth to a cause much larger than themselves.

"What about your families? Are they supportive?" Amit asked, genuinely curious.

"They were hesitant at first," Prerna admitted with a soft smile. "But now they see our dedication. They've come to terms with it."

"And marriage?" Vikas teased, leaning back in his chair.

"We've taken a vow to stay unmarried," Naveen said with quiet determination. "Our focus is on the mission."

As the market began to close, Trilok checked the time. "It's almost nine. Should we drop you somewhere?"

"No, sir. We'll take the bike," Prerna said, standing up. Naveen nodded, ready to give her a ride.

Before leaving, we pulled out a few books and posters. Trilok placed a five-hundred-rupee note on the table. "This isn't for the books—it's for your mission," he said with a warm smile.

Prerna looked surprised. “The books cost only hundred rupees. We don’t want more than that.”

But Trilok insisted, and we left the bookstore feeling lighter, inspired by their dedication.

As we walked back to the car, I couldn’t stop thinking about the day. Just fifteen hours ago, I was filled with doubt and hesitation, unsure if this trip was the right decision. Now, I felt a spark inside me—a curiosity, an eagerness to see more of the world and meet people like Naveen and Prerna who dared to dream big.

Later, Amit parked outside Chawla’s dhaba to pick up dinner. “It’s been a long day,” he said, stretching his arms.

“I feel alive,” I replied, surprising even myself.

Back at the house, we talked about the next day’s plans. Amit suggested visiting Bhagat Singh’s village, Khatkar Kalan. Trilok proposed heading to Chandigarh after that, where we could regroup before moving toward Uttar Pradesh. “Hardil has arranged everything,” Trilok assured us, referring to his friend.

As the others went to bed, Amit couldn’t resist teasing me. “Should I book your train tickets home tomorrow morning?” he joked, tossing a pillow at me.

“Maybe from Chandigarh,” I said with a grin, throwing it back.

Lying in bed, I thought about how much had changed in a single day. Last night, I was terrified, weighed down by my doubts. But today, I didn’t want the day to end. It was as if the world had shifted, offering me a glimpse of something bigger and more meaningful. Time, I realized, is a strange force—it can drag you down one moment and lift you up the next. Yeh

waqtbhiguzarjayega (this too shall pass)—a mantra I'd often heard but never truly understood until now.

With my heart full of gratitude and anticipation, I closed my eyes, ready for whatever the journey would bring.

Chapter 4

The Chandigarh Conundrum

I woke up feeling surprisingly refreshed, a stark contrast to the restless tossing and turning of the previous night. It was around eight in the morning when I finally decided to get up, and the winter air greeted me with its crisp, quiet stillness. There's something magical about winter mornings—the way the sun seems to take its time, allowing the world to embrace the new day at a relaxed pace. The stillness of the hour felt like a comforting blanket, wrapping everything in its serene calm.

As I glanced around, it was clear that everyone else was still fast asleep, lost in their dreams. The tranquility of the moment tempted me to slip outside into the compound. The quiet was almost meditative. Standing there, wrapped in the cool embrace of the morning air, I felt an urge to reach out to Swati and check in with her.

The call connected instantly, and Swati's cheerful voice greeted me. It was obvious she had been waiting eagerly to hear from me. Her warmth was unmistakable, and as we exchanged updates about the family, I couldn't resist sharing all the little details about the previous day. Every word I spoke seemed to spark joy in her, but even amidst her laughter and encouragement, I couldn't help confessing how much I missed everyone back home.

Just as our conversation began to settle into its natural rhythm, Amit stepped out of the house. He noticed me on the phone and, with a knowing look, approached. Before I could react, he gently took the phone from my hand. "Swati, everything is perfectly fine here. Don't let him worry you for no reason," he said, his tone a mixture of playfulness and concern.

Handing the phone back, he turned to me and said firmly, "Don't make them overthink things. Just tell them the good stuff."

"I was just saying I missed everyone," I replied, defending myself.

Amit raised an eyebrow. "And that's enough to get them worried. Stick to the good parts," he advised, a faint smile tugging at his lips.

To shift the mood, Amit changed the subject. "By the way, have you ever been to Chandigarh?" he asked as he settled onto a nearby bench.

"I lived there for six months while working with Bajaj Allianz," I replied. "Rented a flat in Sector 19."

"Good to know. And you're okay with heading there again?" he asked, gauging my response.

"It's not about the place, Amit. It's the company that makes the trip worthwhile. I'll enjoy it as long as I'm with all of you," I said sincerely, earning an approving nod from him.

"Tea?" Amit offered, already heading toward the kitchen. I nodded, appreciating the gesture.

As I sat sipping tea, watching the sky slowly transition from dark to light, I found myself reflecting on how we often overlook such simple moments in our daily routines. Back

home, I would still be asleep at this hour, blissfully unaware of the world waking up. Yet here I was, relishing the quiet beauty of a winter morning. It struck me that a change in routine is sometimes all we need to notice life from a fresh perspective.

Soon, Trilok and Vikas emerged from the house, their voices breaking the calm. “Good morning, early riser,” Vikas greeted me with a teasing smile.

“Must be the charm of a new place,” I replied, grinning back.

The four of us chatted over tea and biscuits, discussing plans for the day. Trilok informed us that we’d start our journey around one in the afternoon since it was about a three-hour drive to Chandigarh. As the morning progressed, Trilok and Vikas busied themselves packing, following the rule we had set—only one bag per person. Trilok’s meticulous approach was impressive; he had even prepared a detailed checklist, including essential medicines. His level of organization reflected how much thought he had put into ensuring everything would run smoothly.

Meanwhile, Amit and I took charge of securing the house. We locked every door and window, gathered the terrace chairs, and made sure nothing was left out of place. The task took about half an hour, but it felt satisfying to leave the house in order.

With everything sorted, Amit and I took Trilok’s bike to grab breakfast. The winter sun shone warmly on us as we navigated through the city traffic, its golden rays adding a touch of vibrancy to the otherwise subdued morning. After breakfast, we returned home, ready to finalize preparations for departure.

To streamline expenses, we agreed to pool five thousand rupees per person. It was a practical decision, ensuring simplicity and avoiding any confusion later.

“Did you speak to Hardil?” Amit asked Trilok as we went over the plan one last time.

“Yes. He’ll meet us at Sector 17 market,” Trilok confirmed.

“And you’ve explained the budget? We need to stick to it,” Amit reminded him, his tone firm.

“Of course. He knows the plan,” Trilok replied, a hint of irritation creeping into his voice.

“Good. If anything goes off track, you’ll be covering the extra expenses,” Amit quipped, half-serious. Trilok chose not to respond, focusing instead on the journey ahead.

By one in the afternoon, all our luggage was carefully arranged in the compound. Each room had been meticulously checked to ensure nothing was left behind. To add a final touch of thoroughness, the main electric supply was turned off by flipping the MCB switches, and the gas cylinder, now disconnected from the kitchen, was placed alongside the rest of our belongings. It felt like we were closing a chapter in our temporary abode.

Right on time, Prince and Shubham arrived. They helped us load the gas cylinder into the trunk of their car while the rest of our luggage found a spot in Amit's car. Trilok's bike, which also needed safekeeping, was brought out with care. Standing outside the now-secured home, we exchanged a few light-hearted jokes and well-wishes, the kind of moments that warm you before the beginning of an adventure.

"Best of luck for the trip. Drive safe," Prince said with genuine warmth as I turned on the ignition.

"We'll meet in Ambala by eight tomorrow morning. Don't be late," Shubham reminded us with a tone that carried both expectation and humor.

"Don't worry, we won't be," Vikas assured him with a smile, taking his place in the passenger seat beside me. With his phone out, he opened Maps to navigate our route, ensuring a smooth journey ahead.

Ludhiana's midday traffic was mercifully light, and soon, we were cruising on the highway. The estimated time on the app suggested less than two hours to our destination. The hum of the road seemed to invite conversation, and I turned to Vikas, curious about his background.

"Tell me about Meghalaya," I asked, eager to learn more about his home state in the North East.

He spoke with pride, painting a vivid picture of its unique culture and traditions. "We have the Ziro Festival every year in September and October. It's a major event back home," he said, his tone filled with nostalgia.

"That sounds incredible. We should plan to visit next year," Trilok chimed in from the backseat, raising an imaginary toast to the idea.

"Amen to that," Amit added enthusiastically, echoing the sentiment.

While they were already envisioning a future adventure, I found myself quietly contemplating the road ahead. "I'll try my best to be there," I said hesitantly, trying to keep up with their excitement.

About an hour into the drive, the inevitable pangs of hunger struck. Amit suggested finding a good spot for lunch, and before long, we were seated at a roadside dhaba. The aroma of freshly cooked food filled the air as we eagerly awaited our meal. Trilok took the opportunity to call Hardil, updating him on our estimated time of arrival.

Resuming our journey, we found ourselves slowing down as we approached Ropar, where the traffic grew denser. Despite the delays, we managed to reach the Sector 17 market in Chandigarh as planned. The city greeted us with its characteristic charm—no towering skyscrapers, just an elegant skyline that had remained true to its roots amidst the evolving urban landscape.

We decided to treat ourselves to ice creams, finding a quiet bench to sit and wait for Hardil. Trilok kept in touch with him, and soon, a formally dressed young man approached us in the parking lot. His attire sharply contrasted with our casual clothes, but his demeanor was warm and welcoming.

"What would you like to eat?" Hardil asked after brief introductions.

"We had a late lunch," Trilok replied, trying to decline politely.

"Have you been to Elante Mall?" Hardil asked again.

"No," Amit admitted, curious about the suggestion.

The prospect of visiting a place new to all of us was appealing, so we agreed to his plan. "Leave your vehicle here. We'll take mine. I have a Scorpio that can easily fit everyone," Hardil offered, leading us to his car.

The sun had set by the time we arrived at Elante Mall. Its sheer size and grandeur left us in awe. However, as we walked around, the glitzy storefronts and branded outlets felt oddly out of place for a group that had hoped to explore Chandigarh's cultural and architectural treasures.

After about half an hour of wandering, we voiced our preference for a different experience. "This is my first time here, Hardil, but I was hoping to see more of Chandigarh's essence. These malls are common in every city," Vikas expressed, articulating the sentiment we all shared.

Hardil nodded understandingly and suggested, "How about Sukhna Lake?" We agreed, hoping to salvage the evening. However, as we drove through the city, Amit decided it would be better to return to Sector 17 and finalize our stay arrangements. "Better you drop us at 17. Everyone's tired and needs some rest," he said diplomatically.

Hardil, still eager to assist, asked about our accommodation budget. His question caught us off guard, as we had assumed he had already made the arrangements. Trilok, visibly frustrated, instructed him to share the hotel's contact details without confirming the booking.

As the conversation grew tense, we collectively realized the importance of taking charge of our own plans. Wanting to lighten the mood, I suggested, "Let's head to Sector 34. I remember finding good hotels there during a previous visit."

Amit had a different idea brewing in his mind. "I have a friend from my city who might be able to help. Let me give it a try," he said confidently, pulling out his phone. The thought of reaching out to friends in Chandigarh had crossed my mind as well, but the practicality of housing four people seemed questionable. After all, it wasn't just about finding space; it was about not imposing too much. Trilok immediately voiced his

concern. "Amit, this might get complicated. Just let it go," he said, shaking his head.

But Amit wasn't one to back down easily. Unperturbed by the suggestion, he dialed the number and started speaking in rapid Punjabi. From his tone and expressions, I could sense a flicker of hope. However, Trilok, a man of little patience when it came to uncertain plans, continued to insist, "Let's not waste time on this. It's late; we should just look for a hotel nearby." His reasoning wasn't wrong—none of us were in the mood for a wild goose chase.

Minutes later, Amit disconnected the call and announced with a triumphant grin, "We're going to Sector 22. Gaurav, you drive, and I'll navigate. Dheera has sent the location." His excitement was almost infectious, but Trilok remained skeptical. "I just hope this doesn't turn out to be a makeshift setup," he muttered under his breath.

As we set off, Trilok couldn't help but make one last plea. "Amit, why can't we just check into a hotel? We're all exhausted, and we really need proper rest tonight." There was a sense of desperation in his voice, but Amit was unyielding. "You don't need a fancy bed to sleep, Trilok. If it doesn't work out, we'll figure something else out. Trust me, we'll enjoy it," he replied, his confidence unwavering as he signaled me to make a turn.

After a ten-minute drive through the quiet streets of Chandigarh, we arrived at our destination—a school. Amit reached for his phone, ready to call his friend, but before he could, the large iron gate creaked open. A man, about our age, stepped out, and Amit waved enthusiastically. The two of them embraced warmly, like old friends meeting after a long separation. Trilok and Vikas motioned for me to drive in, guiding me with hand signals.

The school's parking area was vast and neatly maintained, surrounded by a lush green lawn. A few vehicles were already parked, adding to the sense of security. As I stepped out of the car, I noticed how the moonlight gave the lawn an ethereal glow, adding a calming touch to the atmosphere. Amit introduced us to his friend, Dheera, who greeted us with such warmth that it felt as if we had known him for years. His genuine smile and easy demeanor instantly put us at ease.

After a brief round of introductions and lighthearted banter, Dheera led us to his room. The space was modest but practical—a single folding bed with a neatly arranged pillow and quilt occupied one corner. The kitchen was ingeniously set up on the floor, featuring a single-burner stove connected to a gas cylinder. It was clear that Dheera made the most of what he had, and there was an admirable simplicity to his lifestyle. Looking around, I couldn't help but wonder how four of us would fit into this space for the night. Under normal circumstances, I would have nudged Amit discreetly, hinting at my concerns, but something about Dheera's genuine hospitality made me hold back.

Sensing our weariness, Dheera quickly sprang into action. He prepared steaming cups of tea and offered a selection of chips and biscuits. The warmth of the tea and the light snacks revived our spirits, and we eagerly devoured everything he served.

"Amit bhai, I'll cook dinner for all of you," he offered, already pulling out a cooker and utensils.

"No, Dheere, we're full," Amit replied politely, though the truth was quite the opposite. We hadn't had a proper meal all evening, but having a roof over our heads was more than enough at this point.

“You haven’t eaten dinner? Let me make something quick,” Dheera insisted, his voice filled with genuine concern.

“We ate a lot earlier, brother. Please don’t trouble yourself,” Trilok interjected, trying to downplay the situation.

We sat in a relaxed circle around the bed, with Amit and Dheera perched comfortably on it. Trilok launched into his tales of past travels, his words painting vivid pictures of distant places and adventures. Amit added his humorous takes, lightening the mood with his witty remarks. Laughter filled the room, a much-needed reprieve after the long day. By 11 PM, as the first signs of fatigue crept in and Dheera started yawning, we decided to retire for the night.

The plan for the next day was simple but crucial. We needed to leave by 7 AM to reach Ambala by 8, where Shubham was waiting for us. It seemed like a reasonable goal, though I knew waking up early after such a long day would be a challenge.

Dheera guided us to another room where he had arranged mattresses on the floor, complete with soft quilts and pillows. “This is all I could arrange for you, brothers,” he said humbly, his sincerity shining through his words.

Meeting Dheera had already left a positive impression on me, but his thoughtful gestures deepened my respect for him. His actions reflected a level of kindness and hospitality that felt increasingly rare. It made me realize that even the simplest acts could carry profound meaning.

“I have duty in the morning, so I’ll sleep now. If any of you feel uncomfortable, please take the bed, and I’ll manage here,” Dheera offered generously.

“It’s Sunday tomorrow, right?” Amit asked, curious about his schedule.

"Yes, but I have reporting duty," Dheera replied with a warm smile, a hint of pride in his voice.

"We'll be very comfortable here. You go and rest without worry," I assured Dheera, placing a hand on his shoulder to convey our gratitude. He gave a tired but warm smile and wished us goodnight before stepping out of the room. The door closed behind him, leaving the four of us in the cozy, makeshift arrangement he had prepared.

Amit, who had been unusually quiet for a while, suddenly announced, "I'll have a drink." Without waiting for a response, he reached into his bag and retrieved a bottle along with four glasses. The subtle clink of glass against glass caught everyone's attention. Trilok and Vikas, always up for some late-night bonding, settled down beside him. Not wanting to feel left out, I joined them to complete the circle.

"Just keep the volume low," Vikas suggested, casting a glance toward the door as if to remind us of the late hour.

There's something magical about being in the company of close friends—conversations flow naturally, laughter comes easily, and time seems to lose its grip on you. No formal agenda or specific topic was needed; we simply began talking and weaving through memories. It felt as though the room itself was alive.

The plan to leave by 7 AM to reach Ambala in time for Shubham's bus departure seemed like a distant obligation, overshadowed by the joy of the moment. The ticking clock was no match for the laughter and the ease of our unstructured banter. In the past few days, I had abandoned any pretense of following a rigid schedule, and this night was no exception.

Hours passed like minutes. We were so absorbed in our conversations that none of us realized how late it had gotten

until Trilok shifted restlessly and broke the rhythm. "I'm feeling hungry," he declared, his voice laced with both humor and genuine longing. A quick glance at my watch revealed that it was already 3 AM.

Amit immediately looked at me. "Gaurav, see if you can find a food outlet online and place an order."

I nodded and pulled out my phone, trying to focus despite the late hour and our collective weariness. Scrolling through a few options, I finally found a contact number for a delivery service, which said they were open twenty four hours, and dialed it. After a few rings, a groggy voice answered on the other end.

"Hello," the voice greeted, sounding half-asleep.

"Hello, Sir. I'd like to place an order for food," I said, doing my best to sound polite and alert.

"Where does it need to be delivered?" he asked, his tone a mix of curiosity and annoyance.

"Sector 22," I replied promptly, hoping to speed up the process.

"What would you like to order?" he inquired.

I quickly listed our request, "We'll have two plates of Dal Makhani, two plates of Kadai Paneer, twenty Chapatis, and a bowl of Rice."

There was a brief pause, followed by, "Okay, Sir. Just hold on."

I waited, phone pressed to my ear, as the silence stretched longer than expected. Finally, the man returned, his tone now slightly more alert. "Sir, your bill amount will be ten thousand rupees."

I blinked in disbelief, the number startling me out of my late-night haze. "What?" I exclaimed, unable to hide my shock.

"Sir, you've ordered twenty Dal Makhani, fifty chapatis and two hundred Gulab Jamuns," he clarified in a matter-of-fact manner, as if this were a perfectly reasonable order.

Realizing the man was still half-asleep and clearly misunderstanding the situation, I decided it was best to end the call. "Never mind, thank you," I said quickly before disconnecting.

As I put my phone down, I turned to the others. For a moment, we all stared at each other in silence, letting the absurdity of the exchange sink in. Then, as if on cue, we erupted into uncontrollable laughter. The sheer ridiculousness of the situation—our hunger-induced desperation meeting the sleepy confusion of the food delivery guy—was too much to handle.

By then, it was too late to do much about our hunger. We sat back, our laughter echoing in the small room, a perfect end to a night that seemed to stretch endlessly, filled with the kind of memories only such impromptu moments could create.

"Let's try the food points outside PGI," Vikas suggested, his eyes lighting up with excitement.

"That's a great idea. Gaurav, will you drive?" Trilok asked, turning toward me.

"Absolutely," I replied enthusiastically, grabbing the car keys. The prospect of a late-night food adventure seemed to awaken a new wave of energy in all of us. We stepped out, opened the school gate carefully to avoid disturbing anyone, and retrieved the car.

The streets, which had been bustling with activity just a few hours ago, were now eerily silent. Only the occasional streetlight pierced through the darkness, casting long, lonely shadows. As I adjusted the GPS to set PGI as our destination, a small sense of apprehension crept in. It was already past 3 AM—what if the eateries were closed?

The drive was smooth, with no traffic to hinder us. The chilly air of the early morning seeped through the car's slightly ajar windows, keeping us alert. As we approached PGI, my concerns deepened. However, the sight before us quickly erased all doubts.

Contrary to my expectations, the place was not only open but alive with an infectious energy. The glow of the restaurant lights illuminated the area as if it were early evening rather than the middle of the night. I blinked twice, glancing at the time on my phone to ensure I wasn't dreaming. The parking lot was crowded with two-wheelers and cars, and groups of people were scattered all around, chatting and laughing. It felt surreal.

We managed to find a parking spot after some maneuvering and stepped out of the car, amazed at the scene around us. College students filled the place, immersed in conversations, sipping tea, and enjoying food. Some sat casually on the steps outside, others leaned against their vehicles, and a few were standing in groups, enjoying cigarettes. The atmosphere was buzzing with youthful exuberance.

We scanned the menu eagerly and decided on Paranthas with steaming cups of tea for all four of us. As we waited for our order, I couldn't help but take in the vibrancy of the place. Despite the odd hour, it felt like a hub of activity, a stark

contrast to the stillness of the streets we had just driven through.

Soon, a scooty pulled up, and two young women got off, chatting animatedly as they walked toward the seating area. They chose a table right next to ours, continuing their lively conversation. I observed them discreetly, not out of curiosity but admiration. It wasn't every day that one witnessed such freedom and ease for women, especially at this hour.

Considering the backdrop of the Nirbhaya incident and the intense nationwide discourse it had sparked about women's safety, this scene felt almost revolutionary. The incident had been a dark chapter that awakened the country to the harsh realities women faced daily, especially regarding their safety and mobility. Yet here, two young women moved about freely, with no visible hesitation or fear. It was a sight that filled me with hope.

"This is a different India," I remarked, my voice laced with both admiration and optimism, as the waiter placed the steaming Paranthas on our table.

"It surely is," Vikas agreed, nodding thoughtfully. We all silently acknowledged the significance of what we were witnessing. If only such safety and freedom could extend to every corner of the nation.

The food arrived piping hot, and the comforting aroma of buttery Paranthas and spiced tea was enough to make us forget the cold. We dug in, savoring every bite while sharing stories and laughing at our late-night escapade. Eating with friends has a way of amplifying every flavor, making the simplest meals feel like feasts.

As the time slipped by, Trilok reminded us, "We have to reach Ambala by eight in the morning. Shubham's bus won't wait for us."

A quick check of my watch revealed that it was already 4 AM. Realizing we had barely enough time to rest, we paid the bill and headed back to Dheera's place. The drive back was quieter, the initial excitement replaced by a growing weariness.

Upon reaching, we parked the car, crept into the house without making much noise, and settled onto the mattresses laid out for us. Amit set an alarm for 6 AM, muttering, "Let's grab a power nap. We need to leave soon."

The exhaustion of the night claimed us quickly. I must have fallen asleep the moment I closed my eyes, the comforting warmth of the quilt wrapping me in a cocoon of much-needed rest.

The next thing I knew, the alarm was ringing. Amit turned it off with a groggy hand before burying himself deeper into his quilt. I barely registered the sound of Trilok's phone ringing next. He answered it with a drowsy assurance, "Yes, yes, we're leaving soon."

Moments later, the phone rang again, jolting me slightly. This time, it was Swati calling around 9 AM. Panic briefly surged through me—had everyone left without me? A quick glance around revealed the others still sprawled on their mattresses, lost in deep slumber.

I answered Swati's call, reassuring her, "We're in Chandigarh and will be leaving shortly." My confidence wavered slightly as I realized how late we were.

Shaking Amit awake, I reminded him, "We need to pick up Shubham." He groaned, waved me off, and rolled back

under the quilt. I moved to Trilok next, nudging him insistently.

"Gaurav bhai, he's going to Karnal," Trilok mumbled sleepily, his voice muffled by the quilt, before drifting off again.

I sighed, realizing our plans had, once again, been derailed by the allure of sleep and the irresistible pull of a warm quilt.

Assuming everything was in order, I pulled myself out of the makeshift bed, feeling the cold floor against my feet. The faint aroma of spices led me toward the kitchen, where I found Dheera busy preparing mashed potatoes. He worked methodically, sprinkling in spices with a practiced hand, his face radiating quiet satisfaction.

"Gaurav bhai, you're up," he said with a warm smile, pausing briefly to acknowledge me.

"Good morning," I replied, returning his smile.

"Tea?" he offered, his tone casual yet welcoming.

"That would be perfect," I said, nodding appreciatively.

He reached for a pan and placed it on the stove, the clatter of utensils filling the modest kitchen. As the water began to heat, I stood nearby, soaking in the warmth emanating from the stove. The simplicity of the scene struck me. Here was a man fully immersed in the act of cooking, finding joy in the rhythm of his everyday life—a joy that seemed rare in a world often consumed by ambitions and expectations.

As we talked, he shared bits and pieces of his life. His words painted a picture of contentment found in ordinary moments: tending to his work, speaking with his family, and preparing meals like this one. The way he described his

routine was unassuming yet deeply profound, a reminder of the happiness often hidden in life's smallest details.

The first rays of sunlight seeped through the clouds, casting a soft glow over the room. Trilok shuffled into the kitchen, rubbing his eyes and letting out a sleepy groan.

"Tea, please," he muttered, his voice barely above a whisper.

By now, the tea was ready, and the three of us stood silently for a moment, each savoring the warmth of the cup in our hands.

I broke the silence, glancing at Trilok. "We're running late. What's the plan for Shubham?"

Unbothered by my urgency, Trilok took a slow sip before replying. "Shubham called earlier. I told him to head straight to Karnal. Tarun and Abhishek will meet him there. We'll join them later."

His calm assurance eased my worry, allowing me to focus on the present moment.

Gradually, the others began waking up, their groggy faces brightening at the smell of food. To our surprise, Dheera had prepared a spread of parathas, their golden crusts glistening with butter. The rich aroma filled the air, and with every bite, we could taste the care and effort he had put into the meal.

As we ate, a call from Shubham confirmed his safe arrival in Karnal, where Tarun and Abhishek were already with him. The update was reassuring, letting us relax and enjoy the unexpected hospitality we had been shown.

Looking around the simple yet warm space, I felt a deep sense of gratitude for this experience. Dheera, a man with so little in material wealth, had shown us a generosity that spoke

volumes. His smile was genuine, his contentment unshakable—a living testament to the idea that happiness doesn't come from possessions but from a willingness to share and connect with others.

The clichés of self-help books suddenly felt real and alive in his presence. In this unassuming man, we saw the essence of humanity and a lesson we wouldn't soon forget.

As we prepared to leave, the road ahead seemed filled with endless possibilities. More adventures awaited, but the memory of this morning—the warmth of Dheera's kitchen, the lesson in generosity—would linger long after the journey ended.

Chapter 5

The River, The Road, and The Revelation

As the clock struck ten, the cozy warmth of the morning was filled with the lingering aroma of our delightful breakfast. The smell of freshly cooked parathas mingled with the faint scent of spices, creating a sensory farewell to the humble yet generous feast that had nourished us. With our bellies full and spirits lifted, we began gathering our belongings, preparing to embark on the next leg of our journey. The weight of our bags seemed lighter, perhaps buoyed by the gratitude we carried in our hearts for the kindness we had just experienced.

Before stepping out, we made it a point to thank the man who had made this brief but meaningful stop so memorable. Standing in the modest courtyard, we faced Dheera, the man whose humble demeanor belied his immeasurable generosity. One by one, we expressed our heartfelt gratitude, each trying to convey how deeply his hospitality had touched us.

“Thank you for everything, Dheera bhai,” I said, my words feeling inadequate in the face of the warmth he had shown us.

His weathered face broke into a smile, one that radiated sincerity. Yet, as he bid farewell to each of us, I noticed a shimmer in his eyes, betraying the emotions he held back. A

subtle glint of tears gathered at the corners, and though he quickly blinked them away, the sight stayed with me.

In that fleeting moment, I realized how much this connection meant to him—and to us. It wasn't just the food he had prepared or the shelter he had offered; it was the genuine human bond we had formed, however brief. The sincerity of his farewell left an indelible mark on me, making me reflect on the profound lessons hidden in his actions.

As I took the driver's seat and placed my hands on the steering wheel, my thoughts lingered on what we had just experienced. The true essence of hospitality wasn't about lavish offerings or grand gestures. It was in the heartfelt connections, the shared moments, and the genuine care extended without expectation.

With this in mind, I adjusted the GPS on my phone, setting the course for the day ahead. The road stretched out before us, leading through the lively streets of Chandigarh and toward Karnal, where our friends had been waiting since morning. The cityscape, with its bustling activity and endless streams of vehicles, was a stark contrast to the quiet simplicity of the place we had just left.

As I maneuvered the car through the unfamiliar urban landscape, the hum of traffic filled the air, mingling with the mechanical rhythm of our vehicle. My past driving experiences had mostly been along winding hill roads, where the journey felt slower and more intimate. The highway, with its long stretches of asphalt and the promise of speed, presented a new challenge.

"Gaurav bhai, step on the pedal! Let's not let everyone overtake us," Trilok teased from the backseat, his tone lighthearted but nudging.

Despite his encouragement, my grip on the wheel tightened, and I cautiously maintained my pace. High-speed driving was unfamiliar territory for me, and the transition wasn't as smooth as I had hoped.

Sensing my hesitation, Amit leaned forward and suggested, "Why don't we pull into that petrol pump up ahead? I could use a break, and you can stretch your legs too." He gestured toward the pump that loomed just a short distance away.

Trilok chuckled, shaking his head. "If we keep stopping like this, we'll never get anywhere on time. I guess punctuality is just not in our DNA."

I couldn't help but smile at the banter. It was a recurring theme in our group—the idea of being on time seemed to exist more in theory than in practice. Yet, these lighthearted exchanges added a layer of joy to our journey, turning even delays into moments of shared laughter.

We pulled into the petrol pump, where Amit stepped out, giving me a chance to take a much-needed break. The fresh air felt invigorating as I stretched my legs and gazed at the bustling activity around the station. When Amit returned, he motioned for me to switch seats, and I gladly ceded the driver's spot. Settling into the passenger seat, I watched as Amit skillfully merged back onto the highway. His confidence behind the wheel was evident, and he navigated the road ahead with a calm precision that I admired.

As the hours rolled by, the landscape outside the window shifted, blending urban scenes with stretches of open fields. By the time the clock struck one in the afternoon, we finally reached Karnal. The sight of familiar faces waiting for us brought a renewed sense of excitement.

Tarun, Abhishek, and Shubham greeted us warmly. They had been patiently waiting since the morning, their smiles undimmed by the delay. Abhishek, a student from Gwalior, had become part of the circle during a shared adventure in Ladakh. Tarun, who had once been our colleague, had driven his reliable WagonR all the way from Delhi, adding to the lively energy of our reunion.

With Khatima in Uttarakhand set as our next destination, Trilok exclaimed, "Let's make a move," as he swung open the car door with his characteristic zeal. The day's delays loomed over us like an unwelcome shadow, and the distance still ahead served as a reminder of the challenges to come. Sliding back into the driver's seat of the Swift, I gestured for Tarun to join me in the front. His quiet smile and nod brought a sense of calm to the moment as we resumed our journey.

As the car rolled along, the steady rhythm of the tires against the road felt almost meditative. Tarun, my co-pilot for this stretch, settled comfortably beside me, and soon, our conversation began to flow as naturally as the road stretched before us. We talked about life, its unpredictable turns, and the lessons etched into our journeys. Tarun had a way of speaking that made even the simplest thoughts resonate deeply, his words carrying a quiet gravity.

The rest of the group, meanwhile, was a stark contrast to our introspection. Their laughter and lively chatter filled the car, spilling over into the air outside. I exchanged a glance with Tarun, whose knowing smile reflected the warmth of the moment. "They're a fantastic bunch," he remarked, his voice tinged with genuine admiration as he glanced toward the backseat.

The conversation took a reflective turn when Tarun began recounting an experience that had left a profound mark on him. "I tried camping once on the banks of the Parvati River," he began, his voice carrying a mix of nostalgia and reverence. I leaned in slightly, drawn to the tone that suggested this was no ordinary tale.

"I'll never forget the sound of that river," he continued. "The way it roared through the valley, relentless and powerful. We camped near Kasol, and at night, under the open sky, it felt like the entire world had quieted, except for that river. It was mesmerizing, almost hypnotic." His words painted a vivid picture in my mind—the tranquil campsite juxtaposed against the unyielding force of nature.

He paused for a moment before adding, "But it wasn't just the beauty of the river that stayed with me. It was what happened next."

I could sense the shift in his tone—a shadow of something deeper lurking beneath the surface. "What happened?" I asked, my curiosity piqued.

This is a powerful segment that combines deep emotional confession with a sudden, delightful culinary detour. I will edit this final part of the chapter, focusing on the dramatic tension and the sensory experience of the biryani.

Tarun hesitated, as though carefully choosing his words. "At Manikaran Sahib, I saw Parvati river in its full glory—wild, untamed, and unstoppable. Something about it stirred something deep within me, something I couldn't explain. That night, sitting by the river, I felt... unmoored, like the currents were pulling at parts of me I didn't even know existed."

The car grew quiet, save for the hum of the engine. Even the lively chatter from the backseat seemed to dim, as though

the gravity of Tarun's words demanded silence. "I wasn't in my senses," he admitted, his voice barely above a whisper. "I had weed cookies and I started to believe I'd stay like that forever—lost in that feeling, disconnected from everything else. And then, in that haze, I decided... I'd jump into the river."

The weight of his confession hung in the air, thick and unyielding. My hands tightened on the steering wheel as I glanced at him, searching for any trace of the turmoil he must have felt that night. His face was calm, but his eyes carried the echoes of a man who had once stood on the edge of something vast and terrifying.

"What stopped you?" I asked, my voice barely steady.

He let out a small, almost bitter laugh. "My friends," he said simply. "They stayed up all night, watching me. No one dared to sleep because they thought I'd do it. And to be honest, I might have. The river was calling to me in a way I can't explain—like it understood me, like it wanted to carry me away."

His words sent a chill down my spine, and I couldn't help but picture the scene: Tarun, standing on the banks of the Parvati, the river's roar a deafening backdrop to his inner chaos. The moonlight casting silvery reflections on the water, the shadows of his friends watching him closely, their fear palpable.

"But something changed as the night wore on," he continued. "I don't know if it was their presence, their silent vigil, or just the passing of time, but the pull lessened. By morning, I felt... lighter, like the river had taken something from me after all—but not in the way I feared. It gave me clarity instead, a strange kind of peace."

I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. "That must have been terrifying," I said, my voice filled with both awe and concern.

He nodded, his lips curving into a soft smile. "It was. But it also taught me something about myself. Sometimes, you have to face the chaos to find your way through it. The river wasn't my enemy—it was my mirror."

As his words settled in, I felt a deep respect for Tarun—not just for the courage it must have taken to share such a story, but for the resilience that had carried him through that night. The Parvati River, with its unrelenting current, had become more than a memory for him. It was a symbol—a reminder of the storms we all face and the strength it takes to emerge on the other side.

The road stretched ahead, but for a moment, I felt as though we had paused, suspended in the weight of Tarun's story.

As our journey unfolded, we found ourselves transitioning from the bustling landscapes of Haryana to the rich cultural tapestry of Uttar Pradesh. It was a seamless shift, marked by changing scenery and the subtle nuances of life that came alive along the road. Somewhere along this route, serendipity played its part, guiding us to an unexpected treasure—a modest yet inviting shop tucked away amidst the everyday chaos. Its unassuming exterior gave little hint of the culinary marvels it held, but the tantalizing aroma of mutton biryani wafting through the air stopped us in our tracks.

The shop, though simple, buzzed with energy. Patrons, lost in the pleasure of their meals, filled the small space with a sense of contentment. The sight piqued our curiosity, and unable to resist, we ordered a single plate to test its claims. The first bite was nothing short of magic—a burst of flavors and

textures that seemed to encapsulate the very essence of culinary mastery. Each morsel was a testament to the chef's art, the blend of spices striking a perfect harmony that lingered on the palate.

What began as a casual stop quickly turned into an indulgent affair. One plate led to another, and soon the modest shop witnessed our impromptu feast. The simplicity of the setting contrasted sharply with the sophistication of the dish, making the experience all the more unforgettable. Time seemed to stand still as we relished the biryani, unaware of the hours slipping away.

Eventually, reality knocked on the door of our reverie. The sinking sun reminded us of our journey ahead. It was already 5 PM, and what should have been a midday meal had turned into an early evening indulgence. With Khatima still five hours away, the weight of our delay began to settle upon us.

"Anand just called up!" Trilok suddenly announced, breaking the contemplative silence. His voice carried an urgency that snapped us back to the present. Anand, a dear friend from Khatima, had made arrangements for our stay at a government guest house and was eagerly awaiting our arrival. The mention of his name rekindled our energy. The thought of reuniting with an old friend and sharing a hearty meal brought warmth to the fading light of the day.

"Let's pick up the pace, friends," Trilok urged, determination gleaming in his eyes. With renewed resolve, we piled into our vehicles, engines roaring to life as we set off. The winter evening enveloped us, its cool embrace tinged with the faint promise of a long journey still ahead.

As darkness fell, the headlights of oncoming vehicles turned into our guides—and occasional adversaries. The

narrow road stretched out before us, a solitary ribbon illuminated by flickering beams. It was a delicate balance between speed and caution, the flicker of distant lights creating a surreal dance in the growing twilight.

Four hours later, exhaustion began to set in. The smog, a stubborn hallmark of North Indian winters, thickened around us, reducing visibility to a precarious minimum. The haze blurred the outlines of the road, and with every passing moment, the challenge of navigating it grew more daunting. The air felt heavier, the cold biting deeper, as our journey seemed to slow under the weight of nature's obstacles.

Finally, we decided to pull over in the midst of a small market. The glow of shop lights pierced through the haze, offering a temporary respite from the growing uncertainty. Parking the vehicles along the roadside, we gathered in a circle, our breath visible in the chilly air. A shared silence fell upon us, the kind that often precedes a collective decision.

"This will get very bad," Trilok said, his voice tinged with concern. "We won't be able to make it on time."

"Let's check with Anand," Vikas suggested, his practical nature surfacing. "He might know if the conditions in Khatima are the same."

Without hesitation, Trilok retrieved his phone and stepped away to make the call. As he dialed, I glanced around at my companions, marveling at their composure. Despite the challenges, there was no panic—only an unspoken understanding that we would face whatever came next together.

The smog may have thickened around us, but the bond within our group felt like a beacon. It reminded me that the most testing moments often bring out the best in people. In the

midst of uncertainty, we found strength in each other, a silent agreement to keep moving forward.

A few moments later, Trilok returned, his expression a mixture of resignation and practicality. “Anand says we should have our dinner here. It’s very foggy, and it’ll be quite late by the time we reach Khatima.”

As we surveyed the market surroundings, the glow of a nearby restaurant caught our attention. "Let's have it there," Abhishek suggested, striding confidently toward its warm, inviting ambiance. Locking our cars, we followed him, drawn by the promise of respite and nourishment. The eatery's cozy interior felt like a haven, its comforting warmth shielding us from the biting cold outside.

Settling into our seats, I found my thoughts wandering. The journey so far had been nothing short of extraordinary. From the bustling streets of Chandigarh to the heartland of Punjab and Haryana, crossing the borders into Uttar Pradesh, and now standing at the edge of Uttarakhand, we had traversed a tapestry of diverse landscapes and cultures. Yet, despite the sense of achievement, a lingering tension gnawed at me. The uncertainties that lay ahead, shrouded in fog both literal and metaphorical, weighed heavily on my mind.

In contrast, my companions seemed completely at ease. They relished their meals & exchanged hearty laughs. Watching them, a realization dawned upon me—it wasn’t the size of the problem that mattered but how we chose to react to it. Their carefree demeanor in the face of challenges was a living lesson, unfolding right before my eyes. Problems, I mused, were constructs of the mind, their gravity shaped by our perception.

Amid the clinking of glasses and echoes of laughter, I found solace in their resilience. Our journey was not merely

about covering physical distances but also about navigating the emotional landscapes that connected us. The restaurant, bathed in warmth and light, became a sanctuary against the uncertainties outside. The fog may have veiled the road ahead, but within these walls, the bonds we shared illuminated our path forward.

As we finished our meal, the fog outside had thickened, cloaking the world in an eerie, otherworldly mist. The inevitable debate over who would drive ensued. Shubham, ever confident, volunteered.

"I've handled driving in this kind of fog before," he assured us, slipping into the driver's seat of the WagonR. "Gaurav Sir, follow me closely," he instructed, taking charge of our convoy.

Once back on the road, a passing truck became our unexpected guide. "Trail behind it," Tarun suggested, pointing to the lane ahead. Following his advice, I adjusted our course, keeping a safe distance behind the truck, while Shubham brought up the rear. To our surprise, this tactic significantly increased our pace.

"This way, we might even reach early," Trilok exclaimed with renewed hope. But his optimism was short-lived. The truck, our unwitting savior, soon signaled a left turn into a roadside eatery, leaving us stranded once more. Amit shot Trilok a mockingly disapproving look, and we shared a laugh at our dashed hopes.

Taking the lead again, Shubham urged, "Just stick with me, Gaurav Sir." His confidence was both reassuring and a little nerve-wracking, especially as his occasional bursts of speed left us on edge. The hills grew steeper, the fog denser, and the road seemed to stretch endlessly. Anand's periodic

calls reminded us of the hours we were behind schedule, adding to the mounting pressure.

Yet, as we drove through patches of clarity amidst the fog, a sense of determination fueled our progress. Finally, a milestone welcomed us to Khatima, its weathered lettering prompting jubilant cheers from our exhausted group. Trilok quickly dialed Anand for directions, his eagerness to conclude the journey palpable.

"Keep moving ahead," Trilok relayed, narrating the names of shops we passed. And then, through the veil of mist, we spotted a figure waving enthusiastically—Anand.

Trilok leapt out of the car and ran toward him, their joyous reunion lighting up the night. Their laughter and warm embrace painted a picture of genuine friendship, giving me goosebumps. Trilok's bond with Anand was an example of loyalty and connection that felt almost out of a fairy tale. It was both humbling and heartwarming.

Anand greeted each of us with a smile that radiated warmth. As a Physical Education Instructor at a local school, his demeanor exuded the same energy and positivity that seemed to define everyone we had encountered on this journey. His hospitality was immediate and genuine, guiding us into the guest house with an effortless charm.

"We're here because of Shubham and Gaurav," Amit announced once we were inside. His words caught me off guard, and the ensuing applause made my cheeks flush with embarrassment. Yet, a glint of happiness sparkled within me. I had never imagined undertaking such a journey, let alone receiving such heartfelt appreciation for it.

Collapsing onto the bed, my body surrendered to the weariness of the day. Faint echoes of laughter reached my ears,

signaling that some of my friends were still awake. Despite the temptation to join them, sleep claimed me swiftly. The exhaustion of the journey melted away, replaced by the serenity of slumber. In the quiet of the night, I found peace—a fitting conclusion to a day of challenges and unforgettable memories.

Around 10 in the morning, I woke up from a deep and restful sleep. The cheerful sound of laughter coming from outside gently pulled me out of my dreams. For a moment, I felt disoriented, almost as if I hadn't slept at all. My dreams had been so vivid and profound that they left me wondering if they were real. Shaking off the lingering sleepiness, I stretched and decided to join the others. The lively atmosphere outside was too inviting to ignore.

Stepping out of the guest house, I was greeted by a beautiful sight. Everyone was gathered on the lawn, enjoying each other's company and sharing hearty laughs. The air was filled with a sense of joy that immediately lifted my spirits. I noticed Amit sitting with a handful of walnuts, breaking them open with practiced ease. As soon as he saw me, he smiled warmly and offered me a few.

"Here, have some. These are from Bairagarh," Amit said, handing me the freshly cracked walnuts. I took the walnuts and sat down with the group.

As we enjoyed the walnuts, Amit added, "These are the best walnuts you'll ever have. Shyam sent them to me. He always ensures I get the finest ones."

He was absolutely right. The walnuts were fresh and delicious, with a distinct flavor that was unlike anything I had tasted before. As I savored them, Amit turned to me with an idea.

"You know," he began, "I'll take you to Sach Pass one day. It's a beautiful place. It connects Chamba to the Pangri Valley and isn't far from Dalhousie."

The mention of Dalhousie made me pause. It struck me that despite living so close, I had never truly explored the beauty of my own surroundings. A twinge of regret mixed with excitement filled me as I thought about the possibilities. The words of Tirthankar echoed in my ears. I remembered when he mentioned his trip to Bharmour and how I had yet to visit these beautiful places.

"I would love that," I replied with a smile, my mind already imagining the breathtaking views and the adventures that awaited.

Just then, Shubham chimed in, "So, what's the plan for today?" His practical nature was always focused on making the most of our time.

Anand answered with a smile, "We'll leave for Nepal early tomorrow morning. A few of my friends will join us here soon. They'll bring their car, and we'll all travel to Pokhara together. We don't want you to have fun in Pokhara alone."

Hearing this, I couldn't help but marvel at the energy and adventurous spirit of my companions. Here I was, hesitant to step out of my comfort zone, while they were eager to embrace every new opportunity.

As Anand spoke, I reflected on the contrast between my mindset and theirs. For me, leaving behind the familiar always seemed daunting, but for them, it was second nature. It made me realize how much I had to learn from their outlook on life. Sometimes, the best experiences come when you let go of your fears and embrace the unknown, especially when you have the right people by your side.

"We have the whole day to ourselves today," Anand said, his smile filled with possibilities.

A few days ago, this kind of statement might have annoyed me. I would have worried about wasted time and unplanned chaos. But now, I felt differently. The journey had taught me to enjoy the spontaneity of life, to find joy in the little surprises, and to live in the moment.

Soon, Raju arrived at the guest house. He had traveled all the way from Delhi to join us. Trilok was quick to introduce him to everyone.

"Raju, meet everyone. I've told them a lot about you," Trilok said warmly.

"It's great to finally see you all," Raju greeted us with a smile that instantly made him feel like an old friend. His easygoing nature and friendliness were infectious, and within moments, it felt like he had always been a part of our group.

The day was shaping up to be one filled with laughter and relaxation. As I sat there with my friends, I realized just how much this journey had changed me. These were people who valued connections over material things, who lived life with open hearts and minds. Their energy and positivity were teaching me to see the world in a new light.

These individuals were unlike anyone I had encountered before. In my professional environment, conversations often revolved around money, social status, and climbing the ever-competitive corporate ladder. It was a cycle of comparisons, constantly trying to one-up one another. But here, among this group, there was no such pretense. Their interactions were refreshingly genuine, free from any ulterior motives. It wasn't about what you had or how you measured up—it was about the bonds you shared, the laughter you exchanged, and the

simple joys of being together. Their priorities were clear, and for the first time in a long while, I felt surrounded by people whose hearts were truly in the right place.

Vikas broke the rhythm of our conversation with a question that hung in the air with possibility. "Are there any notable places to visit nearby?"

Anand perked up. "Nainital," he offered, his tone carrying a hint of nostalgia.

Amit leaned forward. "How far is it from here?" he asked, his curiosity piqued.

Anand hesitated, mentally calculating the distance. "It's about three hours from here, but there's a catch," he said, his voice dropping slightly. "It's New Year's time, and the place is bound to be crowded. The roads might be packed, and finding a good spot to park or even enjoy might turn into a challenge."

The mention of Nainital set off a buzz among the group. For some, the name alone was enough to conjure images of its famed natural beauty. Nainital, often called the 'Lake District of India,' is a jewel tucked away in the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand. The picturesque town is built around the crescent-shaped Naini Lake, surrounded by misty mountains. Stories of boating on the serene waters, sipping hot tea by the lake, and strolling through Mall Road came to mind. For those who had been there before, it was a chance to revisit cherished memories. For the rest, it was an opportunity to experience something new.

Vikas's eyes lit up at the idea. "Nainital sounds amazing. Let's do it! How often do we get a chance like this?" His enthusiasm was infectious, and for a moment, it seemed like everyone might agree.

But Anand, the voice of reason, wasn't entirely convinced. "It's not just the crowd we have to consider," he explained patiently. "Think about the timing. We'll have to leave early tomorrow morning for Nepal. If we head to Nainital now, it's going to be hectic. By the time we get back, we'll be exhausted."

Vikas turned to Trilok, hoping for support. "What do you think? We've already come this far," he urged, his voice tinged with hope.

Trilok didn't hesitate. "Let's go," he said firmly, his tone brimming with excitement. For him, the idea of making the most of the day outweighed any potential inconvenience.

The group seemed divided. Anand sighed, clearly contemplating the logistics. "I get it," he began. "Nainital is beautiful, and it would be great to visit. But we also need to think about the bigger picture. If we wear ourselves out today, tomorrow's journey to Nepal will feel like a chore instead of the adventure it's supposed to be."

Trilok frowned, visibly disappointed. He wasn't ready to let go of the idea so easily. "If we don't go, we'll just end up wasting the entire day here," he argued, his frustration bubbling to the surface.

The debate lingered, with each person weighing the pros and cons. Nainital, with its charm and allure, was tempting. The thought of standing by the lake, surrounded by cool mountain air, was undeniably appealing. Yet, the practicality of Anand's argument couldn't be ignored.

I sat back, observing the discussion unfold. The contrasting personalities in the group fascinated me. Anand's measured approach, Trilok's adventurous spirit, Vikas's enthusiasm—it was a blend that brought both energy and

complexity to every decision. It reminded me that this journey wasn't just about the destinations we visited; it was also about the dynamics of the people I was traveling with.

As the conversation continued, I couldn't help but marvel at how Nainital had sparked such a lively debate. The town, even in its absence, had managed to weave itself into our journey, becoming a symbol of the choices, we faced—adventure versus pragmatism, spontaneity versus planning. It was a reminder that every decision we made would shape not just our day, but the memories we carried forward.

"Don't worry. Let us cook in the open today. There's a Surai Forest Range nearby," Raju suggested, his voice carrying a spark of adventure that immediately shifted the mood of the conversation.

"But who will cook?" Abhishek asked, raising the most practical concern amidst the excitement.

"We will manage," Raju replied with a confident smile, his enthusiasm dispelling any hesitation.

As the idea gained momentum, preparations for this impromptu cooking session began in earnest. Anand and Raju took the lead, gathering utensils, essential groceries, and whatever else seemed necessary. Despite my doubts—visions of half-cooked food and logistical chaos playing in my mind—I reminded myself of a valuable lesson learned on this trip: doubts often dissolve in the face of genuine effort and group energy. Their zeal was contagious, and soon, I even found myself looking forward to the experience.

Once everything was packed and ready, we piled into our vehicles. Anand led the way toward Surai. The drive itself felt like the beginning of an adventure. As we moved along winding roads flanked by tall trees and patches of open fields,

the hum of the car engines mixed with the chatter of anticipation.

When we finally arrived, we parked near a canal that gleamed under the soft golden light of late afternoon. Anand pointed toward it and said, "That's the Sharda canal, and just beyond it is the Surai Forest Range." The surroundings were picturesque. The canal's gentle current mirrored the sunlit sky, and the forest beyond seemed to whisper tales of serenity and wilderness.

As we stepped out of the vehicles, the reality of what we were about to do hit me. I glanced at the makeshift arrangements: utensils, raw groceries, and an unclear plan of action. My doubts returned momentarily, a swirl of skepticism about how a proper meal would emerge from this impromptu setup. But the collective enthusiasm around me was overwhelming, and soon, my doubts were once again drowned out by the infectious energy of the group.

Nearby, a group of boys was playing along the canal. Anand waved them over and quickly struck up a conversation. Though I couldn't fully follow the animated exchange, the intent was clear when Anand handed them a fifty-rupee note. The boys, their faces lighting up with excitement, quickly scattered in different directions as if on a mission.

"What did you just do?" Vikas asked, curiosity written all over his face.

"I asked them to gather firewood," Anand replied with a grin. "Trust me, they'll come through. Just wait and watch."

Meanwhile, Raju and Vikas had already begun setting up what Raju called a stone rocket stove. Watching them work was fascinating. Raju's hands moved deftly as he arranged the stones, creating a functional cooking setup with precision. His

expertise was evident, and I found myself mesmerized by the process. The idea of cooking in the jungle, over a makeshift stove, felt surreal—like something out of a childhood storybook brought to life.

The boys came back, their arms filled with dry wood, their faces lit up with pride and excitement. They had scoured the area and managed to gather enough firewood for our evening meal. We greeted them with grateful smiles and thanked them warmly for their effort. Though we invited them to stay and share dinner with us, they politely declined, explaining that their families would be waiting for them at home. As they waved goodbye and headed back, their departure left behind a spark of inspiration among us. Instead of dampening the mood, it motivated us to dive wholeheartedly into preparing our meal, turning the process into an energetic and lively experience.

Amit and Abhishek took charge of chopping vegetables. They worked with a focused precision that was both amusing and impressive, their constant banter adding a cheerful rhythm to the task. Trilok and Raju, with the finesse of seasoned chefs, arranged the utensils and cooking tools, making sure everything was set up perfectly. Meanwhile, Anand and Vikas volunteered to fetch water from the nearby canal, walking back and forth with determination, ensuring we had enough for cooking and cleaning.

The forest around us added to the magic. The rustle of leaves, the occasional chirping of birds, and the soft gurgling of the canal created a natural symphony that enveloped us. The setting sun painted the sky with hues of orange and pink, casting long shadows across the forest floor. It felt as though time had slowed down, allowing us to fully immerse ourselves in the moment.

As the aroma of the cooking food began to waft through the air, I reflected on how this simple, unplanned activity was turning into such a memorable experience. What started as a casual suggestion had become a celebration of spontaneity and the joy of embracing the unexpected.

The air around us buzzed with laughter and activity. It felt like a scene out of a heartwarming movie—friends coming together, each contributing in their own way, and creating something meaningful out of the simplest of tasks.

As I watched everyone engrossed in their work, I began to feel a little out of place. Tarun seemed to notice the same and gave me a knowing nudge. “Shouldn’t we pitch in with something?” I whispered, feeling slightly guilty for not helping.

Tarun nodded and echoed my thought to Amit, asking him if there was anything we could assist with. Amit, without even lifting his eyes from the chopping board, waved us off with a kind smile. “You two should just enjoy the view and relax. Don’t worry about this—we’ve got it covered.”

Taking Amit’s suggestion, Tarun and I decided to step away from the bustle of meal preparation and wandered toward the serene surroundings nearby. The road running alongside the canal was almost eerily quiet, bordered on both sides by thick, lush jungle. As the sun dipped lower in the sky, its golden light reflected beautifully on the calm water, casting ripples that shimmered and danced. The scene was breathtaking—a perfect blend of tranquility and nature’s raw beauty.

“I feel like taking a bath,” Tarun suddenly said, breaking the silence.

I laughed, thinking he was joking. “Go for it!” I teased, fully expecting him to shrug it off. But to my astonishment, he

walked over to the car, rummaged through his bag, and pulled out a towel.

“Wait, you’re serious?” I asked, my voice half-laughing, half-disbelieving.

Tarun grinned and pointed toward the canal. “Just look at that water, Gaurav. It’s so clean, and the reflection—it’s like something out of a dream. I’ve always wanted to experience something like this.”

Before I could respond, he started undressing, carefully folding his clothes on a patch of dry grass. Using a nearby tree branch for support, he approached the edge of the water cautiously.

“You know how to swim, right?” I called out, trying to mask my concern with a playful tone.

“Nope,” he replied casually, making me burst into laughter.

The moment his feet touched the water, he let out a loud, startled yelp. “It’s freezing!” he shouted, his expression a mix of shock and delight. But instead of stepping back, he continued wading in deeper, his smile growing wider with every step, as if the cold was a small price to pay for the joy he was experiencing.

Watching him enjoy the water so much, I couldn’t resist. Racing to the car, I grabbed my towel and returned to the edge of the canal. I dipped a foot in, only to pull back instantly as the icy water sent shivers up my spine.

“Come on, Gaurav!” Tarun called out, splashing water toward me. “It’s cold at first, but then it feels amazing!”

Encouraged by his words, I took a deep breath and stepped in again. The cold hit me like a shockwave, making

me yelp, but I kept going. Soon, the chill gave way to an exhilarating freshness, and I found myself laughing uncontrollably.

By then, Abhishek and Anand had joined us, their playful splashes turning the quiet canal into a scene of wild joy. For the next half hour, we laughed, shouted, and floated in the water, letting go of all our worries. It was unlike anything I'd done before—a moment of pure freedom.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, we climbed out of the canal, soaked and shivering but incredibly happy. The warmth of the fire and the aroma of the food greeted us as we returned to the group. It was a simple day, yet it felt magical.

As the day's adventures replayed in my mind, an old question resurfaced, one that had followed me through countless journeys: "What truly matters more—the journey or the destination?" The answer came to me with the simplicity of the wind rustling through the trees: "It's the company." In the comforting presence of my friends, I realized how the people you share your path with give meaning to every step and make the journey unforgettable.

The horizon was painted with fiery shades of orange and red as the sun dipped below, bidding farewell to the day. Shadows stretched long and thin, blending into the darkening jungle. The flames of our campfire flickered and danced, their light casting a warm, golden hue over our faces. The soothing crackle of burning wood mixed with the faint murmur of the jungle, creating a natural symphony. The air around us carried the tantalizing aroma of the meal simmering in the pot, a fragrance that spoke of effort, teamwork, and love.

Huddled close around the fire, we found warmth not just from the flames but from the laughter. Every bite of food felt special, not because it was the most delicious dish we'd ever

eaten but because it was made together. The flavor was enriched by the spirit of love, by hands working in unison and hearts bound by friendship.

In the background, a soft tune from a portable speaker drifted through the air. Its melody intertwined seamlessly with the jungle's natural sounds—the rhythmic chirping of crickets, the occasional rustle of leaves, and the gentle whisper of the cool evening breeze. Shadows from the fire played across our faces, their movement creating an almost magical ambiance. Above us, the moon emerged, bathing the forest in silvery light. Its reflection in the nearby canal shimmered like a painting come to life.

Lost in this serene moment, my thoughts wandered. I felt a sense of clarity that had eluded me in the hustle and bustle of daily life. Here, amidst the simplicity of nature and the genuine connection with my friends, I could finally see what mattered. Gone were the weight of ambitions, the endless pursuit of achievements, and the distractions of materialism. Life, I realized, wasn't about reaching milestones or accumulating possessions.

Trilok's voice gently pulled me back to reality. "We have an early start tomorrow," he said, glancing at his watch with a knowing smile. His reminder brought a soft chuckle from the group, a subtle acknowledgment that the magical evening had to come to an end.

Reluctantly, we acknowledged that our magical evening had to end, the flames of the campfire now reduced to a faint glow. Without a word, Anand and Raju rose to their feet, instinctively taking charge of the cleanup. They began gathering the remnants of our meal, carefully extinguishing the fire with splashes of water, and ensuring every trace of our presence was erased. Their silent, deliberate movements

reflected a shared understanding—a respect for the forest that had embraced us so generously.

It wasn't just a matter of tidying up; it felt like a ritual, a way of expressing gratitude to the wilderness that had offered us its beauty and shelter. I felt a profound sense of connection—not only with my friends but with the world around us. It was one of those quiet moments that didn't need words to convey its meaning.

The rest of us soon joined in. Everyone pitched in, folding blankets, packing utensils, and double-checking the area to ensure nothing was left behind. The task that could have been mundane became yet another memory to cherish.

As we worked, the jungle seemed to respond, the gentle rustle of leaves and the cool whisper of the breeze brushing against our skin like a parting gift. The moon above cast its silvery glow over the trees, painting everything in a serene light. The shadows of the forest stretched long and mysterious, as if they too were bidding us farewell.

Before leaving, I paused, letting my eyes wander across the tranquil landscape. The once-roaring fire had been reduced to a smattering of glowing embers, now fading into the darkness. But even as the light disappeared, its warmth lingered within me. This day, filled with unexpected twists, laughter, and simple joys, had imprinted itself deeply in my heart. It wasn't just another outing; it had been a celebration of friendship, a reminder of life's understated yet profound beauty.

As we finally walked toward our vehicles, I glanced around at my friends. Their faces were illuminated by more than just the moonlight—a certain glow radiated from within. It wasn't just the satisfaction of a good meal or the thrill of an adventurous day; it was something deeper, a contentment

born of shared moments and genuine connections. The air around us felt alive, carrying a quiet yet powerful energy. We didn't need words to acknowledge it—this was a night we would remember for years to come.

The jungle behind us slowly disappeared into the night, but its essence remained with us. As we trudged forward, a single thought resonated within me, one I knew would stay with me forever: Life's magic doesn't lie in the destinations we reach but in the people who journey with us. It's their presence that transforms an ordinary path into an extraordinary story.

The group eventually dispersed to their respective sleeping quarters. As I settled into my sleeping bag, a calm and deep sense of satisfaction enveloped me. It was the kind of peace that comes from knowing you've truly lived a day to its fullest.

The soothing rustle of leaves outside served as nature's lullaby, while the lessons learned around the crackling fire lingered in my thoughts. I closed my eyes with a renewed appreciation for the simple joys of life—the kind that are easy to overlook but have the power to make everything feel complete.

The night passed swiftly, its stillness broken by the sudden, jarring sound of alarms blaring from our phones. The synchronized ringing cut through the quiet, jolting everyone awake. For a brief moment, there was only groggy confusion as we struggled to comprehend the abrupt intrusion. But as realization dawned upon us, the initial disorientation was quickly replaced by excitement.

This wasn't just another morning—it was the start of something extraordinary. The thought of stepping into a new country, of exploring unfamiliar terrain and embracing the unknown, fueled a palpable energy among us. Sleepy yet

eager, we scrambled to freshen up, each movement charged with the thrill of anticipation.

The soft glow of dawn began creeping through the windows, bathing the room in a gentle light. Backpacks were checked and rechecked, cameras were prepped to capture the memories we knew would become treasures, and laughter echoed as we teased one another about who would take the longest to get ready. Despite the early hour, there was an infectious enthusiasm in the air.

Together, we were about to step into the unknown—not just as travelers but as companions on an adventure that promised to leave its mark on our hearts. The horizon ahead glimmered with endless possibilities, and with every step forward, I knew we were creating a story that would stay with us forever.

Chapter 6

The Unplanned Detour

We got up early, knowing we would be entering a new country. The documentation might take time, and we could face delays. Anand's vehicle took the lead, and we followed them as we moved towards the border. As we approached the Sharda Barrage, marking the border between India and Nepal, my excitement reached a crescendo. The crossing wasn't just a bridge—it was a gateway to a new chapter. The sight was fascinating: a steady flow of people moving in both directions. Nepalese families entered India with bustling energy, their hands filled with bags of goods, while Indian travelers ventured into Nepal, their eyes wide with curiosity. There was no demand for passports or stringent checks, just a simple sense of freedom that underscored the unique bond between the two countries. With each step closer to foreign soil, my heart raced. Crossing the barrage felt surreal—like stepping into a parallel universe where everything looked the same yet carried a new charm. The language on the signboards shifted subtly, and the colorful flags fluttering in the breeze reminded me I was now in Nepal.

After crossing the barrage, the road narrowed into silence. The river murmured below, and the world felt briefly suspended between two countries, two breaths. Then a figure stepped forward—a police officer, his khaki uniform softened

by the afternoon light. He raised a hand, not in command, but in greeting.

“Do you need Nepalese currency?” he asked, his voice carrying the calm assurance of someone who had seen countless travelers pass this way.

The question broke the spell I hadn’t known I was under. I nodded, still caught between hesitation and wonder, and handed him ten thousand Indian rupees. In return, he gave me sixteen thousand Nepalese notes—crisp, pale-green slips of paper that felt like promises. Their unfamiliar texture pressed gently against my palms, whispering of mountains, prayer flags, and the strange beauty of being elsewhere.

I turned to Amit, my eyes asking what words could not. We had read so much before coming here—stories of border bribes, of hostility disguised as duty. Warnings spun by strangers who had crossed this same place with different hearts. But standing there, under a sky unbothered by rumor, we understood something simple and luminous: every encounter is its own truth.

To travel, I thought, is to unlearn what you’ve been told—to let the world speak for itself, in its own quiet tongue.

Our next stop was the Transport Office, where we had to complete the formalities for driving in Nepal. The process was a mix of efficiency and local flavor. First, we filled out a set of forms detailing our vehicle information, ownership proof, and driver’s license. The clerk at the counter, wearing a traditional Dhaka topi, scrutinized our documents while occasionally chatting with a colleague in Nepali, a language that sounded both foreign and musical to my ears. Next came the payment of the permit fee, a modest amount that allowed us temporary driving rights in the country. Alongside this, we were issued a temporary vehicle registration number, which we had to

attach to our cars. A staff member handed us a whiteboard and marker to write down the temporary number, which we then taped to the front windshield of each car.

The system was simple yet effective, adding an element of adventure as we carefully prepared our vehicles for the Nepalese roads ahead. The entire process took about an hour, during which we soaked in the atmosphere of the bustling office, surrounded by other travelers and locals completing their own paperwork. By the time we emerged, permits in hand, the sun had climbed higher in the sky, casting a golden glow on the streets of Mahendranagar. As we rejoined our convoy, ready to delve deeper into Nepal, I glanced at the Sharda Barrage in the rearview mirror. My first steps onto foreign soil had been smoother and more welcoming than I had imagined. Now, with the formalities behind us, the open roads of Nepal beckoned, promising an adventure I would cherish forever.

We handed our phones to a friendly passerby, who happily clicked a few pictures for us. As we reviewed the snapshots, we couldn't help but smile. The journey had already given us so many unforgettable moments, and we had barely scratched the surface of our adventure.

I had taken the lead, and our little convoy moved smoothly along the quiet road. The air was still, the kind that carries every sound a little too clearly. Up ahead, a small police post appeared, and I slowed to a stop.

Behind me, Tarun—ever the Delhi driver—didn't notice. He gave a sharp honk, the kind that in his city was nothing more than a nudge, a reflex born of habit. But here, the sound split the calm like a stone breaking the surface of still water.

Almost immediately, a uniformed officer stepped out, his expression unreadable. Tarun realized his mistake even before

the officer reached him. The reprimand was brief but heavy with authority. The officer warned him, his voice low and deliberate, that another honk would earn him a night in jail.

For a moment, none of us spoke. The silence hung thick in the air—part fear, part disbelief. But when the officer turned and walked away, the tension dissolved into nervous laughter. Someone quipped that the lights had gone out for Tarun, and the rest of us couldn't help but join in.

In that instant, the road ahead didn't just lead us deeper into Nepal; it led us into a new rhythm—one where even the smallest sound could mean something, and silence had its own kind of respect.

With nightfall approaching, we resumed our drive toward Butwal, the city that would be our resting place for the night. The roads were dark, illuminated only by our headlights and the occasional streetlamp. The absence of traffic made the drive smooth, but the unfamiliar terrain demanded caution. The cold had intensified, and I pulled my jacket closer, rubbing my hands together for warmth.

After what felt like an endless drive, we finally entered the city limits of Butwal. The streets were livelier than we expected, with bustling marketplaces and neon-lit signboards guiding the way. Finding a hotel became our next challenge. We wanted something comfortable yet affordable, but every place we checked was either full or beyond our budget.

"Should we keep looking or just settle for whatever we get?" Anand asked, his voice laced with exhaustion.

"We've come this far, let's at least try one more place," Abhishek suggested.

Driving a little further, we spotted a modest-looking hotel with a vacant sign displayed at the entrance. Without wasting a moment, we parked and rushed inside to inquire.

“Do you have rooms available?” Vikas asked the receptionist.

“Yes, we do,” the man behind the counter replied. “How many rooms will you need?”

We quickly discussed and decided on two rooms, dividing ourselves accordingly. The price was reasonable, and the rooms were decent—clean beds, warm blankets, and attached bathrooms. It wasn’t luxurious, but it was exactly what we needed after a long day on the road.

After checking in, we dropped our bags, freshened up, and gathered in one room to reflect on the day. The exhaustion was evident in our eyes, but the excitement still lingered.

“What a day,” Raju said, stretching his arms. “From border formalities to near arrests and shaky bridges—we’ve had quite the experience.”

“And it’s only the beginning,” Trilok added with a grin.

We laughed, recalling the officer’s warning to Tarun and our nerve-racking moment on the bridge. The journey had already tested our patience and courage, but in hindsight, those challenges had only made the trip more memorable.

Hunger soon took over, and we decided to head out for dinner. The streets of Butwal had a charm of their own at night. The air carried the aroma of sizzling street food, and small eateries were filled with locals enjoying their evening meals. We found a simple but inviting restaurant and settled in.

The menu had a mix of familiar and new dishes, and we eagerly placed our orders. When the food arrived, the flavors did not disappoint. The warmth of the meal, combined with the cozy atmosphere, made for the perfect ending to an eventful day.

With full stomachs and tired bodies, we returned to the hotel. The beds felt softer than ever, and as soon as we lay down, sleep took over almost instantly. The next day held more adventures, but for now, all that mattered was rest.

And as I drifted off, I smiled to myself, knowing that this journey was already shaping up to be one of the best of our lives.

The next part of our journey took us from Butwal to Pokhara, a city renowned for its natural beauty and serene environment. Early in the morning, after a hearty breakfast at our hotel in Butwal, we set off on our adventure. The air was crisp, and the sun was just beginning to rise, casting a golden hue over the landscape.

"Everyone ready?" I called out, checking that everyone had packed their essentials.

"Ready!" Shubham shouted back, his voice full of enthusiasm.

Raju, our guide and the most experienced driver in our group, led the way. Initially, all three cars stayed together, forming a little convoy as we navigated the early morning traffic. The road soon began to climb, winding through the hills that offered breathtaking views with each turn. The lush greenery and distant mountain peaks made the drive an unforgettable experience.

As the roads became more winding and narrow, our convoy began to spread out.

"Looks like we're splitting up," I noted, glancing back at the cars behind us.

"It's inevitable on these roads," Raju replied. "Just keep your eyes on the road and enjoy the view."

The sense of anticipation grew as we neared Pokhara, knowing that more adventures awaited us. The journey through the hills was mesmerizing, with each turn revealing a new breathtaking view. Every now and then, we'd stop at a particularly scenic spot to stretch our legs and take photos.

At one such stop, we gathered around a small tea stall perched on the edge of a cliff.

"This place is incredible," Amit said, sipping his steaming cup of chai. "I feel like we're driving through a painting."

"I can't wait to get to Pokhara," Shubham added, excitement dancing in his eyes. "I've heard so much about the lake and the mountains."

"Just wait until you see it in person," Raju said with a knowing smile. "It's even better than the pictures."

Finally, after hours of driving, we arrived at the city's border. We regrouped, sharing stories of the drive and the sights we had seen along the way.

"Did you see that massive waterfall?" Abhishek asked, his eyes wide with wonder.

"Yeah, we stopped there for a bit," Trilok replied. "It was stunning."

Raju, being familiar with the area, knew exactly where our hotel was located. We followed his car, navigating through the bustling streets of Pokhara, until we reached our destination. The hotel was charming and welcoming,

providing the perfect place to rest and recharge after the long journey.

"This place looks amazing," Vikas said as we checked in. "I can't wait to explore."

"Let's get some rest first," Raju suggested. "We'll need our energy for later."

After settling in and freshening up, it was time to step out and feel the pulse of the city. Pokhara awaited—serene yet alive, resting gracefully beside the silver waters of Phewa Lake, with the great Annapurna range keeping watch from above. The mountains stood like ancient sentinels, their snow-lit peaks mirrored softly in the lake's calm surface.

We wandered into the market, drawn by the hum of voices, the color of prayer flags fluttering overhead, the scent of roasted corn and incense twining through the air. Amid that cheerful chaos, I looked up—and there it was. Mt. Fishtail. Majestic. Still. Its unmistakable silhouette pierced the blue horizon, framed by the distant sweep of the Himalayas.

For a moment, time folded in on itself. My thoughts drifted back to the day Amit had shared that status—the one that had unknowingly planted the seed for this journey. How easily I could have missed it. How fragile the threads are that lead us to certain places. Had I not paused to watch it that day, perhaps I would have never stood here, beneath this vast and humbling sky.

I thought of Dalhousie, my quiet home in the hills—how content I had always been gazing at my familiar mountains. Yet here, surrounded by giants that scraped the edge of heaven, I realized how much more there was to see, and how every horizon—even a familiar one—hides another just beyond it.

The market was bustling with activity, with colorful stalls selling everything from local handicrafts to delicious street food. We wandered through the market, captivated by the sights and sounds. The aroma of freshly cooked momos and other local delicacies filled the air, tempting our taste buds.

"These momos are incredible," Amit said, biting into a freshly steamed dumpling.

"They really are," I agreed, savoring the flavors. "We need to get the recipe."

As we strolled around, we couldn't help but marvel at the stunning views of the lake and mountains that framed the city. Every corner we turned offered a new perspective, and we took our time exploring every nook and cranny.

"Look at that view," Trilok said, pointing towards the lake. "It's like something out of a dream."

"We should rent a boat tomorrow and explore the lake properly," Raju suggested. "It will give us ample time."

As we sat together, watching the city breathe and bustle around us, our conversation wandered from one thought to another—light, unhurried, the way talks among friends often are when there's no destination in mind. Somewhere nearby, music floated through the air, the familiar rhythm of life in motion—part laughter, part melody, part heartbeat.

Then, without warning, Shubham leapt to his feet and began to dance in the middle of the road. His movements were wild and free, untouched by self-consciousness. For a heartbeat, the world seemed to pause—shopkeepers smiled, passersby turned their heads—and then his laughter broke through the evening air.

Something in his energy was irresistible. I didn't stop to think; I simply rose and joined him. The two of us danced there, under the fading light, as the city flowed around us—a small, fleeting celebration of the simple joy of being exactly where we were.

"You're crazy, you know that?" Amit laughed, clapping along to the music from a nearby stall.

"Come on, join us!" I called out, grabbing Abhishek's hand and pulling him into the dance.

The music provided the perfect rhythm, and soon enough, our small dance attracted the attention of passersby. People started cheering and clapping, some even joining in. It was a surreal experience—never in my wildest imagination did I think I would be dancing on the market lanes of Pokhara.

"This is amazing!" Shubham shouted, his face beaming with joy.

The moment was magical. I don't know why I danced, but it was a release of some inner energy. We laughed, danced, and celebrated the simple pleasures of life. The sense of connection and shared adventure made the experience even more special. As the sun set, casting a golden glow over the city, we continued to explore.

We eventually made our way to a cozy café by the lake, where we settled down with cups of hot chocolate and local tea.

"I could get used to this," Tarun said, leaning back in his chair. "The view, the company, everything."

"Same here," Vikas agreed. "This trip is turning out to be better than I ever imagined."

As the night grew darker, we walked along the lakeside promenade, the reflections of the lights dancing on the water. The city of Pokhara, with its enchanting beauty and vibrant spirit, had already left an indelible mark on our hearts.

"Tomorrow, let's go for a boat ride," Tarun suggested. "And maybe we can visit the Peace Pagoda."

"Sounds like a plan," Shubham said. "I'm up for anything."

We all agreed, eager to see what else this incredible city had in store for us. The adventure was far from over, and as we headed back to our hotel, we knew that the memories we were making would stay with us forever.

Back at the hotel, we gathered in the common area, sharing stories and laughter. Shubham regaled us with tales of his previous travels, each one more outrageous than the last.

"Remember the time I tried bungee jumping in Rishikesh?" he began, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

"Yeah, and you chickened out at the last minute," Amit teased, causing everyone to burst into laughter.

"I didn't chicken out," Shubham protested, grinning. "I was just making sure it was safe!"

The night went on, filled with stories and shared experiences. And with that thought, I drifted off to sleep, eager for the adventures that awaited us the next day.

The next day, our group faced a bittersweet moment as Raju and three of our members had to part ways with us and head to Kathmandu. Their journey with us had come to an end, and we bid them farewell with promises to meet again soon. As their car disappeared down the road, we turned our attention to the adventures that still awaited us in Pokhara.

Over breakfast, Trilok approached me, a look of concern etched on his face. "How's the financial management coming along?" he inquired.

Trilok nodded, but his expression remained serious. "Gaurav bhai, you have to curb our spending habits. We must adhere to our budget. Next time we exceed our limits, you need to ensure we rein it in," he asserted.

Trilok got up and addressed the group. "From today we are capping our budget. We will have breakfast worth one hundred each day. You can choose your menu as per discussion." Everyone agreed.

After a quick breakfast, we made our way to the famous Phewa Lake. The morning sun shimmered on the water's surface, and the majestic mountains reflected in the clear blue waters created a picture-perfect scene. We decided to hire a boat to visit the temple located in the center of the lake.

"Ready for a peaceful boat ride?" I asked, excitement evident in my voice.

"Absolutely," Amit replied, echoing my enthusiasm.

The boatman, a young and friendly local, helped us aboard. We settled in and began our serene journey across the lake. The gentle rocking of the boat and the cool breeze on our faces made for a relaxing experience. As we approached the temple, its intricate architecture and tranquil surroundings captivated us.

The temple, nestled in the middle of the lake, was a beautiful sight. We disembarked and spent some time exploring the sacred space, taking in the peaceful ambiance and offering our prayers. The stillness of the water and the serene environment brought a sense of calm and reflection.

After spending a tranquil hour at the temple, we headed back to the boat for our return journey. It was then that Tarun, always the one with wild ideas, suggested something unexpected.

"I want to jump into the water," he announced suddenly.

We all turned to look at him, initially thinking he was joking. But the determined look on his face told us otherwise.

"You can't be serious," Shubham said, eyes wide in disbelief.

"I want to try everything before I die," Tarun declared with conviction.

We looked at the boatman for guidance. He smiled and shrugged, clearly amused by our conversation.

"Is it allowed?" Amit asked.

The boatman shook his head. "No, it's not permitted. But there's a spot in the center of the lake where the temple and land are both out of sight. If he wants to do it, that's the place."

"Do you know how to swim?" I asked Tarun, my concern evident.

"No, but I'm wearing a life jacket," he replied, his voice steady.

I remembered how Tarun had once shared his story about the cookies in Kasol, his laughter echoing through the group as he relived the moment. And then my thoughts drifted to that night at Surai, when, beneath the open sky, he had spoken softly about his fear of water—a side of him we rarely saw, but one that made him feel all the more real to us.

The boatman reassured us. "I know how to swim. I'll keep an eye on him."

Despite our initial shock and concern, we saw the resolve in Tarun's eyes. The moment of truth arrived as we reached the center of the lake. The boatman guided us to a spot, and Tarun prepared himself.

With a deep breath and a determined look, Tarun stood on the edge of the boat. "Here goes nothing," he said, and then he jumped into the water.

We watched, holding our breaths. Tarun's initial expression was one of terror, but it quickly transformed into a look of serene calmness. The water seemed to embrace him, and he floated effortlessly, buoyed by the life jacket.

Inspired by Tarun's bravery, I felt a surge of courage. "I can't let him have all the fun," I said, stripping down to my swim trunks. Without giving myself time to overthink, I jumped into the water. The coolness enveloped me, and a sense of exhilaration coursed through my veins.

Amit, not wanting to be left out, followed suit. The three of us floated in the middle of Phewa Lake, laughing and reveling in the sheer absurdity and joy of the moment. The boatman kept a watchful eye on us, ensuring our safety.

After a while, we climbed back into the boat, dripping wet but with wide grins on our faces. The boatman handed us towels, and we dried off, still buzzing with adrenaline.

"That was insane," Shubham said, shaking his head in disbelief. "But also kind of awesome."

"It felt incredible," Tarun admitted, his eyes sparkling with excitement. "I can't believe we did that."

We continued our journey back to the shore. It was a reminder of the spontaneous joy and freedom that travel brings.

Back on land, we walked through the market lanes of Pokhara, our spirits high. We found a cozy café and sat down for a much-needed cup of hot tea.

"Today is a day we'll never forget," Amit said, raising his cup in a toast.

"To more crazy adventures," I added, clinking my cup with his.

I was already having a great day, feeling the afterglow of our impromptu swim in Phewa Lake and the overall excitement of being in Pokhara. The next destination on our radar was the Muktinath Temple, a revered pilgrimage site nestled in the Himalayas. We decided to hire bicycles to explore the city and make our way to the tourism office to apply for the necessary passes. It requires an Inner Line Permit.

As we rode through the vibrant lakeside bazaar of Pokhara, the cool breeze against our faces and the bustling city life around us added to the thrill. The roads were filled with a mix of locals and tourists, and the energy of the city was infectious.

"Pokhara has such a lively vibe," Amit said, pedaling beside me.

"I know, right? It's like every corner has something new to discover," I replied, taking in the sights and sounds.

We arrived at the tourism office and parked our bicycles. The office was busy, with tourists making inquiries and applying for various permits. We approached the counter and spoke to the clerk, a friendly man who greeted us with a warm smile.

"We'd like to apply for passes to travel to Muktinath," I said.

The clerk nodded and handed us the necessary forms. "You'll need to hire a vehicle and a guide for the journey. You can't take your car," he informed us.

We filled out the forms and submitted them, then stepped outside to continue our exploration of the city. The stretch of shops and stalls around us was a delightful mix of colors and aromas, offering everything from local handicrafts to tantalizing street food.

"Look at all these shops," Shubham said, pointing to a stall selling intricately designed jewelry. "I need to buy some souvenirs."

We spent the afternoon wandering through the market, stopping at various stalls to admire the craftsmanship and taste the local delicacies. The vibrant textiles, hand-carved statues, and aromatic spices drew us in, and we couldn't resist picking up a few items to remember our trip by.

As we walked, we noticed advertisements for a helicopter ride to Mount Fishtail, a stunning peak in the Annapurna range. The idea was tempting, but a quick glance at the price made us reconsider.

"Wow, that's expensive," Tarun remarked, looking at the brochure.

"Yeah, it's a bit out of our budget," Amit agreed. "But the view must be incredible."

"Maybe next time," I said with a shrug. "For now, let's focus on exploring the city."

We continued our exploration, enjoying the vibrant atmosphere and the friendly interactions with the locals. As

evening approached, the city took on a different charm with its twinkling lights and the sounds of music drifting from various cafes and restaurants. In the evening we returned to the Tourism Office to collect our Inner Line Permits.

By the time we returned to our hotel, we were pleasantly exhausted from the day's adventures. We gathered in the common area to plan our trip to Muktinath.

"We need to book a vehicle for tomorrow," Shubham reminded us. "A Sumo should do the trick."

We approached the hotel reception and arranged for a Sumo to be booked for our journey. The receptionist assured us that everything would be ready for our early departure the next day.

"All set," I said, feeling a mix of excitement and anticipation. "Tomorrow, Muktinath awaits."

The previous day, we had obtained our Inner Line Permits, which allowed us to visit this sacred site. Early in the morning, the cab was on time outside our hotel, ready to take us on this much-anticipated adventure. We decided to leave our vehicles parked in the hotel parking lot, trusting that the rugged terrain ahead required a more capable vehicle. Our driver was Shiva Dai who seemed to be an experienced driver.

As we started our journey, the road seemed smooth and well-maintained. I couldn't help but wonder why we hadn't brought our own cars.

"Hey, this road is pretty good. Maybe we should have driven ourselves," Amit remarked from the back seat.

"Don't be fooled," Shiva Dai, our driver, replied with a knowing smile. "The road ahead will be much tougher. You'll see."

We settled into the journey, admiring the scenic views that Pokhara had to offer. The morning mist hung low over the fields, and the first light of dawn bathed the landscape in a golden hue.

"This place is so beautiful," Shubham said, gazing out of the window. "I could get used to these views."

"It's like a painting," Trilok added. "Everywhere you look, there's something incredible."

After a few kilometers, the road's condition drastically changed. It was as if the road never existed. We found ourselves driving through river beds and rocky paths that only a vehicle as powerful as a Sumo could handle. The smooth, tarmac roads were replaced by rough, uneven terrain, filled with rocks and streams.

"Okay, now I get it," Trilok said, holding onto his seat as the vehicle jolted over another bump. "Our cars wouldn't have made it through this."

"Yeah, I'm glad we left them behind," Vikas agreed. "This is some serious off-roading."

The vehicle lurched and swayed, but Shiva Dai navigated these treacherous routes with expertise. His calm demeanor and skillful driving kept us at ease, even as the journey grew more challenging.

"How do you manage these roads every day, Shiva Dai?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"It's all about knowing the terrain and respecting it," he replied. "You have to be patient and let the road guide you."

As we pressed on, the landscape around us became increasingly rugged. We drove past small villages where children waved at us from the roadside, their faces lighting up

with smiles. The beauty of the journey was in these small, fleeting moments that connected us to the heart of Nepal.

On the way, we stopped at a police post where our permits were checked. Having a local driver made the process effortless; his easy conversation with the officers smoothed the way in a manner our limited Nepali never could.

We reached Tattopani around seven in the evening. Darkness had already settled over the valley, but the town was alive with the soft hum of laughter and music. Tattopani—the “hot water” village—was famous for its natural springs, where steaming pools gathered beneath the open sky. Tourists soaked in the warmth, their voices rising above the hiss of the water, a shared relief after long roads and mountain chill.

What caught my attention most, though, was the small liquor shop beside the pool, run by a woman. She moved about confidently, her son and daughter helping her with quiet ease. Something about that scene stayed with me—the grace, the self-assurance, the simple normalcy of it. It spoke of a kind of respect and independence that felt refreshingly different from what I had often seen back home in India.

"Did you notice the liquor shop owner?" Shubham pointed out. "She's running the place with her kids. That's impressive."

"Yeah, and look how everyone respects her," I added. "It's great to see women empowered like this."

As we wandered around looking for a room, we felt dejected. There didn't seem to be any homes available for us to stay in, and we began to question our decision to halt here.

"Maybe we should have planned this better," Abhishek said, sounding a bit worried.

"Don't worry," Tarun reassured us. "Things always work out. Let's keep looking."

The woman's son offered to show us around. Following him, we climbed a set of stairs and were greeted by a scene straight out of a fairy tale. A gate opened up to a cluster of homes, shrouded in fog, making it look like we were entering heaven. The welcoming smiles and warm greetings of the locals lifted our spirits.

"This place is magical," Amit said, looking around in awe. "It's like stepping into another world."

We found a homestay run by two young girls who agreed to provide us with food and shelter. It was heartening to see these young women making a living for themselves, something that was still challenging in many parts of India.

"I'm really impressed by these girls," Tarun said during dinner. "They're running this place all on their own."

"It's inspiring," I agreed. "We have a lot to learn from them."

The homestay offered us a glimpse into the local culture and the resilience of its people. That evening, we were served Thakali food, a traditional Nepali cuisine that was both delicious and comforting.

"You know, this trip is turning out to be much more than I expected," Shubham said, strumming a guitar he had borrowed. "It's about the people we meet and the experiences we share."

The warmth of the people, the beauty of the place, and the bond among us made it a night to remember. We spent the whole night singing. It was almost the wee hours of the morning when we finally slept.

The next morning, we again took a bath in the hot springs and refreshed ourselves. We moved towards our parked vehicle only to find that we had a flat tyre. Shiva Dai was already taking the help of the locals to get the problem fixed. He was not disturbed by this challenge, and as a matter of fact, we were also happy with the extra time we were getting to spend in Tattopani. We ordered tea to spend time as we watched the sun coming out through the mountains.

"Ready for the next leg of our journey?" Shiva Dai asked, starting the engine.

"Absolutely," I said, feeling a surge of excitement. "Let's see what Muktinath has in store for us."

Shiva Dai expertly navigated the treacherous roads once again, and we set off for Muktinath, filled with anticipation and excitement for what lay ahead. The rugged beauty of the landscape and the rich cultural tapestry made the place very special.

As we continued our journey, the road became even more challenging. We crossed narrow bridges over deep gorges, navigated sharp hairpin bends, and drove along cliff edges that offered breathtaking views of the valleys below. The scenery was both awe-inspiring and intimidating.

"Look at that view!" Abhishek exclaimed, pointing to a snow-capped peak in the distance. "This is incredible."

"Yeah, but don't look down," Vikas warned, peeking over the edge. "It's a long way down."

Despite the difficult road conditions, Shiva Dai remained calm and composed. His confidence in handling the vehicle reassured us, even in the most precarious situations.

By midday, we reached a small village where we stopped for lunch. The village was nestled in a valley, surrounded by towering mountains. The local restaurant offered simple but delicious food, and we enjoyed a hearty meal while chatting with the villagers.

"This place feels like a hidden gem," Amit said, savoring his meal. "It's so peaceful and beautiful."

The villagers were friendly and curious about our journey. They shared stories about their lives in the mountains and gave us tips for our trip to Muktinath. It was a wonderful experience, connecting with people who lived in such a remote and serene part of the world.

After lunch, we continued our journey. The road to Muktinath took us through diverse landscapes—dense forests, rocky plateaus, and alpine meadows. Each turn revealed a new vista, more stunning than the last.

As the sun began to set, we approached the final stretch to Muktinath. The air grew colder, and the altitude made breathing a bit more difficult. But the excitement of reaching our destination kept our spirits high.

"We're almost there," Trilok said, checking the map. "Just a little further."

Finally, we arrived at Muktinath, a place of great spiritual significance. The temple complex was serene and peaceful, nestled in the lap of the Himalayas. The sight of the temple, with prayer flags fluttering in the wind and the majestic mountains in the background, was awe-inspiring.

"We made it," Shubham said, a sense of accomplishment in his voice. "This place is amazing."

We spent the evening exploring the temple and the surrounding area. The atmosphere was tranquil, and we felt a deep sense of peace and fulfillment. We offered our prayers and took in the beauty of the sacred site. There were 108 streams coming out near the temple, and we drank a bit of water from each one of them.

We also visited a Buddhist temple nearby which had a huge statue of Gautam Buddha. We spent an hour and clicked a lot of pictures. We met a Spanish tourist who had come along with his friend. We talked to them and shared experiences with them. While leaving we asked them to click pictures which they refused. Later we did realize that they were without Inner Line Permit and were scared that they might be caught without permit and fined.

That night, we stayed in a guesthouse in Jomsom. The stars shone brightly in the clear mountain sky, and the crisp air was refreshing. At night we were offered Yak meat and we had good food.

"This trip has been incredible," Vikas said as we sat around a small fire. "I'm so glad we did this."

"Me too," I agreed. "It's been an adventure of a lifetime."

The next morning, we started our journey back to Pokhara. The return trip was just as challenging, but we were now seasoned travelers, ready to face whatever came our way. We reached Pokhara on the 31st of December, just in time for New Year's Eve.

When we reached Pokhara, the first thing we did was thank Shiva Dai for all he had done for us. His expert driving and local knowledge had made our journey to Muktinath unforgettable.

"Thank you, Shiva Dai," Amit said, shaking his hand warmly. "We couldn't have done it without you."

"Yes, thank you so much," Tarun added. "You were amazing."

Shiva Dai smiled humbly. "It was my pleasure. Safe travels, my friends."

As we checked into the hotel, we were met with an unpleasant surprise. The hotel owner demanded three times the price we had initially agreed upon.

"Due to the heavy influx of tourists, we have to increase the prices," he said, unapologetically.

"This is ridiculous," Abhishek muttered, clearly frustrated. "We had a deal."

"It's way over our budget," Trilok pointed out. "We can't afford this."

After a brief discussion, we decided to celebrate New Year's Eve and then drive to Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha, which was about a three-hour drive away. Pokhara was bustling with life, much more than when we had left. The streets were crowded with people, many of whom were from Bihar in India. The atmosphere was electric with celebration.

"Let's enjoy our time here," Vikas said, trying to lift our spirits. "We can figure out the rest later."

We danced on the streets, joining the throngs of revelers. The energy was infectious, and we lost ourselves in the celebration. As the clock struck midnight, the streets erupted with cheers, fireworks, and music.

"Happy New Year!" Shubham shouted over the noise, raising his drink in a toast.

"Happy New Year!" we all echoed, clinking our glasses.

At around 1 AM, we decided to start our drive to Lumbini. The roads were relatively empty, making the journey smooth initially. But around 5 AM, Tarun's car was running low on fuel.

"I'm almost out of gas," Tarun said, glancing at his fuel gauge. "We need to find a place to refuel."

"Let's take a break and rest for a bit," I suggested. "We can look for a fuel station in the morning."

We parked our vehicles outside a row of closed shops and decided to sleep in the cars. Just as dawn was breaking, we were woken up by a commotion outside. A group of Nepali women, armed with khukris, surrounded our cars, mistaking us for thieves.

"What's going on?" Vikas exclaimed, startled awake.

"We need to explain," Trilok said quickly. He stepped out and spoke to the women in Gorkhali, explaining our situation. Slowly, their expressions softened, and they lowered their weapons.

"Sorry for the misunderstanding," one of the women said, smiling now. "We thought you were here to steal."

"No problem," Trilok replied. "Thank you for understanding."

We shared a hearty laugh over the incident and were treated to tea and breakfast by the women. Their kindness and hospitality were heartwarming, turning a potentially frightening situation into a memorable experience.

By 9 AM, we reached Lumbini. Exhausted, we checked into a hotel and immediately fell asleep. When we woke up in

the evening, we decided to explore the town. The tranquility of Lumbini was a stark contrast to the vibrant chaos of Pokhara. We walked around, taking in the serene atmosphere and the historical significance of the place.

"It's hard to believe this is the birthplace of Buddha," Amit said, looking around in awe. "It's so peaceful here."

We had dinner at a local restaurant and returned to our rooms to rest. Just as I was drifting off to sleep, I was woken up by everyone.

"Surprise!" they shouted, gathering around me with a cake and candles. It was my birthday, and they had planned a surprise party.

"I can't believe you guys remembered," I said, genuinely touched. "Thank you so much."

We had a small but lively night party. It was one of the rare birthdays for me away from the family.

The next day, we set out to explore Lumbini further. We visited several monasteries, each associated with different countries, marveling at the diverse architectural styles and spiritual ambiance.

"Look at this one," Abhishek said, pointing to a beautifully decorated monastery. "It's incredible."

As we toured one of the monasteries, Abhishek discovered that his shoes had been stolen from outside.

"Seriously?" Abhishek groaned, looking at the empty spot where he had left his shoes. "Who steals shoes from a monastery?"

"Guess someone needed them more than you," Shubham said with a chuckle.

With our Lumbini adventure coming to an end, we packed up and headed towards Gorakhpur to exit Nepal. We had acquired two khukris as souvenirs, only to realize that they were banned items.

"We need to be careful with these," Trilok warned. "We don't want to get into trouble at the border."

"We'll figure something out," Vikas said confidently. "Let's just enjoy the rest of our trip."

We finally made our way to Gorakhpur, ready to cross back into India. As we reached the Indian side of the border, a stern-looking official approached us and asked for our documents.

"You're one day late," he pointed out, scrutinizing our papers. "You'll have to pay a fine, or you could, you know, handle it in another way."

It was clear he was asking for a bribe. We all exchanged uneasy glances. None of us wanted to get into any hassle, especially since we were carrying the khukris, which were banned items.

"Let's just pay him and get it over with," Amit suggested, lowering his voice. "We don't want any trouble."

Reluctantly, we handed over some money, and the official pocketed it without another word, waving us through. Once we were safely across the border, the tension in the car eased, and we started discussing our experiences.

"You know," Tarun began, "when we entered Nepal, I thought we'd run into trouble. But it turned out to be the opposite."

"Absolutely," Vikas agreed. "Nepal was such a pleasant surprise. The people, the places—we had an amazing time."

"I was really impressed by how respectful and friendly everyone was," Trilok added. "Especially the women managing their businesses so confidently."

"I had mixed feelings about coming back," I admitted. "On one hand, I'm looking forward to being with my family again. But on the other hand, I'll miss the adventure and, of course, the company."

"It's been a trip to remember," Shubham said, nodding. "We've had some crazy times, but it's all part of the adventure."

As we drove further into India, the landscape started to feel more familiar. The conversations became a mix of reflections on our journey and plans for future trips.

"Remember the hot springs at Tattopani?" Abhishek said with a grin. "And that liquor store managed by the woman? That was something else."

"And the surprise birthday party," Vikas added, looking at me. "We had you fooled, didn't we?"

"You definitely did," I laughed. "It was a perfect end to an amazing day."

The journey to Lumbini, with its serene monasteries and the humorous incident with Abhishek's shoes, had been another highlight.

"And let's not forget the khukris," Trilok said, patting the bag where they were hidden. "We'll have quite the story to tell back home."

By the time we reached Gorakhpur, the sun was beginning to set, casting a warm glow over the landscape. The trip had been an incredible blend of adventure and discovery.

As we prepared to go our separate ways, there was a sense of bittersweet nostalgia.

"We should do this again," Tarun said as we unloaded our bags. "Maybe next year?"

"Definitely," Amit agreed. "This was just the beginning. There are so many more places to explore."

We had decided to take a break and have lunch at a roadside dhaba. After having nothing but rice in Nepal, we pounced on chapatis as if we'd never eaten them before. The soft, warm bread was a welcome change, and we devoured it with relish. As we savored the meal, I noticed two signboards outside the window. One pointed towards Delhi, 900 kilometers away, and the other towards Gaya, 1,000 kilometers in the opposite direction.

Abhishek looked at the signs and said, "Why not go to Gaya?"

I was strictly against it. "No way. I'm homesick, my clothes are stinking, and I just want to get home."

But the rest of the group seemed intrigued by the idea. "Come on, it'll be fun!" Shubham said, his eyes gleaming with excitement.

"I'm with Abhishek," Tarun chimed in. "Let's go to Gaya."

Vikas, Trilok, and even Amit seemed to be on board with the idea. Frustrated and feeling outnumbered, I turned to Amit, my last hope.

Amit looked at me and then said, "Why don't we vote?"

Everyone raised their hands in favor of Gaya except Amit and me. Amit had stayed with me, likely just to support me, but I could see he was also tempted by the adventure.

He then suggested, “We both can take a bus from here and go to Delhi if you really want.”

Chapter 7

The Road Returns

I stayed quiet, feeling cornered. Eventually, I had to give in. When we got back in the car, I refused to drive. It was the first time since the journey began that I wasn't in the driver's seat. I sat in the back and pretended to sleep, sulking as Abhishek took over.

We had traveled about forty kilometers when Abhishek pulled over for a cup of tea. Reluctantly, I joined them. Vikas tried to lift my spirits. "Come on, take it easy. I've come all the way from Shillong just to spend more time with friends."

I understood their point, even if I was still irritated. After a moment, I sighed and said, "Okay, I get it."

Relieved, I took my place back in the driver's seat. The mood lightened as I drove happily towards the new roads. The countryside of **Uttar Pradesh** unfolded before us, dotted with small villages, bustling markets, and fields stretching far. The setting sun bathed everything in a golden hue, making the journey feel almost magical.

As we drove, we talked about everything—our families, our dreams, our fears. The open road invited deeper conversations.

"Do you think we'll ever have another trip like this?" Shubham mused, looking out the window.

"Maybe," Vikas replied. "But even if we do, this one will always be special. It's our first big adventure together."

"Remember when Tarun wanted to jump into the Parvati River?" Trilok said, laughing. "That was insane."

"Yeah," Tarun grinned. "But it was worth it."

The drive continued, and soon we found ourselves at the last point of Uttar Pradesh. We stopped at a roadside dhaba for a quick meal. The place was lively despite the late hour, with truck drivers and travelers sharing stories over cups of steaming tea.

It was around four in the morning when we finally landed in Gaya. The town was quiet, almost deserted, with only a few stray dogs wandering the empty streets. The air was cool and refreshing, a welcome change after the long, tiring drive.

Further down the main road, we spotted two policemen sitting outside a small stall, huddled around the orange flicker of a fire they had lit. We walked over, seven of us weary travelers, desperate for information.

"Excuse me, officers," I started, trying to sound alert. "We are seven people looking for a place to stay for the night."

They looked us over. They were very cooperative, perhaps softened by the pre-dawn chill. One officer pointed a gloved hand down the street.

"Approach the Raj Guest House down the road," he told us. "It's a large place, just past the next bend. They should have rooms."

We thanked them and followed his directions. We found the building easily enough. We woke the caretaker, a sleepy man who took us to a room on the second floor. Inside, ten single beds were packed in tightly. It was cramped, far from

comfortable, but the sight of a bed was all the luxury we needed. We were so tired that we barely said a word before collapsing onto the thin mattresses, instantly falling into a deep sleep.

In the morning, as the sun rose, we would discover that we had spent the night in one of India's most spiritually significant cities, a place revered by both Hindus and Buddhists, steeped in tales of Lord Buddha's enlightenment and Lord Rama's ancestral rites. Our humble shelter was a momentary haven in a town steeped in history.

The fatigue from our journey had caught up with us, and leaving the comfort of the bed was hard. Despite the late start, we were eager to explore this historic town. Our first destination was the famous Mahabodhi Temple, where the Bodhi tree and the footprints of Buddha were located.

As we approached the temple, the air was filled with a serene sense of spirituality. The chanting of monks created a peaceful ambiance. The temple itself was an architectural marvel, its intricate carvings making it a sight to behold. There were prayers going on which made it amazing.

"Look at those carvings," Shubham said in awe. "They're so detailed."

"It's amazing to think that Buddha walked here," Tarun added, his voice filled with reverence.

We wandered through the temple grounds, eventually finding ourselves standing before the ancient Bodhi tree. Beneath its expansive canopy, we saw the footprints of Buddha etched into the ground. It was a humbling sight, one that filled us with deep respect and wonder.

"Can you imagine?" Vikas whispered. "This is where Buddha attained enlightenment."

We stood there silently, each lost in thought. The sense of history was almost overwhelming.

"Think about the history here," Amit said. "Centuries of pilgrims have walked these grounds, seeking the same peace we're feeling now."

As we absorbed the tranquil atmosphere, a monk approached us. He had a gentle demeanor and spoke with a calm voice. "Welcome to the Mahabodhi Temple," he said. "This is a sacred place where Buddha attained Nirvana."

He told us the history of the temple and the significance of the Bodhi tree. His words painted vivid pictures of the past.

"Thank you for sharing this with us," Amit said sincerely.

The monk smiled and bowed slightly. "It is my pleasure to spread the teachings of Buddha."

Just as we were about to move on, the monk's tone changed. "We rely on donations to maintain this sacred place. Any contribution would be greatly appreciated."

The request for money jolted us out of our reverence. I couldn't help but feel a pang of disappointment. The commercial aspect of such a spiritual place felt disheartening. The initial joy was overshadowed by this encounter.

"Does it always have to come down to money?" I muttered under my breath.

"It's sad, but it's a reality," Abhishek replied. "These places need funds to survive, but it does take away from the experience."

Reluctantly, we handed over some money. As we walked away, I couldn't shake the feeling of disillusionment.

"Do you think Buddha would have asked for donations?" Shubham mused.

"It's hard to say," Vikas replied. "But I guess every place needs upkeep. It's just a shame it has to be so obvious."

We left the temple. I was ready to call it a day, but Trilok had different plans. As we walked, I couldn't help but think about how this trip, initially just a road trip, was turning into something much more meaningful. It was about understanding the essence of dedication, sacrifice, and the impact one person can have on the world. And with every step, I felt we were getting closer to that understanding.

As we navigated the bustling streets of Gaya, we chatted about the temple and the monk's request.

"Despite the ending, it was still a remarkable place," Amit remarked.

"Absolutely," Tarun agreed. "But it does make you think about the commercial side of spirituality."

"Hey, one of my friends is studying at Magadh University," Trilok announced. "Why don't we go meet him?"

Everyone agreed, and Trilok called and made a plan to meet at the University stadium. We arrived at Magadh University, and Trilok led us to a small, crowded café just outside the campus gates. His friend, Rajesh, was waiting for us, smiling broadly.

"Hey, Trilok! It's been ages!" Rajesh exclaimed, hugging him.

"Rajesh, meet my friends," Trilok introduced us one by one.

We all shook hands and sat down, squeezing around a small table. The café buzzed with the chatter of students, and the aroma of freshly brewed chai filled the air.

As we settled in, the café owner, a jovial man in his fifties, approached our table. "Rajesh, who are these fine gentlemen?" he asked, his eyes twinkling.

"These are my friends, Uncle," Rajesh replied. "They're on a road trip, exploring different parts of the country."

"Ah, travelers! From where do you hail?" the owner asked, his interest piqued.

We took turns sharing our origins. The owner listened intently. "It's wonderful to see young people exploring the spirit of adventure," he said.

"Yes, and our journey has been inspired by the ideals of Bhagat Singh," I added. "His vision of freedom and unity resonates deeply with us."

The owner's eyes widened with admiration. "Bhagat Singh, a true revolutionary. His ideas continue to inspire generations. You must visit Manjhi Road while you're here. It's a place rich in history and struggles, much like the path Bhagat Singh walked."

"Manjhi Road?" Amit asked, intrigued. "What's special about it?"

The owner pulled up a chair and sat down, excited to share the story. "Manjhi Road is named after Dashrath Manjhi, the Mountain Man of Bihar. He single-handedly carved a path through a mountain using just a hammer and chisel, to connect his village to the nearest town. His determination is truly inspiring."

"Wow," Vikas said, impressed. "That sounds incredible. He must have been driven by a powerful motivation."

"Indeed," the owner nodded. "His wife fell ill and later died because the nearest doctor was too far away. That tragedy spurred him to make sure no one else would suffer the same fate. His dedication reminds me of Bhagat Singh's commitment to his ideals."

Rajesh chimed in, "Manjhi Road isn't just a place; it's a symbol of what one person can achieve with unwavering determination. Visiting it might give you a fresh perspective on your journey."

We all exchanged looks, clearly moved by the story. "We should definitely check it out," Shubham said. "It's right in line with the spirit of our trip."

The café owner beamed. "I'm glad to see young people like you keeping the flame of such legacies alive. Finish your chai, and I'll give you directions to Manjhi Road. It's not too far from here."

"I feel like we've been given a mission," Tarun said, as we prepared to leave. "To understand the strength and resilience of people like Dashrath Manjhi and Bhagat Singh."

"And to carry that spirit with us," I added, feeling a renewed sense of purpose.

We thanked the owner and Rajesh for their hospitality and headed out, armed with directions and a new destination in mind. The sun was setting, casting a warm glow over the university town as we made our way to Manjhi Road. The promise of new discoveries filled us with excitement.

We decided to go to Manjhi Road, spurred by the story we had heard at the café. It was only about half an hour away,

and the drive was filled with anticipation. We read more about Dashrath Manjhi during the journey. Nawazuddin Siddiqui had portrayed him in a movie, and Aamir Khan had featured him on his show, Satyamev Jayate.

The road to Manjhi Road was dusty and bumpy, a stark reminder of the hardships that Manjhi must have faced. As we neared the village, the atmosphere became more solemn. We knew we were about to witness something extraordinary, a testament to human perseverance and love.

When we finally arrived at Manjhi's home, we were confronted with a stark reality. The house was in shambles, a far cry from the promises of support and recognition that had been made. The dilapidated structure stood as a silent testament to a man's indomitable spirit and the unfulfilled pledges of those in power.

I touched the rock where Manjhi had used his hammer to carve a path through the mountain. In that moment, I felt a deep connection to the man who had poured his heart and soul into this monumental task. His passion and determination were almost palpable, emanating from the rough surface of the rock. It was a profound realization of what one person could achieve with unwavering resolve.

We stood in silence for a few minutes, each of us lost in our thoughts. The gravity of what Manjhi had accomplished began to sink in.

"Can you imagine the sheer willpower it took to do this?" Shubham said, breaking the silence. "It's beyond comprehension."

"All for the love of his wife," Tarun added, his voice thick with emotion. "This is true dedication."

Amit shook his head, tears welling up in his eyes. "It makes you realize how much we take for granted. Manjhi's story is one of the purest forms of love and determination I've ever heard."

Vikas walked over to the edge of the rock, staring at the path Manjhi had carved. "This place is giving me life lessons that no book could ever teach," he said quietly. "Despite teaching for fourteen years, I feel that the real education for my students lies outside the classroom walls. No curriculum could convey the depth of passion and desire that Manjhi had exhibited."

We continued to explore the village, meeting a few of the locals who shared stories of Manjhi's incredible journey. Each story added another layer of depth to our understanding of this remarkable man. We learned about the struggles he faced, the skepticism of the villagers, and the unwavering love that drove him to achieve the impossible.

"I wish more people knew about him," Abhishek said. "His story deserves to be known and remembered. It's inspiring beyond words."

The group collectively felt that these life lessons surpassed anything learned in a classroom. Manjhi's love for his wife was unparalleled, a true testament to human devotion. We read about Romeo and Juliet, but no love story could feature a hero like Dashrath Manjhi.

As we made our way back to Gaya, we were all deep in thought. The visit to Manjhi Road had left an indelible mark on our hearts and minds. Our first stop was the café where we had met Rajesh and the owner. We shared our moving experience with the owner.

"Thank you for suggesting the visit," I said to the owner. "It was an eye-opening experience."

"I'm glad you found it meaningful," the owner replied, smiling warmly. "Manjhi's story deserves to be known and remembered."

Sitting in the café, I felt compelled to do something more. I took out a piece of paper and began writing a letter to the Chief Minister of Bihar. In it, I described the deplorable condition of Manjhi's home and urged the government to honor its promises to his family and create a fitting memorial for him.

I leaned back in the small café chair, the clatter of the dishes failing to break the silence in my head. Before this trip, my life felt like a polished steel rail—smooth, fast, and aimed only in one direction: up the corporate ladder. Success was defined by salary slips and social status. I had measured my worth by how quickly I could climb, ignoring the landscape passing by. But Manjhi? He measured success not by gain, but by grit. He didn't carve a path to get rich; he carved it out of necessity, out of profound, unshakeable love. That kind of dedication felt alien to the competitive, transactional world I had left behind. It was a purity of purpose that humbled me completely. My own professional struggles suddenly seemed small, almost meaningless, next to the sheer force of his will. The realization hit me: the most lasting achievements aren't those celebrated in boardrooms, but those born from the heart, often forged in silence and hardship. I understood now why I had felt so restless back home—my purpose had been focused inward, while Manjhi's was focused on lifting a community.

Initially reluctant to visit Gaya, I now felt grateful for the journey. The travel had profoundly affected me, more than I could have ever imagined.

"No one could have had the kind of effect this journey is having on me," I mused aloud. "It's transforming how I see the world and my place in it."

"You've become quite the philosopher," Amit teased, nudging me. "But I get it. This trip has been something else."

"I never thought a road trip could be so enlightening," Vikas added. "We've learned more in these few days than we could in months of everyday life."

Shubham nodded in agreement. "Manjhi's story is just one of many out there. There are countless unsung heroes whose lives can teach us so much."

The journey was not just about visiting places; it was about connecting with the essence of those places and the stories they held. Each of us was taking back something invaluable.

We didn't sleep that night. We decided we would leave early in the morning. The sense of adventure and the experiences we had were too fresh in our minds. Despite the lack of sleep, we felt energized. We got up early, packed our bags, and prepared to move back. The streets of Gaya were still quiet as we made our way to a small dhaba for breakfast.

At the dhaba, a young boy served us. His eyes reflected a maturity beyond his years. We struck up a conversation. He shared how he managed his studies, working during the day and studying in the evenings to support his family.

"I get up early, help my mother, then come here to work. In the evenings, I attend school," he explained with calm determination.

Listening to him reminded me of Bhagat Singh's writings, especially his essay "Why I Am an Atheist." Singh, at a young age, had such clarity about his beliefs. This journey was making me confront many of my own questions.

After breakfast, we hit the road. We reached Kanpur around 9 AM, only to be greeted by a thick blanket of fog. Driving through the fog was challenging, so we decided to stop at another dhaba for food. The dhaba had beds, and we took the opportunity to rest, catching some much-needed sleep in the middle of our journey.

The next morning, we resumed our travels. We dropped Abhishek at a nearby train station so he could catch his train to Gwalior. The journey continued as we took the Yamuna Expressway, making good time. We reached Delhi by nightfall.

My desperation to reach home, which I had felt so intensely earlier, was now replaced with a reluctance to end the journey. The trip had become a transformative experience, reshaping how I viewed life. I realized I had to thank Trilok for encouraging us to explore.

In Delhi, Tarun went his own way. Amit, Trilok, and Vikas decided to stay in Delhi for a while, extending their adventure. Shubham and I took a bus from Delhi to Ludhiana, sharing our thoughts and memories along the way.

The bus ride was a quiet, almost sacred time. The noise of the road was the only soundtrack to our exhaustion and reflection. Shubham and I didn't talk much about what was coming next; instead, we replayed the highlights—the chaos of

the border, the chill of the canal water, the smell of the forest fire, and the look on Manjhi's neighbor's face. It felt like we were cataloging precious artifacts. I realized that in a few hours, the last visible thread of this adventure would snap. Shubham, with his quiet strength and constant readiness to help, represented the best part of this spontaneous family. We were returning to our separate lives, but the silence between us was no longer awkward; it was full of understanding, a quiet promise that the bonds forged on this road were too strong to break.

When Shubham got down at Ludhiana, we parted ways with a sense of nostalgia and fulfillment. I continued my journey to Pathankot, where my family awaited me. As I walked through the door, I was overwhelmed with emotions. Swati greeted me warmly, her eyes filled with curiosity about my trip.

"How was it?" she asked, a smile playing on her lips.

I struggled to find words, my mind flooded with memories. The sights, the people, the lessons, and the growth were too vast to condense into a simple answer.

"It was...life-changing," I finally said, my voice laden with the weight of our experiences.

As we sat down, I began to recount the stories, starting with our journey to Nepal, the enchanting visit to Pokhara, the humbling experience at Muktinath, and the unforgettable lessons from Manjhi Road. Each story was a piece of the puzzle that had come together to form a richer understanding of life.

The journey had ended, but its impact on me was just beginning. I knew that the memories and lessons would stay with me forever, shaping my thoughts and actions in ways I was only beginning to comprehend.