

LIVING MY TRUTH

Spiritual Lessons from Truffle
My Faithful Companion

Raajeev A Bhatnagar



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DEDICATION



For Truffle —
My teacher in fur,
My silent companion,
My daily reminder that love needs no words.

And for Pramila, Pracchi, and Rishebh —
The home that keeps me grounded,
The laughter that keeps me light,
The love that keeps me true.

You are my circle of belonging; the reason I keep walking.

PREFACE



Truffle and the Journey Within.

Books often begin with an idea. Mine began with a wagging tail.

When Truffle, our Labrador, bounded into our lives, I thought I was simply welcoming a pet. What I didn't realize was that I had just invited a teacher, a companion, and a silent sage who would change the way I saw life itself.

This book is not about dogs, yet it is full of Truffle. Because through him, I learned that spirituality is not found only in scriptures or mountaintop retreats. It is discovered in the everyday through play, through presence, through silence, through letting go.

You will see how his presence threads through each theme: the gift of not knowing, the dance of time, the art of waiting, the sacred ordinary, and finally, the voice of silence. These are not abstract philosophies. They are lived truths, shaped by muddy pawprints, slow walks, watchful eyes, and unconditional love.

Truffle reminded me again and again that the divine does not hide in lofty places. It reveals itself in the circle of belonging, in the patience of waiting, in the sacredness of simple meals, in the timeless silence of companionship.

So, as you turn these pages, imagine him beside us; sometimes playful, sometimes still, always present. May his spirit open your heart to notice what is already here: that truth is not distant. It is alive, ordinary, and waiting to be seen.

This is not just my truth. It is a truth gifted by a faithful companion, whose language was wagging tails and deep silences.

May you, too, find your Truffle within or around you and walk a little more gently, a little more lovingly, into your own truth.

—Raajeev A Bhatnagar

FOREWORD



There are books that inform, books that inspire, and then there are books that quietly transfer by reminding us of what we already know deep inside but may have forgotten. *Living My Truth* belongs to the latter.

In these chapters, Raajeev does not lecture or preach. He invites us into the living room of his soul, where truth is discovered not through abstract theories but through the rhythms of daily life, illuminated by the gentle presence of Truffle, his Labrador companion.

Truffle is not just a pet in these pages. He is a mirror, a guide, a spiritual friend. Through his eyes, we rediscover what it means to be present. Through his patience, we learn the art of waiting. Through his unconditional love, we remember the circle of belonging. And through his silence, we encounter the divine presence that words can never fully express.

There are many lines and paragraphs in the book that are both revealing and insightful. In the current context of learning from Truffle, I found this particular paragraph very insightful & emotional:

“The ego hates such mirrors. It resists, distracts, blames. But the soul? The soul longs for them. It craves honesty, even when uncomfortable. And Truffle, without knowing it, was the most honest mirror I’d ever faced.”

What makes this book remarkable is its simplicity. It does not demand the reader to climb mountains or renounce the world. It asks only that we notice - notice the sacredness in play, in rest, in meals, in silence, in companionship. It reminds us that the extraordinary is woven into the ordinary, waiting to be recognized.

As you read these chapters, you may find yourself smiling, pausing, perhaps even tearing up. You may remember your own companions -

human or animal, who have taught you truths without ever speaking to them. And you may feel the quiet nudge to live your own truth, gently, faithfully, courageously.

This book is not just about Raajeev or Truffle. It is about all of us. It is about the timeless dance between love and loss, presence and absence, sound and silence.

Raajeev's use of metaphors and the constant link to Truffle, and his 'living interaction' with the family, is well etched.

Here are a few paragraphs that I have taken the liberty to copy here, only to whet your interest, to read the book.

“And then, in the middle of my irritation, I started laughing. This was silence too — not the absence of sound, but rather, the total acceptance of it. All said and done, Silence isn't about controlling the world. It's about not letting the world control you.”

“Living your truth isn't a one-time decision. It's not like signing a contract or taking an oath. It's a practice, a rhythm, a way of walking through life.”

“Truffle showed me the truth: The scarcity of time is an illusion. It's not about hours. It's about priorities. Never rushing, he always had time for what truly mattered — play, rest, love. Watching him, I realised I wasn't time-poor; I was attention-poor.”

Read it slowly. Let it breathe. Let it walk beside you, as Truffle once walked beside Raajeev. And may it remind you that truth is never far away—it is alive in each moment, around you, enveloping and encompassing you, patiently waiting to be seen.

Jayesh Ravindranath
Dubai

CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Straddling Two Worlds 1

Chapter 2

Echoes of Awakening 7

Chapter 3

The Mirror of the Present 14

Chapter 4

The Quiet Teacher: Time 23

Chapter 5

Silence Speaks 33

Chapter 6

The Divine Presence 38

Chapter 7

Living My Truth 41

Chapter 8

The Gift of Letting Go 43

Chapter 9

The Dance of Time 50

Chapter 10

The Gentle Art of Waiting 59

Chapter 11

The Sacred Ordinary 64

Chapter 12

The Circle of Belonging 73

Chapter 13

The Language of Play 79

Chapter 14

The Weight of “Should” 85

Chapter 15

Noise vs. Voice 91

Chapter 16
Life Without the Mask..... 97

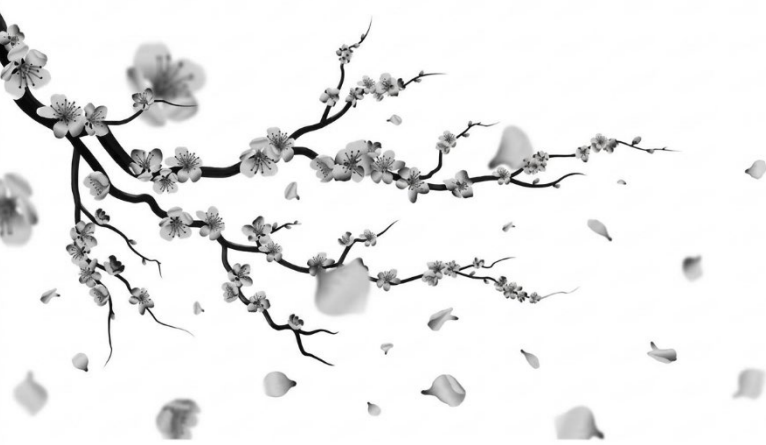
Chapter 17
The Courage to Walk Away..... 105

Chapter 18
Building a Life That Fits the Soul..... 114

Chapter 19
The Homecoming Within 122

Afterword: The Last Wag..... 129

Writer’s Note..... 130



CHAPTER 1

STRADDLING TWO WORLDS

“Truffle??!!”

There are certain ways your child calls out to you, that you never quite forget. One is the drawn-out “Daaaaaad” that usually precedes a request for money. The other is the panicked scream of your dog’s name, sharp enough to cut through walls, silence, and even your afternoon cup of tea.

This was the latter.

The way my daughter Pracchi screamed out the word “Truffle” that evening, I knew it wasn’t one of his mischievous episodes. No missing slippers, no upturned dustbins. This was different.

“Dad! Pleeese come... something’s happening to Truffle!!!”

My wife was hovering nearby, pale but composed, repeating, “Jaldi aao, jaldi aao!” as if I wasn’t already leaping across the room!

Kindly allow me to confess, sprinting is not my natural mode of transport. I am more of a ‘comfortable-stroll-with-pauses-for-chai’ kind of man. That evening, however, I could have given Usain Bolt a run for his money. By the time I reached the drawing room, our beloved Truffle’s den, I was breathless, heart thumping in my ears, and praying that my daughter was overreacting.

In hindsight, I wish she *had been*...

But there Pracchi was, kneeling on the floor, hands pressed desperately on Truffle's chest, trying what looked like doggy CPR. Her face drenched in tears, her voice breaking as she kept pleading, "Come on, baby, breathe!"

I dropped to the floor beside them. One touch was enough. His body was still warm, but limp in a way that told me my golden boy was here... and yet, not here at all.

Truffle—our family's sunshine, socks-thief, philosopher, clown, and comforter all at the same time—had slipped away.

I cannot begin to describe the silence that followed. It wasn't the comfortable silence of a nap-filled Sunday, but rather, the heavy, suffocating silence of absence. The silence that screams louder than any sound.

However, we humans don't accept silence easily, do we? We fight it with denial.

"Noooo!" Pracchi shrieked. "He can't be gone! I'll try again, Dad, I'll try CPR!"

My instinct was to support her madness, because sometimes denial is love's first language. But reason caught up, and I called Dr. Shobha Nadkarni, our neighbour and expert doctor. She arrived within minutes though for us, those minutes stretched out like excruciatingly painful, inexorably long hours.

The first thing Dr. Nadkarni did when she arrived, was to check Truffle's vitals. Her hands calm, her face betraying the truth. With the finality of a judge delivering a verdict, she whispered softly:

"He's no more."

And just like that, our world was split wide open, like a gaping wound that seemed as though no salve would ever heal it.

I wept inconsolably. There, I said it. Here was a man in his sixties, tears streaming down his face like a child. If anyone tells you 'Real men don't

Cry,” hand them a Labrador and then take that Labrador away. Let’s see how dry their eyes remain!

When the verdict that we were all dreading was proclaimed, Pracchi collapsed in an avalanche of sobs, clutching her soulmate tightly (as though if she squeezed him hard, he might somehow miraculously come back to life). For her, Truffle wasn’t just a dog; he was her *shadow*. She had adopted him back in the year 2012 in Delhi when he was but a two-month-old ball of fur. Over the years, they had become inseparable—her laughter echoing in his wagging tail, her tears soaked into his golden coat.

Even at home the usually steady anchor in our storms, had tears in her eyes. She managed to hold herself together, but I could see her heart breaking quietly.

Our son, Rishebh, was in Vancouver. Imagine his panic when his phone buzzed at 6:45 a.m. Canadian time with a call from Mumbai. Calls at such hours rarely mean good news. He answered breathlessly, “*Papa?* Is everything okay?”

What could I say? How do you explain to your son across the world, that his brother in fur had passed away? That the house that once rang with happy barks, now echoed with the saddest of silences?

Looking back, perhaps I should have been better prepared. Truffle had been struggling for weeks, limping, slowing down, even looking at me with eyes that seemed to ask, “*How much longer must I fight?*”

Indeed, it hurt to watch him struggle. Every attempt to coax him into a routine walk felt akin to urging an old man to run a marathon. Yet, in his eyes there was still the same love, still dignity...

That morning, a few hours before Truffle’s passing, I sat with him and asked him in the softest tone possible, “Do you really want to go, my baby?” And with an effort that broke my heart, he raised his paw and placed it on my lap. Not once, but twice—each time, with his silent answer:

“*Yes.*”

It was as though he was teaching me the lesson I never wanted to learn—that *sometimes, love means letting go*.

So, I whispered, “Okay, Truffle. Let go of all attachments and pass in peace. I’ll pray for you.”

And only hours later, he did.

After Truffle, the very existence of the house we all lived in, felt wrong in some kind of intangible manner. His bowl in the corner, untouched. His favourite spot on the sofa, glaringly empty. His toys scattered like Souvenirs of an era, that has passed yet not gone. Friends and neighbours dropped by to offer their condolences, some trying humour (“At least he’s chasing bones in heaven!”), other platitudes (“Time heals all wounds”). They meant well, but grief has its own stubborn rhythm. The more we were consoled, the more we seemed to plunge into that seemingly endless pit of sorrow.

The truth is, I wasn’t looking for words. I wanted Truffle’s bark at the sound of the ringing doorbell, his head nudging my knee for attention, his mischievous raids on my socks.

Instead, there was silence.

Yet, in that silence, something strange happened. Memories of Truffle began to cascade, suddenly filling the void we had all been sucked into not just as grief, but *teachings*!

This was because, dear readers, Truffle was no ordinary dog. He was a philosopher disguised in fur, who we were all fortunate to have been blessed with. A master who lived entirely in the moment. Whether he was sniffing a lamppost or devouring a biscuit, he was *fully there*.

How many of us can say the same about eating dinner (without scrolling our phones)?

Moreover, Truffle trusted us blindly. The vet’s needle, the thunderstorm, the chaos of Mumbai’s streets—none of these shook him, as long as we were near.

When his time came, he didn’t cling. Instead, he proffered me his paw as though to say, “*It’s okay, Dad. You’ll be fine.*”

It was about that time that the realization hit home: Truffle wasn't just a pet. He was a teacher sent to us, a golden-furred guru who taught without lectures. After his passing, I found myself thinking often of what we Indians are told about the soul—that it is eternal, that death is but a doorway. *Moksha*, rebirth, evolution—big words that seemed abstract before, felt real all of a sudden.

The reality was this: When Truffle passed, I didn't just lose a dog. I glimpsed something deeper—the sense that life isn't measured in years, but rather, in *love given and received*. That souls come not just to live, but to teach.

And Truffle's lesson was clear:

Love fiercely, live presently, and when the time comes, let go gracefully.

Of course, Truffle wouldn't have wanted us moping endlessly. He was, after all, a master comedian. I remember once, after an expensive bath at the pet parlour, he walked straight into the dirtiest puddle in the lane. I think he did it just to watch my expression—one of those “*Why me, God?*” looks that dogs secretly enjoy provoking.

Or the time he stole my slipper, chewing it beyond recognition – then, looking so guilty that I ended up consoling *him!*

Even in grief, these memories made us laugh through our tears. It was Truffle's final gift, perhaps: reminding us that joy and sorrow often walk hand in hand.

In those days, I felt suspended between two worlds. One foot in the practical, feeding myself, answering calls, managing work. The other in the spiritual, wondering where Truffle's soul had gone, what he might be teaching me from beyond.

And slowly, I began to realize that perhaps this is the very point of it all! Life is not merely about choosing one world over the other, but rather, *straddling both*.

Serving with our hands, while staying rooted in our souls.

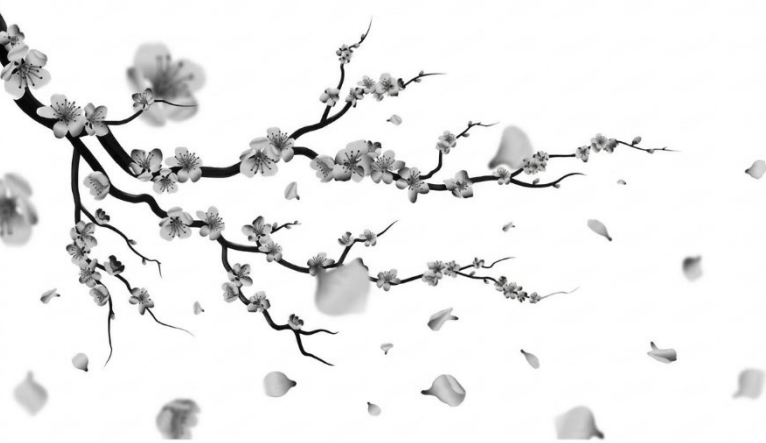
Truffle's departure cracked my heart, this much is true. But through that crack, light entered.

So here we are, dear readers. Chapter 1 begins with loss. But it is not the end—it is the doorway. Or a portal if you'd like to call it that, one that opens to another world. A world that goes beyond the ephemera of existing on the 'surface.' because, what followed in the weeks after Truffle's passing, was nothing short of an *awakening*. A Labrador's paw had nudged me into silence, into presence, into truths I had overlooked in the busy life.

And that awakening, as you'll see in the next chapter, didn't arrive in the Himalayas, under a Bodhi tree, or in a temple.

It arrived on a humid Mumbai morning.....

With a Labrador tugging stubbornly at his leash.



CHAPTER 2

ECHOES OF AWAKENING

Awakening. The word itself sounds grand, doesn't it? You picture monks, glowing under Bodhi trees, saints levitating in caves, or desert wanderers discovering the Divine in shifting sands.

On the contrary, in my life, that awakening didn't come with fireworks or haloed visions. It arrived on a muggy Mumbai morning, with my Labrador tugging furiously at his leash while I wrestled with my slippers.

Not exactly *The Life of the Buddha*. More like *The Life of a Blundering Logistician with a Stubborn Dog!*

After Truffle's passing, mornings were the hardest. For years, my day began with his paws thumping the floor, as though reminiscent of a tiny drummer who was hell-bent on honing his craft in the wee hours of the morning. By 6:30 a.m., his nudges would arrive, as insistent as unpaid bills: "*Wake up, Dad. The world won't walk itself.*"

Then, all of a sudden, there was silence. No paws. No nudges. No eager eyes waiting by the door.

At first, I sank into that emptiness. I told myself it was a sort of relief — no more chauffeur duty for a dog who believed lampposts were

temples requiring full-length sermons. On that note, grief is a sneaky thing. That short-lived relief soon turned into an intense longing.

One morning, weeks after Truffle's departure, I found myself automatically reaching for my walking shoes. The leash hung in my hand like an unfinished sentence. There was no wagging tail at the other end. Just absence.

You must know, dear readers, that the moment hit me harder than I expected. In that hollow silence, memories rushed back: countless walks where I had grumbled, tugged, and muttered, while Truffle sniffed bushes as though decoding the Rig Veda.

At the time, I thought he was being plain and simple stubborn. In hindsight, he was infinitely patient, teaching me something most precious: Awakening doesn't come with cymbals crashing. It comes in pauses, in lamp posts, in the unnoticed details of the morning air.

The Pavement Lesson

If you've ever walked a Labrador, you'll know they operate at two speeds:

1. Turbo-zoom (usually when pigeons or cats appear).
2. Sacred sniffathon (usually when you're late).

Truffle was a grandmaster of the second.

One morning, I had back-to-back meetings. My phone buzzed in my pocket like an anxious bee. I tugged at Truffle's leash. "Chalo, Truffle! Hurry up!"

And what did my cocky Labrador do instead of listening to me? Why, he stopped dead in the middle of the lane, plonked himself down, and looked right at me! That look — liquid brown eyes, calm and steady — said: *"You go if you want. I'm not done listening."*

I swear, if he could talk, he would've added, "By the way, your meeting isn't half as important as this patch of grass."

And so, there I was: a middle-aged man in formal trousers, sitting cross-legged on a pavement with his dog, while neighbours slowed down to watch. A vegetable vendor smirked. A schoolboy whispered, "Uncle's meditating with his dog."

For once, I stopped resisting.

And in that pause, I heard things I usually bulldozed past: sparrows squabbling on overhead wires, the faint sweetness of rain still clinging to the earth, the murmuring rhythm of the city waking up.

It wasn't enlightenment. But it was... awareness. A widening of the lens. A reminder that life was already happening while I was busy running late for it.

This was the comic essence of Truffle's teaching: Awakening doesn't demand saffron robes or mountaintop retreats. Sometimes, it demands fumbling with slippers while a Labrador drags you into the street before dawn.

And once you notice it, you can't unsee it.

The world is constantly whispering. The trouble is, we're too busy shouting to hear.

Awakening doesn't always arrive dressed in robes and chanting hymns. Sometimes it arrives panting, wagging its tail, and demanding you pause while it sniffs a lamppost for the ninety-seventh time.

That was Truffle's method. His sermons weren't preached, they were *performed* often in the middle of traffic, or worse, in the middle of my schedule!

For me, walks were exercise. A box to tick. Steps to record on my smartwatch. "Burn the calories, get it done."

For Truffle, walks were holy ground. Each lamp post was a temple pillar, each bush a scripture. He sniffed with the seriousness of a scholar cross-examining ancient manuscripts.

The lesson was simple but relentless: *"The point is not to arrive. The point is to be here."*

And here I was, yanking the leash like a distracted CEO, muttering, "Chalo, Truffle, hurry up," while he lingered in his furry state of samadhi. If enlightenment were to somehow be depicted by a sketch of comedic proportions, this was well and truly it.

Meals carried their own wisdom. On days I dropped kibble into Truffle's bowl absentmindedly while rushing back to my laptop, he often ignored it. He'd look at me as though to say, *"What am I supposed to do with this distracted offering? Feed me with presence, not just pellets."*

But if I crouched down, patted him, looked into his eyes, and then placed the bowl in front of his eager face — Ah, then the feast truly began!

Same food, same bowl. The difference was *presence*.

Lesson: even kibble becomes sacred when offered with attention.

One morning, Truffle spotted one such frisky squirrel, darting across the park. In an instant, he bolted. The leash slipped from my hand. Picture me, a middle-aged man in formals — dragged through wet mud like a potato sack on wheels. Oh, what a farcical scene that was, as though it were straight out of an episode from the Tom and Jerry cartoon!

When he finally stopped, panting proudly, I was covered in grime, and fuming. I opened my mouth to scold him, but then he turned around with that goofy grin — ears flapping, eyes shining.

His grin said it all: *"Wasn't that fun, Dad?"*

And it was. Once I got over my bruised dignity, I realised: sometimes you just need to surrender to the chase, mud, and all.

And then, his *pièce de resistance* —those unscheduled naps. Sometimes, right in the middle of a busy road, he'd flop down like a royal maharaja claiming his throne. Cars honked, bikers swerved, people laughed, and I pleaded. But Truffle? He lay there, tongue lolling, looking like the happiest creature alive.

At first, I was mortified. Then, slowly, I saw the point. The world didn't collapse when we paused. Life continued.

It was Truffle's way of saying: *"Slow down. Even the middle of the road can be a resting place."*

This, then, was the cosmic joke: Enlightenment wasn't hiding in Himalayan caves. Rather, it was sprawled on hot asphalt, forcing me to laugh at myself, at the absurdity of it all.

One of Truffle's greatest gifts was turning inconvenience into wisdom, frustration into humour, and ordinary moments into sermons disguised as slapstick. If I'd had the humility to listen earlier, I could have saved money on spiritual retreats. Instead, I paid in chewed slippers and muddy trousers!

Awakening isn't always a thunderclap. Sometimes it's a stubborn Labrador refusing to play fetch until you put your phone down.

If the walks and naps were his sermons, then his greatest teaching tool was his gaze — those liquid brown eyes that refused to be fooled.

On evenings when I came home cheerful, Truffle would launch into his signature 'Labrador Disco' routine: paws tapping, tail thumping like a tabla, ears flopping in sync with the overall rhythm. His joy was contagious, an echo of my own. On the other hand, if I walked in tense and irritable, carrying the day's storm, his response was equally clear. No wag. No dance. Just a quiet stare, head cocked, eyes saying *"What thundercloud have you dragged in, Dad?"*

In fact, Truffle mirrored me so very perfectly, that sometimes I dreaded his greeting more than Pramila's questions. At least Pramila softened her words. Truffle's silence was blunt honesty.

One evening, I absentmindedly tossed him his toy while still on a business call. He brought it back, tail wagging, but I waved him off instead. Not one to be dismissed, he dropped it on my lap. I shooed him away again. Finally, he sighed loudly and walked off.

That sigh hit harder than any complaint. It said: *"If you can't be here, then what's the point?"*

Later, when the call ended, I realised I hadn't just disappointed him. I had disappointed the present moment itself.

Naturally, the family joined the chorus of reflections.

Pramila would chuckle, "Raajeev, you don't need a stress test. Just look at Truffle. If he's sulking, it means you're not present."

My daughter once teased, "Papa, Truffle is more honest than you. At least he doesn't fake a smile when he's upset."

And Rishebh, used to joke, “Papa, put Truffle on camera first. His face tells me how you’re really doing.”

It became a running family joke: *Truffle, the mood barometer*.

However, not all mirrors were funny. As Truffle aged, his slower steps became my mirror. I saw in them my own impatience, my denial of time’s flow. His tired gaze reflected back my fear of loss, my resistance to endings. Once, when I scolded him for being slow, he simply looked at me calmly. Not hurt. Not angry. Just reflective, as though to say, “*Why are you fighting reality, Dad?*”

That look stung. But it also softened me. It taught me that awakening isn’t about *changing the moment*. It’s about *letting the moment change you*.

Truffle never sermonized. He didn’t need to. His fur, his sighs, his wagging tail — *they* were his syllabus! Indeed, he showed me that awakening wasn’t ‘out there,’ but ‘here.’

In feeding him with attention, in noticing sparrows during walks, in sitting with him, sadness visited.

And perhaps the loudest echo of all was this: “*Be present, Dad. Because presence is love.*”

Over the years, Truffle’s lessons stacked up like paw prints across my life —sometimes messy, at times muddy, but impossible to ignore.

He never handed me a philosophy book. He never quoted scriptures. Yet, his teachings were clearer than most words I had read.

None of this came with footnotes or sermons. Instead, it was accompanied with drool, fur on the sofa, chewed furniture, and laughter in the middle of frustration. The real punch-line? We humans spend fortunes chasing awakening — flying to retreats, paying for mindfulness workshops, quoting sages as if collecting stamps. And all the while, my enlightenment was snoring at my feet, occasionally farting in his sleep!

One evening, after a particularly long day, I sat with my head in my hands. Truffle came, rested his head on my knee, and simply breathed. No advice. No fixing. Just *being*.

And in that moment, I remembered a line I once read: “*When you seek enlightenment, you’ll find it was quietly sitting at your feet all along.*”

In my case, it was literally true — *drooling on my trousers!*

That’s the cosmic joke of it all. Awakening doesn’t shout; it *whispers*. It hides in lampposts, in half-chewed tennis balls, in muddy paw prints that ruin your freshly mopped floor.

One morning, weeks after Truffle’s passing, I sat with a cup of chai, sunlight streaming through the window. The house was still, and warm. No barking. No paws. Just me.

And in that quiet, I felt him. Not his fur, not his weight, but his *essence*. A whisper, almost playful: “*This is it, Dad. This ordinary moment, is awakening.*”

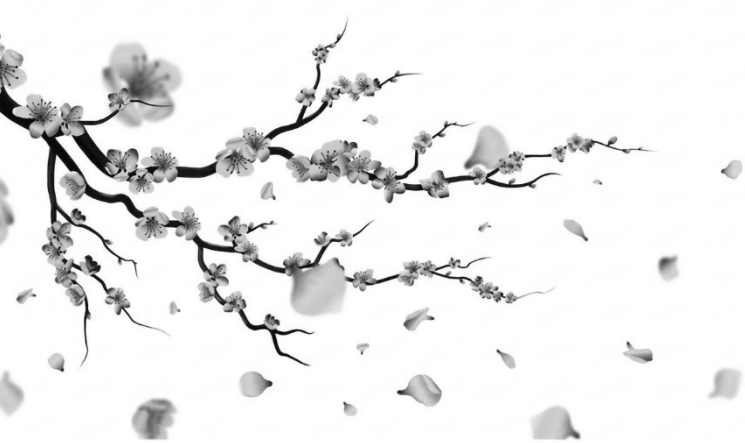
It wasn’t grand. It wasn’t mystical. But it was real.

And so, dear readers if you’re chasing awakening, pause for a second. You might not necessarily need a guru in saffron robes. You might just need to taste your tea slowly. Or, watch the sparrows bicker. Or walk with a dog who insists that lampposts are sacred texts.

After all awakening isn’t about *changing your life*. It’s about *noticing it*.

Truffle taught me that first whisper of awareness. But there was another lesson waiting, one even sharper. The lesson of seeing myself clearly. That’s because awakening shows you the moment. But what happens when that moment reflects *you* back at yourself?

That, my friend, is the next chapter...



CHAPTER 3

THE MIRROR OF THE PRESENT

Dogs are terrible liars. They can't fake interest in your stories, can't pretend to like your boss, and will never politely applaud your new shirt if they think it smells odd. On the contrary, they are excellent truth-tellers — masters at holding up a mirror to your state of being.

If you've ever lived with a Labrador, you'll know this truth runs even deeper...

Truffle was my unflinching mirror. No filters, no edits, no sympathy lighting. Just raw, unpolished reality reflected back at me in his eyes, his posture, even the wag (or lack of wag) in his tail!

One evening, I dragged myself home after a day that could have soured even the saintliest of people. Traffic had been brutal, the office deadlines worse, and by the time I parked, my inner monologue was essentially a playlist of complaints.

Normally, Truffle greeted me like a rock star. The full routine — ears flying, tail beating out a drum solo, paws dancing like he was auditioning for “So You Think You Can Dance.”

Not that day, though. That day was different from all the others that preceded it. He sat quietly by the door, head cocked to one side, studying me, his eyes saying: *“What storm have you dragged home today, Dad?”*

What you must know, dear reader, is that silent stare cut deeper than any human reprimand. No lecture. No scolding. Just a reflection: *"You're not here. You're somewhere else."*

When I brushed him off, still wrapped in my irritation, he simply walked to his corner. Not sulking. Not angry. Just a matter of fact. His body language said,

"I'll be here when you're actually present."

That night, I realised something unsettling. I hadn't seen myself in the bathroom mirror. I had seen myself *in Truffle's eyes* — and it was not flattering.

However, it worked both ways.

On days when I walked in humming, light-hearted, and maybe even a little mischievous, Truffle erupted into that 'Labrador disco' I spoke of earlier. His tail was a metronome of happiness, paws skittering across the floor, eyes sparkling with delight.

It wasn't just joy. It was *my joy mirrored back at me*, amplified, unfiltered, unapologetic.

He was telling me, *"Yes! This is the energy worth bringing home. More of this, Dad!"*

The moment sadness walked with me, though, Truffle didn't try to 'fix' it, like Chris Martin (of the infamous band Coldplay speaks of 'fixing' his lover in the popular single 'Fix You'). He didn't perform tricks, shove toys into my lap, or beg for treats. He simply sat near, rested his head on my knee, and *breathed* with me.

That was his mirror for grief. Not denial, not distraction, but instead, a calm reflection:

"Yes, I feel it too. And we'll sit with it together."

No therapist or motivational speaker could ever have taught me presence in such 'pure' fashion.

What came as a pleasant surprise, however, was the fact that my family noticed these 'mirror moments,' too. Pramila, practical as ever, would say, "Raajeev, I don't need to ask how your day went. I can see it in the

way Truffle greets you. My daughter once teased, “Papa, Truffle’s more honest than you. At least he doesn’t fake a smile when he’s upset.” Even Rishabh, watching over video calls, remarked, “Papa, Truffle’s face is like a mood chart. I know exactly how you’re doing before you even say hello.”

And how right they were! Dogs don’t lie — and by extension, they don’t let *you* lie to yourself...

The thing about Truffle was his reflections weren’t limited to the dramatic moments of joy or sadness our lives are peppered with. No, his mirror worked *overtime* — in the small, ordinary, everyday rhythms of life.

For me, walks were exercise. “Get the steps in, burn some calories, tick the box.” A practical, efficient activity. For Truffle, walks were scripture. A pilgrimage. Every lamp post, every bush, every leaf was holy text to be sniffed, pondered, absorbed.

So, there we were: me tugging impatiently at the leash, muttering, “Chalo, hurry up Truffle,” while my Labrador lingered in devotional absorption, tail wagging in rhythm with his sniffing mantra.

One day, out of sheer frustration, I pulled his leash sharply. He stopped, turned, and gave me a look that seemed to pierce my soul. Not angry. Not submissive. Just calm, steady, reflective.

“Why are you in such a hurry, Dad? The whole point is to be here.”

And just like that, the mirror was clear: I wasn’t walking a dog. I was dragging my *restlessness* up and down the street.

Determined to improve my ‘presence,’ I tried meditation.

I sat on the floor, cross-legged, spine straight, eyes closed. I took deep breaths, imagining myself enlightened, as though I might have some sort of aura over my head like the great masters do.

Enter Truffle.

A cold nose jabbed me in the ribs. Startled, I opened one eye. He was standing there, tail wagging furiously, gaze locked on me as though I

might be the prey in a hunter's rifle – ready to 'shoot' his next lesson at me.

If he could speak, he'd have said: *"Nice try, Dad. But you're faking it."*

That was the end of my sage-like composure. I laughed until my belly hurt.

Lesson? You can't fake presence. Not with a Labrador. Not with your own soul.

I started joking that I didn't need gurus, I had a Labrador!

Hey were teasing, yes. But behind the humour was truth.

Of course, not all reflections were comfortable. When I snapped at him for barking, I wasn't seeing his 'misbehaviour,' but rather, my 'impatience.' When I pushed him away during busy thoughts, I wasn't protecting my 'space.' I was exposing my 'restlessness.'

The ego hates such mirrors. It resists, distracts, blames. But the soul? The soul longs for them. It craves honesty, even when uncomfortable. And Truffle, without knowing it, was the most honest mirror I'd ever faced.

The most piercing mirrors are not the ones that flatter us, but the ones that show us what we least want to see.

In today's Insta-culture, we live behind a multitude of mirrors. It's as though we might be standing in a hallway of mirrors, our reflections repeating infinitely. Only in this hallway we have lost sight of who the 'real' version of us is – the one who created that multitude of images, to begin with!

The real mirrors, on the other hand, are the ones that cause us pain – the ones we stray away from, for fear of knowing who we truly might be.

When Truffle grew old, his eyes turned into such mirrors. They didn't just reflect his fragility — they reflected my own fear of losing him.

At first, it was small. His muzzle grew whiter, his gallops slowed into gentle trots, and he paused more often on walks.

I told myself it was nothing. "Just the heat." "Just a lazy day." "He's saving his energy..."

However, denial can't outpace time. His body was changing, and in his gaze, I saw the truth: he was teaching me about aging, about endings, about acceptance.

One morning, I knelt to tie my shoelaces before our walk. Truffle stood by the door, patiently waiting. I looked up into his eyes — eyes now clouded with age, and yet - steady as ever.

And suddenly, I saw not just Truffle, but myself. My own years. My own fragility. My own fear of what was coming.

His look was calm, steady, almost amused:

"Don't project your fear onto me, Dad. I'm ready. Are you?"

It was the rawest mirror I'd ever faced.

The ego doesn't like these mirrors. When I snapped at him for being slow, it wasn't about him. It was *my* impatience, *my* denial, my refusal to accept what the mirror showed.

When I tried to cheer him up with forced energy, he'd simply look at me quietly, as if saying, *"Stop pretending. Sit with what is."*

That was the part I resisted most. He wasn't asking me to fix anything. He was asking me to face reality.

The family felt it too.

Pramila began to fuss over his meals, measuring portions carefully, making sure medicines were given on time. She didn't say it out loud, but her hands revealed her acceptance.

Pracchi grew gentler. Her teasing energy softened into tender pats, longer cuddles, quiet time by his side. She whispered once, "Papa, he looks wise now. Like he knows something we don't."

And my son, calling from Vancouver, dreaded the question he asked without fail every single call: "How is he, really?" Sadly, my vague answers couldn't mask the truth. Even across oceans, he felt the mirror pressing on us all.

What was truly remarkable (and an utter lifesaver), though, was that even in decline, Truffle's humour shone through. To quote an instance, there was his famous 'fake hearing loss.' I'd call, "Truffle, come here!"

and he'd ignore me completely. Then Pramila would open a packet of biscuits in the kitchen — and he'd trot over with perfect hearing.

Or his naps. *Endless naps*. Sometimes I'd panic, thinking he was gone, only for him to snore so loudly, I'm sure he wakes up the neighbours from their afternoon siesta. That was his way of saying, "*Relax, Dad. I'm still here. And yes, I'm enjoying this nap more than you're enjoying your serious thoughts!*"

Even in Truffle's slowing years, his mirrors reflected not just fragility, but laughter.

It stung to see him so weak, yes. But slowly, I began to see that the sting was healing. For in those tired eyes, I learned to sit with the truth without flinching. Indeed, Truffle showed me that presence isn't about pretending things will last forever. It's about *being here, fully*, even when things are changing, even when endings are near.

And maybe, just maybe, that was his greatest reflection yet.

Over time, I began to realise that Truffle wasn't just a mirror of me. He was a training ground. Once I learned to see myself in his eyes, I started noticing the same reflections everywhere else.

When Pramila grew quiet, it wasn't 'silence' but rather, a reflection of my distraction, my absence. When Pracchi teased me, underlying that humour was, sometimes, a mirror of her longing for my attention. When Rishabh's voice grew heavy across the phone, it wasn't just tiredness. It was a reflection of my own unspoken worry echoing back from miles away.

The truth was everywhere, but it took a Labrador to tune me in.

Even strangers mirrored me. The shopkeeper who smiled warmly when I greeted him properly. The rickshaw driver who grew grumpy when I rushed him. The waiter whose eyes lit up when I said "thank you" with presence.

Life was reflecting *me* back, always. The question was: *Did I dare look?*

The ego, of course, hated it. It preferred to blame others. "Why is he sulking? Why is he distant? Why is the dog ignoring me?"

But the soul —Ah, the soul loved these mirrors. It wanted the rawness, the unfiltered truth, the chance to be seen clearly.

Truffle's gaze had trained me to move from ego to soul. To stop asking, *"What's wrong with them?"* and start asking, *"What is this showing me about myself?"*

Truffle eventually crossed the rainbow bridge, but his mirror didn't leave. It had well and truly embedded itself in my soul, as though they might be paw-prints in the earth that he so gaily walked on, in all the years he was on this earth. Now, whenever I rush, I remember his stubborn sniffing at every lamp post. When I grow restless, I recall his deep, unhurried breaths.

When I feel unseen, I think of the way his eyes said, *"I see you. And you are enough."*

Because here's the thing: Dogs don't lie. And neither does the present moment. Both will tell you the truth — if only you're willing to look.

And that mirror, uncomfortable as it may be, is the doorway to awakening.

For when you see yourself as you truly are, you finally begin to live as *only you* truly can.

And that brings us to the next teacher in my journey —the one that's even more relentless than a Labrador.

Time.

Because while Truffle held the mirror to the present, Time was quietly ticking beside us, reminding me that presence itself is fleeting.

The question then arose: Could I walk with Time as honestly as I had walked with Truffle?

There came a point when I realised something subtle. Seeing myself clearly was one thing.

But what came after that... was even more important. Listening.

Not the kind of listening we are used to. Not listening to respond. Not listening to argue.

Not even listening to solve. But a quieter kind. Listening without noise.

For the longest time, I believed I was a good listener. I heard words. I followed conversations. I responded when needed. But somewhere in all that, I missed something deeper. I wasn't really listening. I was interpreting. Reacting. Preparing my next thought while the other person was still speaking. Even with myself.

And then, strangely enough, Truffle showed me what real listening looked like. He would sit beside me, completely still. No interruption. No impatience. No need to jump in. Just attention.

There were moments when I would speak to him—about work, about stress, about things that made no real sense when said aloud. He didn't understand the words.

But somehow, he understood me.

Because he wasn't listening to the words. He was listening to the presence behind them.

That made me pause. How often do we truly listen like that?

To others...And more importantly, to ourselves?

When I began sitting in silence more often, I noticed something. Beneath the constant stream of thoughts, there was another voice.

Quieter. Calmer. Not reactive.

It didn't rush. It didn't panic. It didn't argue. It simply... knew. At first, it was easy to miss.

Because the louder voice—the one filled with worry, planning, and opinion—always came first. But when I didn't immediately react... when I just stayed with the moment...That quieter voice began to surface.

Not as instructions. But as clarity.

Sometimes it said, "Let this go." Sometimes it said nothing at all.

And sometimes, its silence said more than any answer could.

I realised then—The soul doesn't shout. It doesn't compete with noise. It waits.

And perhaps that is why we miss it. Because we are rarely still enough to hear it. Truffle lived from that space effortlessly.

He didn't second-guess. He didn't overthink. He didn't carry yesterday into today.

His responses were simple. Direct. Uncomplicated. Not because he lacked intelligence—

But because he wasn't clouded by noise.

Watching him, I began to understand: Clarity is not something we create. It is something we uncover...When we stop drowning it out.

These days, I still get caught in noise. Thoughts still race. Reactions still come. But every now and then, I pause. And in that pause, I listen.

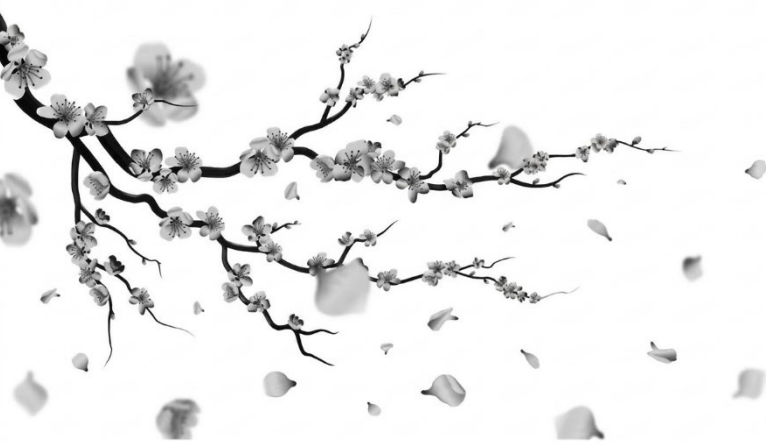
Not for answers. But for truth.

And more often than not, it's already there.

Quietly waiting.

Seeing myself clearly was only the beginning. Because once the mirror stops lying... something else begins to move. Quietly. Relentlessly.

Time.



CHAPTER 4

THE QUIET TEACHER: TIME

If you've ever tried arguing with Time, you'll know it's like trying to win an argument with Pramila — impossible! The fact of the matter is: Time doesn't bend, bargain, or make exceptions. It just ticks on.

When Truffle bounded into our lives — floppy ears, oversized paws, and a nose that seemed to sniff out both biscuits *and* trouble — I believed we had 'forever.' He was a golden furball with boundless energy, and I thought the clock was firmly on our side.

"We have years," I told myself. Plenty of walks, plenty of games, plenty of memories just waiting to be made.

But here's the catch: "Plenty of time" always feels true — until one day, it isn't.

Puppy Truffle lived in a different universe of time altogether! Morning walks weren't quick affairs, but rather, sprawling expeditions. Every leaf had to be sniffed, every pole inspected, every pigeon chased (even if pigeons in Mumbai are professionals at ignoring Labradors). It was as though he were a 'doggie' version of the great fictional archaeologist Indiana Jones, or perhaps the one and only Sherlock Holmes!

When I tugged impatiently at the leash, Truffle looked up as if to say, *"Relax, Dad. What's the hurry? This blade of grass has a whole story to tell."*

At first, I resisted. I was a man of ‘schedule,’ after all: office calls, school runs, deadlines, etcetera. My watch dictated the day, and I expected Truffle to march to its beat!

But slowly, that Labrador, with his boundless energy, wore me down. His delight in the smallest things — a muddy puddle, a passing butterfly, even the neighbour’s shoe he ‘borrowed’ once — forced me to stop rushing.

Time, through Truffle, was teaching me its first lesson: Presence beats Punctuality.

Ah, how I believed in those days, that we had endless time together. Truffle would pull me forward with such force on walks, that I joked he was training me for a marathon. We’d play *fetch* until my arm hurt more than his legs. What’s more, he’d devour his meals with the enthusiasm of a five-star food critic discovering roadside chaat!

And I blindly (and blissfully) told myself: *this will go on forever*.

However, Time, sneaky as it is, was quietly moving the goalposts while I wasn’t looking. One day, I noticed the pull on the leash had eased. The sprightly pup now paused more often, sniffed less, and gazed more. His face grew whiter, his eyes softer. Just like his ‘human baby’ counterpart, he seemed to mellow down a bit.

The truth was, Time hadn’t shouted. It hadn’t announced itself with a kind of dramatic roll of drums. It had simply tiptoed in and changed the pace of our walks.

There’s one moment etched in me like a tattoo. We were out walking one evening, when Truffle, already slowing down, stopped under a golmohur tree. He didn’t sniff. He didn’t bark at squirrels. He just stood still, looking up at the branches heavy with blossoms.

I tugged impatiently. “Chalo, Truffle.”

And what do you think my precious Labrador did, dear reader? He turned his head and gave me an intense look yet again. Not his usual goofy grin, not the mischievous twinkle in his eyes, but a gaze that said, “*Stop. This moment will not come again.*”

For a second, I swear the city around us hushed. The honking faded, the rickshaws blurred, even the chaos paused. Time itself seemed to press a finger on the stopwatch. Then, as if nothing had happened, Truffle carried on — sniffing a lamppost, wagging his tail. But something inside me shifted.

I realised: I wasn't just walking a dog. I was walking alongside Time itself!

We humans obsess over clocks. We check them when bored, curse them when late, smash their alarms in fits of morning rage.

Dogs, on the other hand, live on a different schedule altogether:

- Dinner time? Whenever the human heads to the kitchen.
- Walk time? Whenever the leash jingles.
- Nap time? *Always*.
- Playtime? Also, always!

Truffle never cared for hours or minutes. He cared about *moments*. A ten-second belly rub given fully, was worth more than an hour of distracted segments of time that involved me mindlessly scrolling my phone.

Isn't that the secret, though? Time doesn't ask us to *count it*. It asks us to *live it*.

Of course, at home, my experiments with Truffle's 'dog clock' became the family's running joke. If I lingered on a walk, Pramila would shake her head. "Don't tell me Truffle gave you another lecture on stopping to smell the flowers." Pracchi, rolling her eyes, added, "Papa, you're going to be late again. Tell your dog clock that the human clock still rules college schedules!" Even Rishebh, calling from across time zones, teased me: "Papa, IST stands for Indian Stretchable Time, not International Standard Time. Stop using Truffle as an excuse."

We laughed, and how! Truffle was reshaping my relationship with time, one paw-step at a time.

Time is many things — a strict schoolmaster, a slippery eel, and, at times, a stand-up comedian. It loves to mock our obsession with schedules. And Truffle, knowingly or not, joined in on the joke.

At home, I often declared: “I value a sense of punctuality!”

However, my family knew better. If dinner was at eight, I’d arrive at eight-fifteen, usually with some lofty excuse: “I was in deep reflection” (translation: I was lost in WhatsApp).

My wife would shake her head. “Raajeev, you and punctuality are like India and five-day cricket matches — occasionally promising but rarely finished on time.” Pracchi once added, “Papa, your sense of time is like my Wi-Fi. Always lagging when it matters.”

Even Truffle joined the chorus. If I delayed his dinner by even ten minutes, he’d sit in front of me, paw tapping the floor like a disapproving headmaster. His eyes said it all: *“Don’t preach punctuality, Dad, when you can’t even serve on time.”*

Work life and Truffle’s time sense clashed often. Once, I had a video call scheduled for 10:00 a.m. sharp. Just as I logged in, Truffle trotted over with his leash in his mouth, insisting it was his walk time.

“Not now, boy,” I whispered desperately, waving him away.

But, like the stubborn child he was, he refused. He plonked himself in front of my chair, eyes locked on me, tail wagging with the force of a small motor.

The meeting began. My colleagues discussed quarterly numbers. And there I was, trying to push a Labrador, gently out of frame. Naturally, he chose that exact moment to bark — loudly — as if giving his own forecast.

“Was that... a dog?” someone on the call asked.

I sighed. “Yes. My personal timekeeper.”

After that day, I stopped pretending I could separate human clocks from dog clocks. Truffle’s schedule always found a way to interrupt mine, and strangely, make it better.

Puppies nap. Old dogs nap even more. But Truffle turned naps into a kind of Olympic sport.

He had an uncanny ability to doze off anywhere: sprawled across the hallway, curled up under the dining table, once even half-on and half-off the sofa, snoring as if auditioning for a tractor commercial!

At first, I was worried. “Pramila, he’s sleeping too much!”

She shrugged. “He’s old. Let him.”

But then I realised something: his naps weren’t wasted time. They were full-time lessons. Each nap whispered: *Rest when you need it. The world won’t collapse if you take a pause.*

To this day, I fight afternoon naps, pretending to be busy with ‘urgent’ emails. I can’t help but believe, though, that Time is laughing in the corner, watching me resist what even a Labrador had mastered.

As Truffle grew older, his sense of hearing became... *strategic*.

In the prime of his youth, one whistle from me would send him bounding over. In his senior years, I’d call, “Truffle! Come here!” — and he’d glance at me, yawn, and look away.

Pracchi giggled once: “Papa, he’s ignoring you the way I ignore your advice.”

I tried clapping, coaxing, bribing him with treats. Nothing seemed to work. Then one day, I whispered to Pramila in the kitchen, “Let’s fry pakoras tonight.”

From across the hall, Truffle sprang to life up and trotted over.

Selective *hearing*, yes. But also, selective *timing*. He heard exactly what he wanted, exactly when it mattered.

Time’s second joke, I realised, was this: It reveals what truly matters to us. What we ‘hear’ and what we ‘ignore’ says more about our priorities than any calendar.

Time isn’t just personal — it’s a *family battleground*!

- Pramila likes things orderly. For her, time is discipline. Meals on time, chores on time, bills on time. When I forget, she doesn't scold. She just raises an eyebrow — far more effective.
- Pracchi lives on “youth time.” Her 5 minutes means 20. Her night starts when mine ends. She once told me, “Papa, time is a social construct.” I replied, “Tell that to your mother when dinner's cold.”
- Rishabh, calling from Vancouver, lives in “time-zone limbo.” Half our conversations begin with, “What time is it there?” And when I tell him it's past midnight here, he laughs, “Papa, you're still awake? Time hasn't slowed you yet.”

In the grand scheme of things, Truffle was the great leveller. His time sense — eat when hungry, nap when sleepy, play when joyful — made our human squabbles about minutes and hours look absurd!

Looking back, I think Truffle was secretly mocking me all along. Here I was, chasing deadlines, setting alarms, scheduling life to the last detail. And there he was, showing me that joy doesn't wait for the perfect slot on a calendar.

A ten-second game of tug-of-war, a spontaneous roll in the grass. A nap in a sunbeam.

These weren't interruptions. They were *life itself*.

Time, through Truffle, was whispering: *Stop measuring, start living.*

Time, for all its gentle lessons about presence and patience, also has a sterner side. It lets us play and laugh and pretend forever, but eventually, it leans in and whispers, “*Enough. Slow down.*”

And with Truffle, I felt that shift more sharply than ever.

In Truffle's last months, Time seemed to shrink. The days blurred into vet visits, medicines, gentle walks cut shorter and shorter. I had always believed there would be ‘plenty of time’ for more games, more belly rubs, more tail wags. But suddenly, hours felt like borrowed coins — precious, limited, slipping fast through my fingers.

Even the simplest routines carried weight. His meals, once devoured in seconds, became slow and deliberate. Walks that once galloped forward

turned into meandering pauses. Nights felt heavy with dread — Would tomorrow bring more weakness?

Time, instead of being relegated to the seamless background rhythm it seemed earlier, was now nothing short of a countdown clock!

Of course, like any human, I tried to bargain.

“Just give me one more year with him.”

“Okay, six months.”

“Alright, at least *one more birthday!*”

I prayed, pleaded, tried to strike deals with a universe that wasn’t taking calls.

The thing is, however, Time doesn’t pause for bribes. It listens politely, then carries on.

One evening, as Truffle lay weak, he did something small yet unforgettable. He lifted his paw and placed it gently on my lap.

It wasn’t a demand for food. It wasn’t a request to *play*; a quiet reassurance, Truffle’s way of saying, “*It’s okay, Dad. Don’t fight Time. Accept it.*”

That single gesture broke me and healed me all at once. I realised my job wasn’t to conquer Time, but instead, learn from it. To let it teach me acceptance which is the hardest lesson of all.

Even as he grew frail, Truffle carried humour with him — as if he was determined to lighten Time’s heavy hand.

Take his ‘selective hearing’ we just discussed earlier on. As a pup, one whistle would send him sprinting like a hunter trying to catch its prey. In old age, I’d call out, “Truffle!” and he’d turn his head away, yawning theatrically. It was as if he was saying, “*Dad, I’m retired. Walk yourself.*”

Then there were his naps. Puppies nap often, but *old dogs*? Why, they nap as if training for a marathon in dreamland! Sometimes I’d panic, thinking he’d slipped away, only for him to snore loudly almost mockingly as if to say, “*Relax, I’m still here. And I’m enjoying this nap more than you’re enjoying life!*”

Even in aging, he refused to let Time win the humour battle.

Watching him grow older, I couldn't help but see myself reflected back.

When young, like him, I had raced ahead, chasing goals, juggling tasks, believing the future was an endless buffet. You could say, in a sense, that I was 'finding my truth' back then. As I grew older, I began to slow — savouring tea instead of gulping coffee, listening more, rushing less.

Now, as Truffle's muzzle greyed and his steps slowed, I saw in him a mirror of my own journey. Time wasn't an enemy stealing our youth. It was a companion nudging us toward *depth*.

You could say, that in a strange kind of way, I began 'living my truth' for the very first time in my life.

The family felt it too. Pramila, steady as always, became Time's co-teacher gently insisting on medicines on schedule, meals on time, rest when needed. Her way of saying: "If we can't stop Time, we can at least walk with it gracefully."

Pracchi, though young, sensed the clock too. She lingered longer by his side, patted him with more tenderness. "Papa," she whispered once, "He looks wise now. Like he knows more than us."

And Rishebh, calling from across the ocean, struggled with distance. "Papa, how is he really?" he'd ask, dreading the truth hidden between my words. For him, Time meant missed moments, and the ache of not being here for every pause.

Together, we lived in those shrinking hours, trying to stretch them into eternity with love.

Through it all, Time whispered its toughest lesson: *acceptance*.

Not every moment can be prolonged. Not every goodbye can be delayed.

But every single one can be *lived fully*.

In India, we often speak of *Kaal* — not confined to the ticking of seconds, but as the great cosmic wheel that turns everything. The dance of creation, preservation, and destruction. Time not as *enemy*, but as *principle*.

Truffle's life — his birth, his bounding puppyhood, his playful middle years, his slowing steps, his final farewell was my most vivid lesson in

that philosophy. Perhaps even more than mine, in hindsight, given the fact that it was ‘he’ who taught me how to truly live.

It wasn’t just biology. It was *kala* in action. The wheel turning, as it always does.

And yet, Time is not always solemn. Sometimes, it carries humour on its back.

Think of birthdays. As children, we rush toward them, demanding cake, and gifts. As adults, we dodge them like unwanted bills. We almost seem embarrassed, to be treated in the very same fashion that we would be when we were kids. Same tick of the clock, two entirely different reactions!

Or consider Indian Standard Time. Weddings announced for 7:00 p.m. rarely begin before 9:00. Relatives arrive hours late but still ask, “Are we early?”

Time is surely chuckling at our games, watching us pretend we can stretch it like rubber!

Truffle, too, played along expertly. His ‘retired dog’ naps, his deliberate delays when I was in a hurry, his selective hearing — all comic reminders that no matter how tight we grip, Time will always slip through, wagging its tail.

As I grew older alongside him, I realised how many years I’d spent worrying about tomorrow instead of living today.

I thought of my children — how quickly they’d grown. One day, you’re teaching them to tie their shoelaces, the next they’re teaching you how to pay bills online. I thought of my parents, now gone, and how often I’d taken their presence for granted. I thought of myself, always chasing, rarely pausing...

It was almost comic, really. The Labrador had understood Time better than the Human ever did.

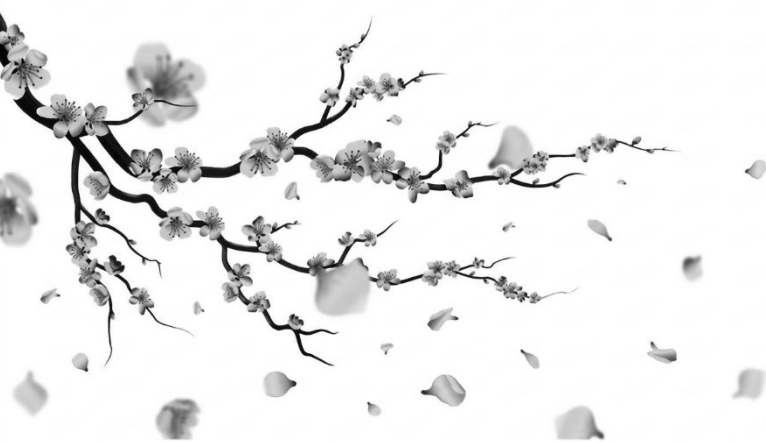
These days, when I sip my tea slowly, I imagine Time sitting across from me. Not a stern headmaster, but a quiet teacher.

“See?” it seems to say. “It’s not about rushing. It’s about *tasting*.”

And when the years weigh heavily on me, I remember Truffle's calm gaze, his greying muzzle, his paw on my lap — saying without words:

Don't fear me. Walk with me.

Time, I realised, doesn't have to be cruel. It can be gentle, if only we let it. And so, when Time finally took Truffle's body, it didn't take his *essence*. His lessons remained, etched in every heartbeat, every pause, every moment lived fully. Time had been my quiet teacher. And when its lesson ended, it pointed me toward the next. Because, beyond Time's monotonous ticking, lies something far deeper. Something not measured in hours or days.



CHAPTER 5

SILENCE SPEAKS

Silence arrived the day Truffle left us.

Not the gentle kind that wraps around you after a long day. This was heavier. The kind that lingers in corners, settles into furniture, and refuses to leave.

The house felt... incomplete.

No paws across the floor. No tail thumping against the sofa. No familiar Labrador snore grounding the night.

It was as if someone had quietly switched off the background music of our lives.

And like most people, we did what humans do best when silence becomes uncomfortable—we tried to drown it.

At home, the television stayed on longer than usual. Music filled closed rooms. Conversations stretched just to avoid gaps. As for me, I buried myself in “important” work—calls, emails, errands that suddenly felt urgent.

Anything but sitting still. Until one evening, I stopped.

No grand decision. Just exhaustion.

I switched everything off. The television, the phone, even the fan. And I sat there.

At first, the silence wasn't silent at all. The fridge hummed loudly. The clock ticked like it had something to prove. Distant horns sounded sharper than usual.

And then came the real noise—my own mind.

What next? What about tomorrow? Did you finish that work? Why does this feel so empty?

It was chaos.

But slowly, something softened.

The noise didn't disappear—it simply lost its grip. And underneath it, I sensed something else.

Not emptiness. Not loneliness. But presence.

And in that quiet presence... I felt him.

Not physically. Not as memory. But as something gentler. Familiar. Steady. Silence, I realised, was how he spoke now.

The next morning, inspired by this newfound wisdom, I decided to try meditation. I sat cross-legged, spine straight, eyes closed.

"I will be still," I told myself. "Calm. Composed. Almost enlightened." Within minutes, my back itched. Then my mind wandered to breakfast. Then to unfinished work.

Just as I began to regain some dignity, I felt a sudden presence. I opened one eye.

There he was—Truffle—staring at me, head tilted, clearly unimpressed. And then, with impeccable timing, he sneezed. So much for enlightenment.

That's when it struck me—silence isn't about controlling the moment. It's about allowing it. Even a sneeze belongs.

Once I stopped chasing silence and started sitting with it, I began noticing it everywhere.

During morning walks, in between the city's usual chaos, there were small pockets of stillness—the pause before birds began their chorus, the brief hush before a street came alive.

At home, even during meals, there were moments when no one spoke.

Earlier, I would rush to fill those gaps. Now, I let them be.

And strangely, those quiet moments often said more than conversations ever did. A pause carried emotion. A glance carried meaning. A shared silence carried connection.

Truffle had always lived this way. He didn't need words.

A look meant, "I see you." A nudge meant, "Be here." A quiet presence meant, "All is well."

In his silence, he had always been speaking. I just hadn't been listening. Of course, silence isn't always comforting. Sometimes, it reveals more than we're ready to see.

When I first began sitting quietly, I discovered how restless my mind really was. Always planning, replaying, worrying. Like a never-ending commentary.

At first, it felt unsettling. Then, oddly... amusing. Half the thoughts that felt urgent in noise seemed unnecessary in silence.

Like watching a dog chase its own tail—energetic, but not particularly useful. And that's the thing about silence—it has a quiet sense of humour. It gently exposes our seriousness.

One evening, I tried sitting in silence again. Naturally, the world decided to test me. The neighbour's mixer started. Someone slammed a door. Voices rose in the corridor. I felt irritation creeping in.

And then, unexpectedly, I laughed. This too... was part of it.

Silence wasn't the absence of sound. It was the absence of resistance.

Weeks after Truffle was gone, I sat alone one night and found myself whispering, "Where are you?" There was no answer. But there was a feeling. Soft. Familiar. Assured. As if something within was saying, "I'm here."

Not in form. But in presence. And for the first time, silence didn't feel empty. It felt full.

These days, I find silence in unexpected places. In the car, with the radio turned off.

In a queue, without reaching for my phone. Even while watching a cricket match—pausing between overs, noticing the stillness before the roar.

Life, I realised, isn't missing silence. We are.

At home, my experiments didn't go unnoticed. "Are you meditating," I was once asked, "or just sitting quietly doing nothing?" I smiled.

Because from the outside, both look exactly the same. But from the inside, they are worlds apart.

Silence doesn't demand anything. It doesn't preach. It doesn't instruct. It simply waits.

And when you finally stop running, it meets you exactly where you are. Just as he always did.

There is something else I began to notice, slowly and almost by accident. Beneath all the noise... beneath even the silence... there is a stillness.

Not something you create. Not something you chase. Something that is already there.

I caught glimpses of it in small moments. While sipping tea without distraction. While sitting quietly after a long day. While watching nothing in particular... and yet feeling complete.

It wasn't dramatic. It didn't announce itself. But it was steady.

Unaffected by the day's chaos. Unaffected by thoughts, emotions, or circumstances. Almost like a quiet centre within.

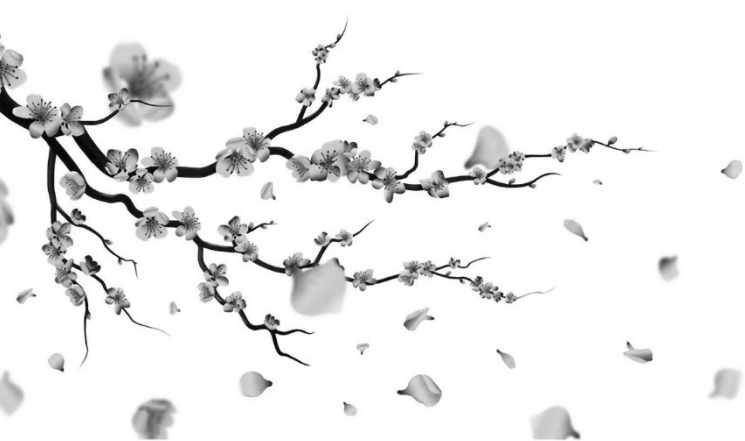
And the more I stopped trying to control my experiences, the more this stillness revealed itself.

Truffle had lived from that space effortlessly. Whether he was playing, resting, or simply sitting beside me—there was no inner conflict. No rush. No resistance. Just being.

Perhaps that was his deepest lesson. Not just to find silence around me...but to recognise the stillness within me.

Because once you touch that space, even briefly, something shifts. You stop chasing moments.

You start living them.



CHAPTER 6

THE DIVINE PRESENCE

There was a time when I believed the divine lived in specific places. Temples. Sacred texts. Moments of prayer.

Places where you lowered your voice, straightened your posture, and reminded yourself to be serious.

It felt... appropriate.

And yet, somewhere along the way, that idea began to shift.

Not in a temple. Not during prayer. But in the most unexpected place—On the floor of my living room.

Truffle lay stretched out beside me, completely at ease. No agenda. No restlessness. No sense of needing to be somewhere else.

Just... there.

I remember watching him and thinking—how does he do that? No past. No future. No inner noise.

Just presence.

We often imagine the divine as something distant. Elevated. Hard to reach. But watching him, it began to feel... closer.

Quieter. Almost ordinary.

One evening, I returned home after a long, tiring day. The kind that clings to you. My mind was still at work. Conversations replaying. Thoughts running ahead. I sat down, but I wasn't really there.

Truffle walked over, as he always did. No excitement this time. No playful energy. He simply sat beside me.

Still.

After a few moments, he rested his head gently on my knee. No demand. No distraction. No attempt to "fix" anything.

Just presence.

And something shifted. Not outside. Inside.

The noise softened. The urgency faded. The day loosened its grip. Nothing had been solved. And yet, everything felt... lighter.

That was the moment I began to understand something I had missed for years. The divine does not always arrive with grandeur. Sometimes, it arrives quietly—As presence. As stillness. As a gentle companionship that asks for nothing.

We are taught to "seek" the divine. To go somewhere. To do something. To become something.

But what if it isn't about seeking? What if it's about noticing?

I began to see it in small, everyday moments. In the warmth of morning sunlight entering the room. In the first sip of chai, taken slowly. In shared silence at home, without the need to fill it.

Nothing extraordinary. And yet, deeply complete.

Truffle never searched for anything beyond the moment he was in. When he played, he played fully. When he rested, he rested deeply. When he sat beside you, he was entirely there.

There was no separation between him and the moment. Perhaps that is why being around him felt so... peaceful.

We often think peace comes from controlling life. But maybe it comes from aligning with it.

From not resisting what already is. There is a quiet kind of presence that doesn't announce itself. It doesn't ask for recognition. It doesn't demand belief. It simply exists. Steady. Patient.

Waiting to be noticed.

I still visit temples. I still bow my head.

But now, I don't feel the need to go looking for something that was never far to begin with. Because sometimes, the divine is not found in distant places.

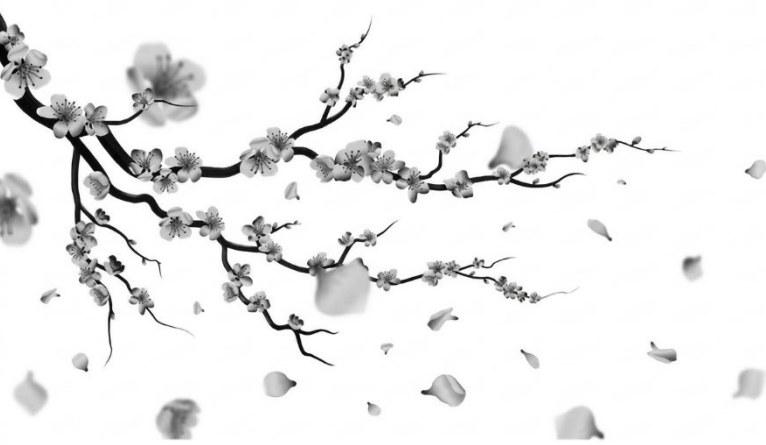
Sometimes, it is found sitting beside you...Breathing. Waiting.

And if you're quiet enough...You'll notice—it was always there.

And in that silence, something else began to reveal itself. Not as thought. Not as emotion.

But as a presence... subtle, steady, and always there. I had been looking for it in distant places.

I hadn't realised it had been sitting beside me all along.



CHAPTER 7

LIVING MY TRUTH

For a long time, I thought living my truth meant figuring everything out. Having clarity.

Being certain. Making the “right” choices. It sounded serious. Almost heavy.

But life, as it often does, had other plans. It didn’t hand me answers. It gave me moments.

Moments with Truffle—simple, ordinary, almost forgettable at the time. A walk that went slower than I wanted. A pause I didn’t plan for. A silence I tried to avoid. And yet, those were the moments that stayed.

Somewhere along the way, I began to see something clearly. Living your truth is not a destination. It’s not something you arrive at one fine morning and declare, “Now I’ve got it.”

It is quieter than that. It shows up in how you live your day. In whether you are present... or elsewhere. In whether you are honest... or performing. In whether you are listening... or just reacting.

Truffle never tried to “be” anything.

He didn’t struggle with identity. He didn’t compare. He didn’t pretend. He simply lived.

Fully. Naturally. Without conflict.

And perhaps that is what made him so free.

We, on the other hand, complicate things.

We carry expectations. We hold on to roles. We worry about how things appear. Somewhere in that process, we drift away from ourselves.

Living your truth, I realised, is not about becoming someone new. It is about returning.

Returning to simplicity. Returning to honesty. Returning to presence.

Not perfectly. But consistently.

There are still days when I get lost. Days when I rush, react, overthink. Days when I forget everything, I just said. And yet, the difference now is small... but important.

I notice.

And in that noticing, something shifts. I pause. I breathe. I come back.

That, perhaps, is what living your truth really is. Not perfection. But awareness.

A quiet alignment between what you feel... and how you live. Truffle never spoke these words.

But he lived them every single day. And maybe that's why his lessons stayed. Not as instructions. But as reminders.

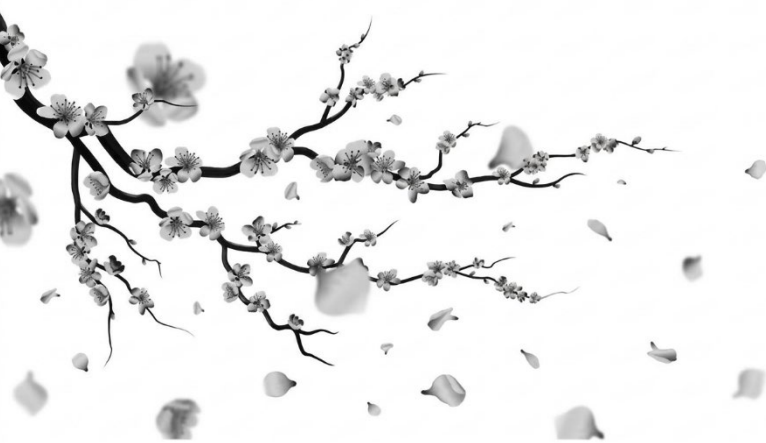
To live simply.

To be present.

To be real.

And when you forget—

To return.



CHAPTER 8

THE GIFT OF LETTING GO

Letting go.

Two miniscule words, and yet when you say them aloud, they feel heavier than a mountain in your chest!

Spiritual teachers speak of letting go as though it's a fine art — an elegant release, a gentle surrender. But in practice? It feels like prying open your own clenched fists while your heart protests, “*No, not yet.*”

And yet, life makes its incessant demands. Seasons change, children grow, loved ones leave, pets age. Whether we like it or not, the grip loosens, we too are ageing.

When Truffle bounded into our home as a golden-furred tornado of floppy ears and clumsy paws, the thought of endings never entered my mind.

Puppies trick you like that. They smell like forever.

Indeed, Truffle was *all beginnings* - his first clumsy run across the living room, his first attempt to conquer the staircase, his first night curled at our feet (and snoring loudly enough to wake the neighbours!) Every antic felt eternal.

We took endless photos, laughed at his chaos, argued about who he loved more. Not once did we stop to think: *This, too, carries an ending within it.*

It's the same in childhood. As kids, we know in theory that everyone dies someday, but it somehow feels abstract, as though it were a fact scribbled in a textbook. It is only as the years gather behind us, that we realise: Every "hello" we've ever spoken, already carries a hidden "goodbye."

Truffle's beginnings slowly revealed their endings. It started subtly: a slower rise after a nap, longer pauses on walks, a faint greying around his muzzle. Then came those heavier breaths after play, and the occasional stubborn refusal to climb stairs.

However, the signs gathered until they could no longer be ignored. I began to notice how his eyes lingered on us more often as if *memorising*. How he sighed more deeply, as if teaching me the rhythm of *acceptance*.

In Truffle's instance, the process of letting go had already begun. Not with the final farewell, but in those small shifts that asked me to hold joy more lightly.

The family noticed too, each in their own way.

He already knew the answer in our hesitations...

We all felt the tug. The awareness that holding on too tight, would only hurt. That the art was not in gripping harder, but in learning to let go slowly, lovingly, gracefully.

Here's the paradox: letting go felt like betrayal, but it was in fact proof of love.

Love wanted to clutch tighter, to shout at Time, to demand eternity. But love also whispered: *"Don't make this about your fear. Make it about his peace."*

His love was never a cage. It was open, generous, trusting.

And that, I realised, was the first hidden gift of letting go: it doesn't kill love. It *frees* it.

"If you love a flower, don't pick it up.

Because if you pick it up, it dies and ceases to be what you love."

~ Osho

We humans often confuse love with possession. We think, “If I love you, I must never let you go.” As though, clinging tightly could somehow miraculously keep life from shifting beneath us. But Truffle, in his simple, tail-wagging way, showed me the opposite:

True love doesn’t grip tighter. It opens its hands.

If I left for work in the morning, Truffle never wailed endlessly. He might have released a small sigh, or perhaps a single protest bark, but then he settled, secure in the trust that I’d return. When guests came over and showered him with affection, he welcomed it wholeheartedly. He didn’t sulk, as if my love were being stolen. His joy was wide enough to include everyone.

How many of us human beings, can show the same affection for strangers, as we do for the people we know?

I once joked to Pramila, “Our dog is more generous with love than most humans.” She replied, smiling knowingly, “Maybe that’s what he’s teaching us.”

Indeed, Truffle never hoarded love for himself, and neither did he ever cling possessively to mine. His trust was complete an *echo* of how we are meant to hold those we love.

Perhaps animals don’t grasp the concept of death the same way we humans do. However, they seem to accept suffering and endings with a whole lot more grace. I recall one evening when Truffle was unwell. His breathing was laboured, and yet, when I stroked his head, he leaned into my palm with absolute trust. Not resisting or panicking, just *being*.

I began to see that holding on is not the same as holding with love. Holding on suffocates. Holding with love allows freedom, even in goodbye.

Of course, my human heart didn’t surrender easily. When I sensed Truffle’s time slipping away, my first instinct was to hold tighter. To extend walks even when he was tired. To feed him extra treats, as though food could bribe Time. To sit by his side at night, half out of love, half out of fear of missing a moment.

On the contrary, love whispered otherwise: “*Don’t make this about your fear. Be with him. When the moment comes, let him go.*”

It was the hardest paradox: To love deeply, but not possessively. To cherish but not clutch.

That quiet surrender was his way of telling me: “*Love me by trusting, not by clinging.*”

And in that moment, I realised: Letting go is not abandonment. It is the deepest proof of love.

Pramila, watching me fuss, said gently, “You don’t need to grip so tightly. Just be present.”

Pracchi, with her youthful clarity, added, “Papa, he doesn’t need your panic. He needs your calm.” Even Rishebh, far away, said softly on a call, “Papa, don’t fight it. Just hold him with love. That’s enough.”

Letting go is so hard because, deep down, we believe we can control life. We plan. We organise. We build routines. We imagine that if we just hold the reins tightly enough, the ride will go our way. But life, like a mischievous Labrador has an uncanny knack for yanking the leash out of our hands!

One night, Truffle was struggling to breathe. I sat beside him, frantic. I tried everything: the prescribed medicines, soft words, prayers whispered into the silence. I even adjusted his bed, stroked his head, and begged him to feel better. Still, his chest rose and fell unevenly. Each breath felt like it was borrowed from the universe. My helplessness pressed down on me like a stone.

And then, in that very helplessness, I saw the truth: I couldn’t control the outcome.

My task wasn’t to *fix*, but to *accompany*.

Letting go of control didn’t mean abandoning Truffle. Rather, it meant releasing the illusion that I was the master of life and death. It meant being fully *present*, loving him through the struggle, without pretending I could stop it.

That night, dear reader, changed me in a way I could have never imagined. I realised how often, in love, we rush to *fix*, to offer advice, patch wounds, tidy up emotions. But sometimes, the greatest gift isn't a solution. It's *presence*.

Sitting there, stroking his head, I whispered, "I'm here, boy."

And I could have sworn that, in the stillness of his gaze, I felt him whisper back: "*That's enough.*"

Strangely, it reminded me of *Carl Sagan's* words about the "pale blue dot." When Voyager I turned its camera back toward Earth in 1990, it captured our planet in such manner as to make it resemble a tiny *speck* suspended in a shaft of sunlight. A grain of *dust* in the vast darkness.

Sagan wrote:

"Our posturing, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light."

Reading those words again that fateful night, years after I had first heard them, I realised: In the vast cosmic scheme of things, what kind of 'control' did I really assume I had? My ambitions, my schedules, my frantic attempts to resist endings, all of them were as tiny and fragile as that pale dot.

In that very sense of 'humility,' lay my freedom. If control was an illusion, then perhaps my role was not to *command*, but to *love*. And I wasn't alone in facing this illusion, mind you. My family mirrored it back in their own ways. Pramila, ever the pragmatist, didn't fuss with the idea of control. She focused on comfort: giving medicines on time, keeping the food soft and nourishing and his bed warm. Her acceptance was quiet but steady, a different kind of surrender.

Pracchi, with her youthful tenderness, simply sat beside him, stroking his back, whispering silly jokes into his ears, playing soft music. She wasn't trying to fix. She was simply *there*.

And Rishebh, from across the ocean, bore the hardest role. His helplessness came in the form of distance. On calls, he asked for updates with a strained voice, already knowing the answers in my silences. For him, letting go of control meant trusting us to be his presence by proxy.

We were each learning the same lesson in different languages:

You can't command life, but you can well and truly *love through it*.

Truffle himself modelled this surrender better than any of us. Even in illness, he didn't rage against his body. Not demand explanations of any kind, he leaned into our touch, trusted our presence, and accepted what came. It struck me then: maybe the secret doesn't lie in *holding control*, but rather, in *flowing like the river*. The river doesn't cling to stones in its way. It moves around them, over them, through them not because it controls, but because it trusts its own current.

And perhaps letting go is simply that: Choosing flow over grip, presence over illusion.

It was only far, later that an old analogy (the one briefly touched upon in the earlier paragraph), helped me make sense of Truffle's passing. Imagine love as a river. Grief is the heavy stone dropped in its flow. At first, it feels as if the stone blocks everything - damming the current, silencing the water.

However, the things about rivers are this: They don't stop. They rise, they curve, they carve. Slowly and steadily, they find a way around the obstacle. Over time, they even erode the stone itself! My love for Truffle was like that river. It wasn't meant to be trapped or frozen in a single moment of goodbye. It was meant to flow through play, through care, through illness, through memory.

The stone of grief resisted fiercely at first, but the current of love carried on. And with every passing day, I saw that the river was stronger than the stone.

Truffle practiced this all of the above effortlessly. If scolded for chewing a slipper, he sulked for five minutes, then shook it off literally and returned, tail wagging, as though nothing had happened. What if we humans could practice letting go with the same ease? Shake it off, wag the metaphorical tail, and move on? Life would feel lighter, less cluttered, more alive!

Here's the paradox I never expected: Letting go doesn't shrink love. It *expands* it.

After Truffle passed, I thought love would vanish with him. Instead, it spread into places I hadn't looked before. I saw him in the eyes of street dogs, their tails wagging hopefully at passers-by. I felt him in children's laughter echoing in the park. I sensed him in the warmth of the sun on cool mornings.

His love had firmly taken root in me, and now it blossomed everywhere.

Letting go didn't close the chapter. It opened the book wider.

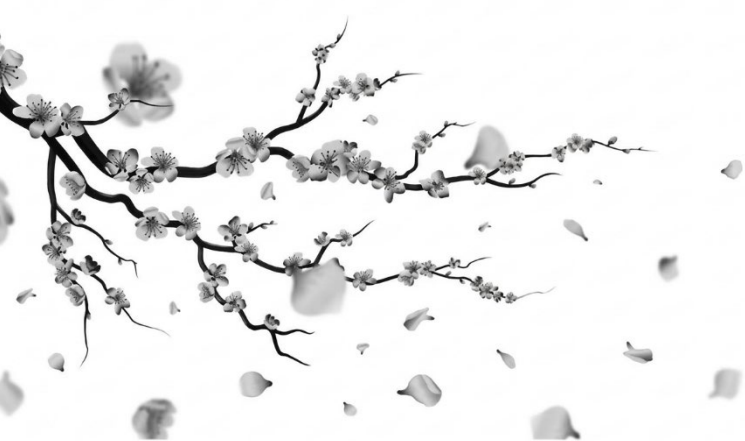
In the end, Truffle's greatest gift wasn't only his companionship. It was his final lesson:

Letting go is not a failure of love but its highest form.

To let go is to trust the flow of life. To honour the truth that everything is given for a time, but nothing belongs to us. To see that love doesn't die. It changes form. It deepens. It expands.

Now, when I think of Truffle, I don't feel merely the ache of absence. I feel the river of love that still flows. And in quiet moments, I hear his presence not in words, but in essence.

"Don't hold on too tight, Dad. Let go. Love will remain."



CHAPTER 9

THE DANCE OF TIME

If there ever was a master class in stretching minutes into eternities, it was taught by a golden Labrador puppy with floppy ears and the ultimate disregard for urgency!

When Truffle first arrived in our home, nights felt endless. His whining carried on like a broken alarm clock that refused to snooze. Minutes stretched into hours as I stumbled around the house at 2 a.m., trying to calm him with pats, lullabies, or - in moments of desperation - muttered negotiations: “Please, beta, just sleep. I’ll give you two treats tomorrow morning instead of just the one.”

Spoiler: he never agreed to the deal.

The days weren’t much better. I learned that time has a special kind of *elasticity* when you’re chasing a puppy around the living room, a slipper dangling from his mouth like a trophy. A single minute of slipper-snatching chaos could feel like an Olympic marathon. And don’t even get me started on toilet training - mopping up ‘accidents; wasn’t just frequent; it was practically my entire day’s cardio routine!

At the time, I found myself complain: “This dog is eating away my hours!”

In truth, he was teaching me patience.

One particular morning stands out amongst the others. I had an important meeting. Shirt ironed, bag packed, I thought the walk would be brisk, five minutes tops.

Truffle, though, had other plans.

We stepped out of our home, and he instantly froze in front of a puddle. Just a small puddle, mind you - harmless, glistening in the sunlight. However, for Truffle, it was apparently the Sphinx of Egypt demanding riddles before the voyage continued.

I tugged; he resisted. I coaxed; he sat. We stood locked in this power struggle for ten whole minutes! Neighbours passed by, amused. Auto-rickshaws honked. My irritation boiled. And then, something shifted. I realised: I wasn't late. The world wasn't ending. Why was I fighting so hard to hurry through this moment?

So, I stopped tugging. I stood beside him. He stared at the puddle; I stared at him. The universe seemed to pause with us. And in that pause, something beautiful happened: time softened. It stopped being a taskmaster cracking its whip. It became spacious, generous, almost playful.

That silly puddle became my teacher. I realised: Time expands when you stop fighting it.

At the time, I had nodded silently upon reading this in a book, then promptly rushed back to my inbox that was jammed with emails. However, standing there with Truffle alongside that puddle, the knowledge of that profound statement seemed to seep into my bones!

Truffle didn't philosophise. He simply *lived his truth*. For him, there was no 'next meeting' or 'pending deadline.' There was only *this* puddle, *this* smell, *this* breeze.

And the funny part? Once I relaxed and stopped dragging him, he sniffed the puddle, gave a decisive nod as though concluding his research and happily trotted on. Ten minutes wasted? No - Ten minutes utterly *transformed*!

Slowing down with Truffle wasn't always serene, for that matter. Often, it was hilariously inconvenient. Like that one time he decided the middle

of the road was the perfect place for a nap. Cars honked. I begged. He sprawled on the tarmac like a Bollywood hero in a dramatic death scene. Passers-by chuckled, and I seriously considered pretending I didn't know him!

Or perhaps, the evenings when guests arrived, and he leapt on them with such unbridled enthusiasm that time itself seemed to accelerate into chaos. Within thirty seconds, we had flying teacups, toppled chairs, and myself apologising profusely while he wagged his tail as though to say: "See how much fun we're having?"

Indeed, while those chaotic minutes stretched into what felt like hours, in hindsight, they're the memories I cherish most. Time, I realised, isn't always meant to be tidy. Sometimes it's meant to be messy, loud, and utterly alive!

At first, I found it maddening. My inner clock ticked on loudly: "Come on, hurry! We don't have all day!" But slowly, I realised maybe we *do* have all day. Or at least, maybe this day deserves more than my impatience.

Moreover, Truffle showed me that time isn't about *speed*. It's about *presence*. The minutes I thought I was losing, I was actually gaining—simply because, I was finally *living them*.

Looking back, I laugh heartily at myself. For decades, I had treated time like a scarce resource; guarding it jealously, measuring it obsessively. And yet, here was a dog who wasted it extravagantly, sniffing, napping, rolling in the grass and somehow, on top of it all, he was richer in joy than I had ever been!

Maybe the joke is on us humans. We treat time like currency - always hoarding, never spending freely. Dogs, on the other hand, treat time like *confetti*, tossing it into the air with a sense of gay abandon, trusting it will always fall where it rightly should.

Perhaps that's exactly why puppy chaos, puddle standoffs, and midnight whines turned out to be more than ephemeral irritations - they were my first lessons in the *dance of time*.

Time, I discovered with Truffle, doesn't just move forward in a straight line. It *cycles*. Just like nature, it moves in *seasons*. And each season brings its own kind of beauty, ache, and lesson.

Truffle's spring was noisy, chaotic, and full of discovery. There was nothing delicate about his arrival. He stormed into the house like a pint-sized hurricane with floppy ears. Shoes were chewed, cushions gutted, carpets christened. Every day was a sketch of comedic proportions, and we Bhatnagar's, the unwilling, supporting cast.

One morning, Pracchi was eating buttered toast before school. She turned her head for exactly two seconds, which was all it took for Truffle to execute a flawless snatch-and-run manoeuvre. She screamed, "Papa! He stole my breakfast!" I tried to chase after him but instead, ended up slipping on the rug. As for Truffle? Why, he trotted triumphantly into the corner, tail wagging, butter on his whiskers, looking every bit like a victorious outlaw!

In spring, time felt endless long nights of whining, long days of mischief. But beneath the veneer of exhaustion, lay a sense of unparalleled wonder. Every puddle was an ocean to Truffle, every stick a sacred relic, every corner of the house an unexplored continent.

Spring was messy, yes. But it was also pure *joy*. It reminded me that beginnings are never tidy, instead, they are exuberant, overflowing, and achingly alive.

As Truffle grew into adulthood, summer arrived the season of vigour. This Labrador was strong, fast, and endlessly playful. Morning walks became marathons, afternoons tug-of-war contests! Evenings, for that matter, were relegated to symphonies of squeaky toys. I often joked that I needed two staff members: one to walk him, another to *walk me after walking him*.

Summer was also the season of deep companionship. If I sat down to read, he curled beside me. If I paced the living room on a tense phone call, he matched my steps. If I laughed loudly at a silly TV joke, his tail thumped ferociously, as though in perfect rhythm.

Pramila called him my ‘shadow.’ The thing was ~~things were~~, he wasn’t just following me. He was teaching me how to *live more fully in my own skin*.

The best part of summer was Truffle’s boundless joy. A ball tossed across the room wasn’t just a ball; it was *ecstasy*. A walk in the park wasn’t just exercise; it was *communion*. He lived summer in high definition, and somehow, that colour seeped into our lives, too.

Then came autumn. His steps grew slower, his naps longer, and his fur, all of a sudden, was tinged with grey. At first, on those evening walks of ours, I vehemently resisted. “Come on, boy, keep up!” However, he wasn’t keeping up anymore. He was teaching me something different: the art of slowing down.

Walks became pilgrimages, not workouts. A single tree might hold him transfixed for minutes - nose pressed into the bark as though reading scripture. When I tugged impatiently, he looked at me with a gaze that said, “Why rush? The world will still be here tomorrow.”

Pramila noticed it too. “He’s not just slowing down,” she said one evening. “He’s inviting us to slow down with him. Autumn wasn’t only about a sense of *decline*, but a sense of *gentleness*, too. Quieter evenings on the balcony, him resting his head on my lap while I sipped tea. More silent companionship, fewer chaotic chases. Autumn taught me to savour.

Winter arrived with quiet footsteps. Truffle’s once-powerful legs trembled on the stairs. His golden coat grew pale. His breathing, laboured. I dreaded winter. I wanted to bargain with time, in an attempt to somehow stretch the season infinitely. Truffle, though, didn’t resist. He met winter with dignity.

One night, he lay at my feet, too tired to rise, and yet, his eyes held a steady calm. I whispered, “I’m not ready, my boy.” He seemed to whisper back, “I am.”

Even in fading strength, he carried presence. Winter was not cruel it was tender, solemn, dignified.

Pracchi sat with him often, stroking him gently, whispering, “Good boy” time and again, as though each repetition carved her love deeper into his

heart. Rishebbh, calling from afar, reminded me of bright summer days, “Remember how he used to drag us down the street, Papa? That’s still him. That joy is still there.”

In hindsight, winter was the hardest season. Still, it was also the most profound. It showed me that endings are not failures. They are simply the final notes of a song played beautifully.

Looking back, I see that each season carried its own wisdom:

- Spring: Life is messy but packed with a joy that hides within that mess. Find that joy!
- Summer: Live vibrantly, love exuberantly.
- Autumn: Slow down, savour, breathe.
- Winter: Meet endings with grace.

Truffle’s life was not a straight path. It was a dance through seasons, each with its own rhythm. And perhaps the greatest lesson was this:

Don’t cling to any single season. Savour and Honour them all.

We humans are slaves to *clock time*, appointments, alarms, deadlines. The calendar is our king, the wristwatch our tyrant. We check our phones every few minutes, as though the ticking of seconds were more important than the beating of our own hearts.

Truffle, on the other hand, lived in what I came to call ‘dog time.’ And let me tell you, it was infinitely saner!

In dog time, mornings aren’t measured by hours, but by *smells*. The scent of dew on grass, the neighbour’s breakfast drifting through the air, the faint perfume of another dog’s overnight visit to the lamppost.

Afternoons? Marked not by productivity, but by naps and belly rubs.

Evenings? A walk, a good meal, the sound of family laughter.

Sundays and Mondays were the same to him. National holidays, festivals, ‘urgent’ meetings – absolutely irrelevant. His clock was wound by presence, not by *pressure*.

The more I watched him, the more I wondered: What if dog time was actually truer than clock time? One morning, I had back-to-back calls

lined up. My phone was buzzing, emails waiting to be read and, in some instances, replied to. Truffle, in the meantime, was on a sniffing pilgrimage. Each tree received a thorough analysis, each bush a forensic investigation! He walked with the seriousness of a scientist and the devotion of a monk.

I tugged at the leash. “Come on, Truffle, hurry up!” He blithely ignored me. For him, this wasn’t *delay*. This *was* the very *point* of the walk.

After ten minutes of futile rushing, I gave up. I stood there while he sniffed a lamppost as if decoding the Rosetta Stone. And in that surrender, something softened. I noticed the faint pink streaks of dawn, the sounds of sparrows bickering overhead, the coolness of the breeze on my skin. By the time he finished his ‘research,’ I realised I’d attended a different kind of meeting — a meeting with the present moment. And, unlike the several Zoom calls I was used to making every day, this ‘call’ left me utterly refreshed.

How often do we say, “*I don’t have enough time*”?

I used to complain about this constantly. Not enough time to *read*. Not enough time to *exercise*. Not enough time to *sit with family*. And yet, magically, I always had time to scroll through my phone for 45 minutes, or even, replay old worries in my head like a broken cassette.

Truffle showed me the truth: The scarcity of time is an illusion. It’s not about *hours*. It’s about *priorities*. Never rushing, he always had time for what truly mattered — *play, rest, love*. Watching him, I realised I wasn’t *time-poor*; I was *attention-poor*.

Pramila, ever-practical, once teased: “You claim you don’t have time for a walk, but you’ve had time to argue with your email for the last hour.” She was right. Truffle simply lived what she said out loud: *Time isn’t about quantity, it’s about quality*. Indeed, Truffle didn’t care how many hours the day contained. He cared about the *moments that mattered*; the ecstatic sprint after a squirrel, the joy of curling up by my feet, of leaning into a hand scratching his ears...

I slowly began measuring my days not by deadlines met, but instead, by such timeless moments. And then, I must tell you this dear reader:

Life suddenly looked abundant, not scarce!

Of course, the contrast between clock time and dog time often led to comic collisions. There was the evening when I had an ‘urgent’ work call. I sat at my desk, headset on, nodding gravely as a colleague spoke about ‘deliverables.’ At that exact moment, Truffle decided my lap was the only place to be. All thirty kilograms of him climbed up, panting happily into the microphone.

“Was that a dog?” someone asked on the call.

“Yes,” I admitted, “and he thinks this is more important than your PowerPoint presentation!”

The truth is, he was right.

Or the time I tried to meditate with a timer on my phone. I sat cross-legged, eyes closed, waiting for the alarm to ping after 20 minutes. Truffle watched me intently for two minutes, then sauntered over, licked my face, and plonked down on my lap. Meditation timer or not, he knew presence had absolutely nothing to do with the clock.

Dog time is the antidote to our clock time obsession.

It doesn’t erase responsibilities, it simply reminds us that life is happening *now*, not later. That moments lived *fully*, are worth more than hours riddled with anxiety.

Even after Truffle passed, time did not end. It simply *shifted*. The house felt quieter, the days seemed longer, the evenings stretched like shadows with no wagging tail to greet me. Yet, in my mind’s eye, he was still here. His paw prints were etched not just on the floor, but into my heart.

Grief has its own peculiar rhythm. Some days drag endlessly, every minute weighted with absence. Other days fly by, entire weeks dissolving into a blur. In all of this, however, love acts like an anchor, bending time so the past is never fully gone.

One morning, as I sipped tea by the balcony, I suddenly remembered a walk we once took under a glowing moon. His gait slow but steady, his head had brushed against my hand. The memory landed so vividly it felt as if time had *folded*, stitching past into present. Tears welled up, but so did gratitude. Time, I realised, doesn’t erase love. It carries it forward, like a song that lingers long after the music fades.

Every so often, time seemed to stop altogether. This resembles the afternoon when Truffle curled at my feet while I read, both of us immersed in perfect stillness. Or perhaps, the moment he rested his head on my lap after a long day, his sigh heavier than words, telling me, “This is all that matters.”

In those moments, time lost its power. It wasn’t about past or future. It was pure presence. A sense of *timelessness*...

With Truffle, I learned to notice those ‘everything’ moments. Never quite grand, they were instead ordinary, but fully lived, nonetheless. And that, perhaps, is what makes them eternal.

Looking back now, I see that time was never the enemy. It wasn’t something to conquer, or hoard, or fight against. Time was a *dancer*. Sometimes it led, racing through summers, flying past milestones. Sometimes it slowed, holding me still by a puddle or a napping dog. Yet other times it bowed, gently ushering in endings. Truffle never resisted the dance. He moved *with it*, running when young, strolling when old, resting when tired. He never resented the passing of time; he accepted it as part of the *rhythm*.

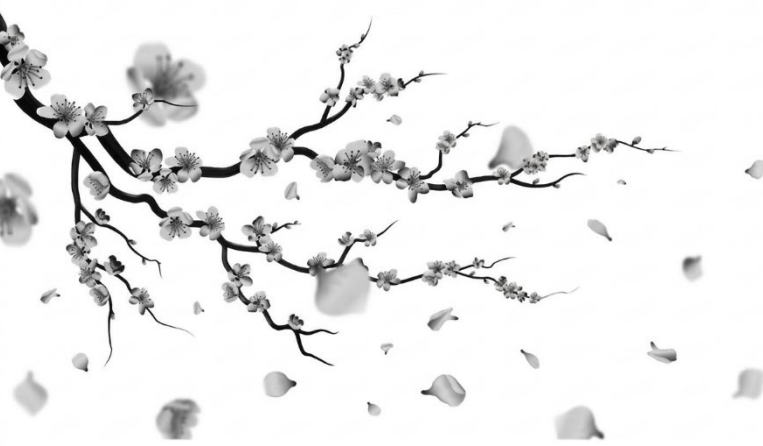
And perhaps, that’s the secret:

Don’t try to grip time like a taskmaster. Don’t curse it like a thief. Hold its hand, feel the music, and let it guide you.

Now, when I hear the ticking of a clock, I don’t feel pressure. I feel *invitation*. An invitation to dance, to live, to be fully present. And in that dance, I remember him — the dog who never checked a watch, who never cursed a deadline, but rather, one who lived every moment as though it were eternity.

Time is not a thief.

Time is a dancer.



CHAPTER 10

THE GENTLE ART OF WAITING

Patience and I were never exactly best friends. If I had to list my natural talents, ‘waiting calmly’ would lie somewhere between ‘solving quantum physics problems’ and ‘winning a salsa competition’!

When it comes to traffic lights? I honk as though my horn is Moses’s staff, capable of parting seas of Maruti Suzukis! Wi-Fi buffering? My glare alone could melt the router! Bank queues? I’ve mentally renovated more government offices than any contractor ever has— all while drumming my fingers and muttering under my breath!

It was but natural, then, that when Truffle entered our lives, I thought at least this was one area I wouldn’t be tested. After all, dogs are supposed to be loyal, playful, uncomplicated. They wag, they fetch, they guard, right? *Wrong!* My golden Labrador was less a pet and more a Zen master in disguise sent to me with one mission: Teach this gentleman the fine art of waiting.

And boy, did he have patience (and humour) on his side...

Every evening, Truffle transformed into a furry security guard. Long before I reached home, he planted himself at the front door—posture erect, ears twitching, tail tapping a whimsical beat on the floor. Not

occasionally, not casually, but daily. I tell you, he ran that door like an army checkpoint.

Sometimes, he began his vigil an hour early. Every scooter that sputtered erratically in the lane, each sound of the neighbour's slippers scuffing along the corridor, every creak of the lift—his ears perked up like satellite dishes in each instance. And every single time the realization hit that it wasn't me, he sighed, repositioned himself with dramatic flair, and resumed waiting.

But when it *was* me? It was a show of fireworks! His entire body quivered like it had been plugged into a *Diwali socket*. His eyes shone brighter than diyas, his tail whipped like a helicopter rotor, and he practically exploded into dance.

It made me wonder: Didn't he get bored? Didn't the minutes drag? Didn't the waiting weigh heavy? Apparently not - his waiting wasn't empty, but rather, charged...

With love, loyalty, and anticipation.

My wife summed it up best with her trademark clarity: "His waiting makes us feel more loved too. It's like his patience rubs off on the whole house."

Pracchi chimed in: "Papa, when he sits at the door, it's like he's saying, *I belong here, no matter what*. It makes home feel warmer."

She was right. Walking into a house where someone has *waited* for you—not grudgingly, but joyfully—is one of life's greatest gifts. It's perhaps one of the oldest reasons that people want to get married – so that they don't come back to an empty home, but rather, to someone who loves them.

To *love itself*...

One morning, he devoted ten whole minutes to a single patch of grass. Just as I thought we'd move on, he halted at the next pole for another full investigation. By the third stop, I threw my hands up. "At this rate, Truffle, we'll reach the park by Diwali!"

Neighbours chuckled as they passed. One elderly aunty even patted my shoulder and said, "Beta, don't fight it. He's teaching you patience." I

wasn't sure if I was learning patience or losing hair, but she wasn't wrong.

The comedy was endless. Sometimes he'd refuse to move, firmly planting his bottom on the pavement while traffic honked, cyclists swerved, and I pleaded like a madman. He'd sit there, staring at the horizon like a philosopher contemplating life's meaning, while I muttered, "This isn't *Bodh Gaya*, you know!"

Pramila, naturally, had saintly patience. On evening strolls she'd smile indulgently: "Let him sniff, he's enjoying."

Pracchi was less zen. "Papa, he's soooo slow! Can't we just carry him?" But then she'd soften when his tail wagged at a butterfly and giggle, "Fine. He's cute."

And Rishebh? When he came home from abroad, he summed it up perfectly: "This isn't a walk, Dad. It's a Netflix series—one episode per lamp post." Honestly, a better review than most shows.

Funny thing is, once I stopped dragging him along and simply *waited with him*, I noticed more myself. Bougainvillea spilling over gates. The sweet scent of jasmine in the air. Kids giggling as they played cricket. The slow rising of the sun painting the sky.

The pauses weren't detours. They were the *point*.

The hardest waiting wasn't at the thresholds of doors or on walks—it was at the vet's clinic. Anyone who's sat in a veterinary waiting room knows it's unlike anywhere else. There's no casual magazine-flipping or impatient foot-tapping. Instead, there's a shared hush. Pet parents stroke fur, murmur reassurances, squeeze paws a little tighter. Eyes meet across the room with unspoken solidarity: *We're all here for love, and we're all helpless in our own way*.

I remember one long evening vividly. Truffle lay curled at my feet, breathing unevenly. I stroked his head as the clock dragged. My mind screamed: *Why so slow? Why now?*

Then I looked at him. He wasn't fighting time. He wasn't panicking. He was simply being, leaning into my touch, trusting completely.

And I realised: *The waiting itself was love.* It wasn't wasted. Every stroke of fur, every whispered reassurance, every sigh—it was all part of the sacred bond between a dog and his master. Pramila expressed her love through action—the timely deliverance of medicines, softening his food, keeping his bed warm. Her waiting was service. Pracchi's waiting was reading aloud in a far gentler tone, humming softly, resting her hand on him quietly.

And Rishebh, far away, carried his waiting through phone calls. “Papa, how is he now?” he'd ask, voice tight with helplessness, eyes moist. His waiting was stitched together with faith – placing an implicit trust in us, to be his hands and eyes.

Together, we carried the waiting, through different expressions of the same love.

Here's the difference, I noticed. Humans wait like prisoners—fidgeting, sighing, refreshing apps, mentally scripting disasters. Dogs wait like monks. Tell them “stay,” and they will. Not because they like sitting still, but because they *trust*.

Truffle's waiting whispered: *Stay steady. Something good is coming, even if it's not pizza.*

Since then, I've started noticing waiting everywhere I look:

- In traffic, I sometimes roll down the window and notice bougainvillea instead of glaring at the signal.
- At restaurants, instead of scowling at the door to the kitchen in impatient anticipation of the dish I have ordered, I talk to the people at my table (radical idea, I know!)
- At airports, I observe the little dramas unfolding around me—families reuniting, kids throwing tantrums, couples whispering secrets. It's like *free theatre*.

Do I always succeed? No. My inner honker still lives. But sometimes, when I remember Truffle, I choose differently.

Humour helps, too. Once, in a long queue at the passport office, I muttered, “This is worse than Truffle's sniffing pauses.” The stranger

ahead turned and laughed: “At least your dog doesn’t ask for extra photocopies.”

Of course, the hardest waiting was the last. In Truffle’s final days, every breath felt like it carried the massive weight of time. My waiting was laced with a sense of dread: Is today going to be the last day?

But strangely, in that heaviness, there was peace. I stopped planning, rushing and even, demanding. I simply sat. Every sigh, every nuzzle, every silence became a jewel. Waiting was no longer about reaching the end. It was about soaking in what still remained.

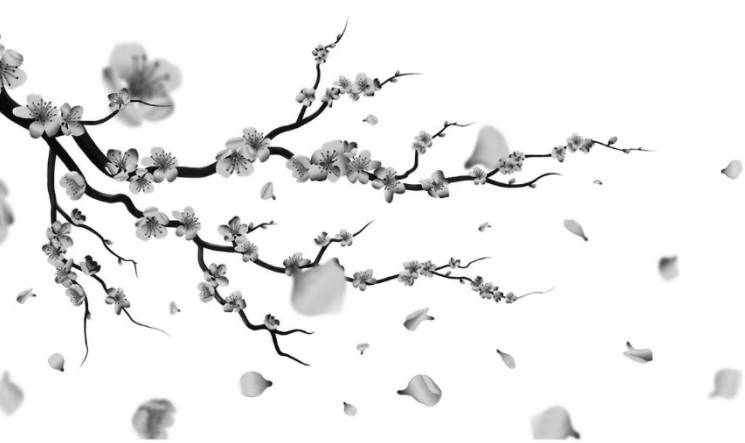
And when the waiting ended, it wasn’t despair. It was *release*.

I realised then: the end of waiting is not always answers. Sometimes it is simply the grace of being together until the very last breath.

Today, whether I’m stuck in traffic, waiting for results, or standing in life’s uncertain pauses, I remember Truffle at the door—ears alert, tail ready, joy trembling beneath the surface.

And I remind myself: Waiting isn’t wasted. Waiting is love, stretched across time.

Because in the end, it’s not about *what* you’re waiting for. It’s about *who* you become while you wait. And sometimes—if you’re lucky—you get *pizza*!



CHAPTER 11

THE SACRED ORDINARY

Mornings in the Bhatnagar household were never grand affairs. There were no temple bells echoing down marble halls, no incense wafting through Himalayan caves. Instead, there was Truffle—stretching, yawning, and thumping his tail against the furniture like a furry alarm clock with no snooze button.

That, dear reader, was my first lesson in sacred, ordinary life:

Sometimes holiness arrives with dog breath at 6:30 a.m.!

Every morning, without fail, Truffle would rise from his bed, arch his back in a perfect yoga asana, yawn with the seriousness of a sage, and then trot over to greet me. His eyes sparkled with a simple, unwavering message:

You are the most important person in the world right now.

There were no conditions attached. He didn't check whether I'd meditated, if I'd remembered to iron my shirt, or whether my mood was sunny or stormy. His welcome was unconditional, unfiltered, and entirely present. And in that presence, I realized: *This* is prayer. Not the kind where you chant verses you only half-remember, but rather, one where you feel seen, accepted, and loved— all without the need for qualifications of any kind.

In our house, tea is practically a religion. The day doesn't officially start until Pramila hands me that piping hot cup of chai. For years, however, I drank it absentmindedly - scrolling through emails, checking the news, letting my mind race three meetings ahead. Truffle, on the other hand, had his own ritual. He'd sit by my chair, head resting on my knee, eyes lifted with quiet devotion, as though this chai was no less sacred than the Ganga at sunrise.

It struck me: That sense of all-pervading holiness didn't lie merely in the tea itself. It was in the way I *received* it. A sip taken with gratitude turned the act into a *communion* of sorts. A sip taken with distraction turned it into pain and simple... *caffeine*.

From then on, whenever I lifted my cup, I tried to pause. To feel the warmth seep into my palms and notice the aroma rising like incense. To whisper a silent thank you—to Pramila for brewing it, to life for offering another morning, and, last but not the least, to Truffle for reminding me to even notice at all.

Of course, not every morning was serene. Some mornings were chaos incarnate. Imagine this: Pracchi searching frantically for her missing dupatta, Truffle gleefully running around the house with said dupatta clamped between his teeth, and me trying to play mediator while still half-asleep. Add to that the pressure cooker whistling in the kitchen like a war trumpet, and you'll understand exactly why enlightenment seemed so very far away.

In the midst of it all, though, sacredness hid in plain sight. Beneath the noise and the nonsense was love—messy, noisy, chaotic love. The kind you don't appreciate until years later, when the house feels too quiet, the children have flown the nest, and the dog has moved on to sniff lamp posts in heaven!

It turns out, the sacred ordinary doesn't need silence. Sometimes, it lives bang in midst of all that *clatter*.

Mornings also revealed the different ways each of us held sacredness, without even knowing it.

- Pramila: Sacred in her steadiness. Her rituals—tea, breakfast, the quiet order she brought—were temples in themselves.

- Pracchi: Sacred in her youthful energy. Even her chaos had a vitality that rendered the house alive.
- Rishabh (when he was home): Sacred in his teasing. His way of turning even groggy mornings into laughter, was its own kind of blessing.

And then - there was me, somewhere between grumbling about traffic and trying to remember passwords - fumbling my way into presence. Together, we weren't performing grand rituals. We were simply *living*. Yet in hindsight, each act—tea poured, laughter shared, socks stolen—was woven into a tapestry of sacred ordinariness.

One morning stands out distinctly among the rest. I had returned late the previous night from a long trip, exhausted and irritable. Truffle bound himself firmly to me at dawn, tail wagging like a windshield wiper stuck on high speed.

"Not today, Truffle," I muttered.

He cocked his head, wagged that tail harder, and then leapt onto my lap with such force that my tea nearly baptized the carpet! I burst out laughing. Just like that, the mood broke.

And it hit me right then and there: joy is sacred, too. The ordinary gift of laughter—sudden, unplanned, unpolished—is perhaps the holiest of them all.

From Truffle, I learned that mornings hold sacredness not in grandeur, but in small gestures:

- The stretch that honours the body.
- The tea that honours the moment.
- The laughter that honours connection.
- Even, the chaos that honours life's messy abundance.

Sacredness doesn't arrive from *elsewhere*. It's *already there*, wagging its tail in the doorway, waiting to be noticed.

If ever there was a high priest of play, it was Truffle. His theology was simple:

Life is serious enough; play is the prayer that keeps the soul light.

To him, every ball was not merely a toy, but instead, a divine offering. Every tug-of-war rope was not just a game, but rather, a ritual of communion. And the sheer joy he carried while bounding after a ball—ears flapping like untidy banners, tongue hanging out like a flag of surrender—was nothing short of holiness on display.

With Truffle, there was no half-hearted play. When he chased, he did so with his entire *being*. When he rolled on the grass, he rolled as though the earth itself had conspired to tickle him. His abandon was his worship, his way of saying, *this life is worth celebrating*.

I used to stand there, stick in hand, wondering: *Why do we humans make joy so complicated?* For Truffle, it was as close as a ball, a patch of grass, a willing playmate.

Perhaps, I thought, *joy itself is sacred*. And when we laugh, when we play, when we let ourselves be utterly ridiculous, we are already standing on holy ground.

Mealtimes, too, carried their quiet aura of sanctity. In many traditions, food is blessed before eating—the Christian grace, the Hindu prasadam, the Buddhist mindful meal. The idea is the same: food is life and receiving it with gratitude, turns an ordinary act into communion.

Truffle didn't say grace, but he certainly lived it. Whenever his bowl appeared, he approached it as though someone had just rolled out a feast fit for kings. His tail wagged, his eyes sparkled, and his entire being radiated a single message: *Thank you for this gift*. No distracted scrolling on his part. No absent-minded chewing. He ate as though every bite was a miracle.

Meanwhile, I would sit across from him, scrolling through my phone, barely noticing the taste of my own meal. It struck me then: *He* was the one truly praying, not me.

That realization changed the way I approached food. I began to pause before eating. To notice the colours on the plate, to breathe in the aroma, to feel a small rush of gratitude—not just for the food, but for the hands that cooked it, the soil that grew it, the sun and rain that nurtured it. Truffle, with his wagging-tail reverence, had turned kibble into

sacrament. And by watching him, I remembered that every meal, no matter how simple, could be prayer—if only we noticed.

In our home too, did those meals find a sense of communal sacredness. Pramila, with her knack for turning the simplest ingredients into comfort, had her own ritual. She'd fuss over whether the dal was too thin or the rotis too thick, and yet, when we all sat down, it was never *just food*. Rather, it was *love* - ladled onto plates!

Pracchi often turned meals into theatre—sharing stories, cracking jokes, sometimes distracting us so much that the food went cold. And then there was Truffle, stationed loyally by the table, his soulful eyes silently lobbying for 'just one bite.' Needless to add, he won more often than he should have. And each time he did, the table erupted in laughter.

Those meals were not grand feasts. They were daal, sabzi, roti, laughter, love, and the unspoken bond of *being together*. Looking back, I realize: every single one of those dinners was a kind of prayer circle. Not the kind with folded hands and bowed heads, but rather, one where hearts bent toward each other without even knowing.

Of course, Truffle had his own ways of making meals 'interesting.' One afternoon, I placed my plate on the coffee table in my endeavour to grab water from the kitchen. I returned to find him licking the last traces of sabzi with a look of divine contentment, as though he had just performed a sacred offering to his stomach-god.

"Truffle!" I cried.

He looked up at me, eyes wide with innocence, tail wagging as if to say, *What? Sharing is caring, Dad.*

I should have been furious. Instead, I laughed, because in that moment, even his mischief had a kind of holiness. It reminded me that life's rituals are not meant to be *rigid*. Instead, they are meant to be *alive* with laughter, mistakes, and the occasional stolen chapati.

From Truffle, I learned that meals are not just about feeding the body. They are about feeding the soul.

- To eat with gratitude is to turn food into blessing.
- To share with laughter is to turn the table into temple.

- To play, to tease, to steal the occasional bite—these too are sacred, because they remind us not to take ourselves too seriously.

Holiness, it seems, doesn't always arrive in silence. Sometimes, it arrives in wagging tails, shared bites, and laughter so hearty that the neighbours knock to ask what the fuss is about.

One evening, as we paused beneath a blooming gulmohar tree, petals drifting down like benedictions, Truffle sat still, gaze held upward. The streetlight threw a soft halo around him, and in that moment, I felt as though I were standing inside a cathedral not built by stone, but by sky, trees, and silence.

It was like Osho had once infamously said about dancers:

The dancer disappears into the dance, until only the dance remains.

That night, it wasn't Truffle and me. It was just *the walk*.

If play was Truffle's temple and walks were his pilgrimage, then naps were his meditation hall! He could curl up anywhere—sofa, rug, or smack in the middle of the hallway—and surrender completely to sleep. His breathing slowed, his body softened, his spirit seemed to sink into some invisible rhythm of peace. Watching him, I realized: his rest wasn't laziness. It was *reverence*.

Reverence for the body that carried him, reverence for the life that pulsed through him.

Meanwhile, I—like so many of us—glorified exhaustion. I boasted of busy schedules, prided myself on skipping rest, and even, wore tiredness as though it were a badge of honour. But Truffle, with his shameless, guilt-free naps, reminded me: Rest itself is sacred.

Of course, the ordinary isn't all petals and peace. It comes with shadows, too—dirty dishes piled in the sink, laundry that never ends, bills that refuse to stay paid, and traffic that tests both brakes and patience. I often sighed through these chores, muttering under my breath, "Why does life have to be so... repetitive?"

Truffle, on the other hand, never once complained about repetition. The same walk every day? He found new smells. The same toy chewed to

shreds? He discovered new ways to destroy it. The same couch corner? He settled into it as though it were a fresh throne each evening.

Even the shadows became holy when seen through his eyes.

It made me wonder: Perhaps sacredness isn't about escaping the ordinary grind. Perhaps it's about how we enter it. That pile of laundry becomes a nuisance when seen as 'work.' It becomes love when folded with presence, knowing someone you love will wear it, sooner or later.

Truffle didn't elevate the ordinary by changing it, but rather, *being fully in it*.

In those shadowed corners of ordinary life, Truffle taught me:

- Patience: Even queues and chores can be lived with gentleness instead of irritation.
- Renewal: Repetition is not punishment—it's life offering another chance to notice.
- Perspective: A task that feels dull may hold quiet sacredness when performed with love.

The sacred ordinary, I realized, isn't about perfection. It's about *perception*. And sometimes, the shadow is part of the sacred rhythm too—like the silence between notes that makes the music whole.

After Truffle passed, what I missed most wasn't the big things. Not the long walks, not even the family outings he accompanied us on. It was the small, ordinary details that cut deepest. The thud of his paws on the floor. The way he followed me from room to room, as though my shadow needed a companion. The gentle weight of his head resting on my lap while I read. These were the moments I had once brushed aside, taken for granted. They had seemed too ordinary to be cherished. And now, in their absence, they revealed their true value.

Grief has a way of turning hindsight into high definition. Suddenly, the very moments you had overlooked glow with sacredness. It's as though life whispers:

You thought this was ordinary. It was holy all along.

The silence after Truffle's passing was deafening. It wasn't just the absence of sound—it was the *absence of presence*. No wagging tail at the door, no snoring at night.

At first, the silence felt unbearable, like a wound that has no chance of healing. But slowly, as I sat with it, I discovered something unexpected: *The silence itself became sacred.*

Because in that silence, I still felt him. Not his bark, not his body, but his *essence*. The warmth of memory. The echo of joy. The presence of love that death couldn't erase.

Sacredness, I realized, doesn't vanish with loss. It changes form. It moves from pawprints on the floor to imprints on the heart.

With time, I began noticing Truffle in other 'ordinary' places.

A child's laughter on the street carried his joy. A stray dog wagging his tail excitedly at a passer-by reminded me of his open heartedness. The golden glow of evening light on the balcony brought to my mind the way his fur used to shine.

The sacred ordinary had not disappeared. It had simply *moved*. It now revealed itself in unexpected corners, waiting to be recognized.

Truffle had taught me in life. In absence, he continued to teach: The sacred isn't bound to form. It flows. It finds new shapes. It keeps whispering—but only if you're willing to listen.

Grief, painful though it was, became a teacher in itself.

It taught me that the sacred ordinary is most visible in hindsight. That we often miss it while it's happening. That we need reminders—sometimes harsh ones—to treasure what we already have. It also taught me that grief doesn't end love. It reveals it. Every tear shed, after all, was proof of a bond that had been real, ordinary, and yet, profoundly holy.

Perhaps this is why so many spiritual traditions speak of 'dying daily.' Not as morbidity, but as practice—practice for letting go, for treasuring the now, for discovering the sacred in each fleeting moment.

Now, inspired by Truffle, I make it a practice:

- To pause before meals, even if only for a breath.
- To notice the sunlight as though it were a blessing.
- To treat laughter not as an interruption, but as prayer.
- To see chores not as burdens, but as opportunities for presence.

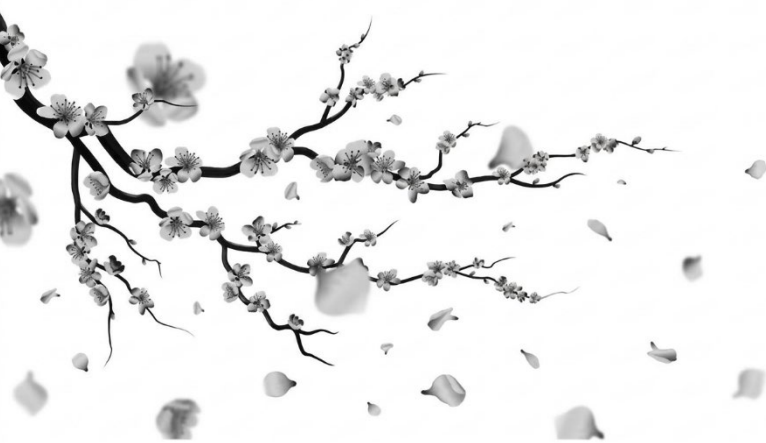
These practices don't add anything new to life; they reveal the wisdom what was already there:

The ordinary is soaked in sacredness.

Truffle never sought temples or scriptures. His temple was the home we shared. His scripture was presence. His prayer was joy. Through him, I learned that sacredness doesn't demand grand gestures. It waits in the unnoticed, the everyday, the mundane.

Now, when I sip tea, watch the sunset, or sit in silence, I remember him. And I smile. Because I know: The ordinary was never ordinary at all.

The ordinary, when seen with love, is the most sacred gift of all.



CHAPTER 12

THE CIRCLE OF BELONGING

Every heart craves to *belong*. To a family, to a community, to a purpose. We long for a circle where we are seen, accepted, and loved not for what we achieve, but simply for *who we are*.

That sense of belongingness is as old as humanity itself. It's why ladies gather at kitty parties to compare recipes and jewellery, while men cling to their Wednesday night 'inner circles' of rum, cricket debates, poker, and political analysis (which rarely solve anything but forever feel urgent). Even in the digital age, the humble *WhatsApp* family group—despite its two hundred unread messages and cryptic Good Morning GIFs gives us that small thrill of inclusion: "Ah, I am still in the circle. Someone thinks of me when forwarding that sunflower!"

What does it mean to truly 'belong'? For much of my life, that sense of belonging felt complicated. Society always seemed to wrap it in conditions: *Be successful, be useful, be agreeable, and then, perhaps, you'll belong*. At home, belonging was tied to roles and responsibilities—breadwinner, parent, son, husband. Outside, it was measured in status, performance, reputation.

And then, along came Truffle...

I tell you, that golden Labrador scampered into my life and dissolved all that ambiguity about belonging with one wag of his tail. With him, I belonged without effort. Without performance. Without masks. His circle was drawn in sand, wide and forgiving, open to all. And the best part? He pulled not only me, but Pramila, Pracchi, and Rishebh into it too.

From the day Truffle padded into the Bhatnagar household, it was no longer just a *house*—it became a *home*. His presence stitched warmth into the walls, laughter into the rooms, and comfort into every corner.

Take Pramila, for instance. She has forever had this penchant for balancing the household—keeping the machinery of meals, schedules, and sanity well-oiled. However, she also has moods (what good wife doesn't?) - moments when her fiery gaze can silence an entire parliament session!

Truffle had a special radar for those moods. If Pramila was cross, he'd trot up, tail wagging so excitedly that even her sternest scolding dissolved into reluctant giggles. I remember one evening vividly: she was in the middle of a serious lecture to me about leaving wet towels on the bed (a crime I have been repeatedly guilty of, I openly confess), when Truffle decided the timing was simply perfect, to clamber onto her lap. Just picture it: a Labrador—no longer a puppy, mind you—trying to make himself a lap dog! She tried to keep her frown intact, I tell you, but when a 30-kilo furball is wriggling onto your sari, even the sharpest lecture loses steam.

I quietly slipped out of the room, towel still on the bed, grateful for my furry ally. Belonging, it seemed, had comic timing.

Pracchi had her own private circle with Truffle—built almost entirely out of sound. She spoke to him in that mysterious 'baby-talk' language known only to pet lovers. It was higher pitched than her normal voice, involving words that weren't in the dictionary, and was often accompanied by impromptu singing. Truffle adored it.

He would sit in her room, head tilted, tail wagging, as she poured out the secrets of her day—the dramas of school, the triumphs of exams, the heartbreak of friends who didn't understand. He listened with more patience than any therapist I've ever met. Sometimes, when she'd brush

his fur, she would even narrate her playlists to him. “This is Taylor Swift, Truffle. She understands me.” He looked at her with liquid-brown eyes that seemed to say, “I understand you better.”

Truffle’s sense of belonging with Pracchi wasn’t just confined to her room. It was in her music, her messy notebooks, her whispered prayers at night. Truffle became a silent member of her teenage years, and I often wondered whether he knew more of Pracchi’s heart than the rest of the family combined.

Now, Rishebh, my son, was the cool one in the house. He tried to play it casual, acting as if he wasn’t too attached to ‘the dog.’ “He’s just a pet, Dad,” he’d shrug, while secretly slipping Truffle bits of samosa under the dining table. Late nights, when his friends came over, Truffle would join them as an honorary gang member. I’d peek in and find him sitting like a referee between heated debates about cricket, politics, or which actor was overrated. When laughter erupted, his tail thumped like a drumbeat. If the debate grew too loud, he’d bark just once—a canine judge restoring order.

The funniest part was his deeply ingrained sense of loyalty. He didn’t side with logic or morality, but instead, with whoever held the snack plate. Fairness, according to Truffle, was measured in samosa distribution! And so, even the uber-cool, slightly aloof Rishebh melted in his presence. He belonged to Truffle as much as Truffle belonged to him.

Truffle’s circle of belonging was not limited to family. He extended it to anyone who crossed our threshold. Guests were greeted with equal enthusiasm, whether they were old friends or the electrician who’d just arrived to fix the fan. The courier man once confessed he looked forward to delivering parcels to our house—Truffle made him feel more welcome than his own children did!

Relatives, of course, received the royal treatment—wagging tail, soulful eyes, paws pressing against their trousers, leaving behind hair that stuck like emotional confetti. One uncle, allergic to dogs, would sneeze his way through visits, but even he admitted: “This fellow has a way of making me feel... wanted.”

That was Truffle's magic. His belonging wasn't selective. It was democratic, unconditional, scandalously wide. Perhaps I felt his lesson most deeply because I knew what it meant to feel *excluded*. There were times in life when I didn't fit the circle whether at school, in professional spaces, or even in social gatherings. Society has a cruel way of drawing circles that keep some out. However, Truffle erased those old wounds. Sitting with him, I realized that belonging didn't always have to be bestowed by society. Sometimes, one being's unconditional acceptance was enough to repair years of conditionality.

Indeed, his wagging tail was stronger medicine than any self-help book I've read.

Truffle didn't just belong with humans, for that matter he belonged to nature itself. Walks with him were proof. He rolled in grass as if it was designed for his fur. He drank from streams with reverence, as though they had been poured just for him. Birds, trees, stray cats, everything was kin. Of course, his definition of belonging included rolling in the dirtiest puddles, often just before guests arrived. While I groaned and scrambled for towels, he looked gloriously happy, declaring, "I belong to the earth and now, so does your sofa."

Nature accepted Truffle just as he was...

When Truffle passed, the circle of belonging felt somehow shattered. The house echoed with his absence. We each grieved differently. Pramila kept cleaning the house, as if by keeping order she could soothe the chaos inside. Pracchi wept openly, clutching his toys as though they were talismans. Rishebh, true to his style, went quiet (even though I noticed him scrolling through old photos more often than usual).

And me? I sat in silence, trying to hold everyone together while secretly falling apart.

Yet, even then, Truffle found ways to belong. His fur kept appearing weeks later in freshly washed clothes, inside books, once even on Rishebh's cricket bat. It was as though he was saying, "Don't worry, I'm still in the circle."

The vacuum cleaner became the most emotional appliance in the house—it kept finding Truffle, and every time it did, we smiled through tears.

Truffle also nudged me toward a harder truth:

Deepest belonging is not outside, but within.

If he could accept me—messy, moody, unshaven, sometimes grumpy—why couldn't I? He didn't care about my résumé, my waistline, or the stock market. He wagged at my presence, not my performance. Self-belonging, I realized, begins when we stop exiling parts of ourselves. When we welcome our own shadows and flaws, we finally step into the circle we've been searching for all along.

Scriptures across traditions speak of belonging to something *larger*—the divine, the cosmos, the infinite. Too often, we imagine it as something to *earn*.

Truffle's eyes, though, told me another story: *You already belong. You always did. Not because you've prayed enough or perfected yourself, but simply because you exist.*

In those moments, sitting quietly with him, I sensed the greater Circle—the one that holds us all, always.

Belonging doesn't only arrive in mystical flashes. It comes in small ways:

- A smile from a stranger that says, *I see you.*
- A shared meal that warms more than the stomach.
- The comfort of Pramila sipping chai beside me in silence.
- Pracchi's laughter spilling down the hallway.
- Rishabh finally admitting he missed Truffle more than he thought.

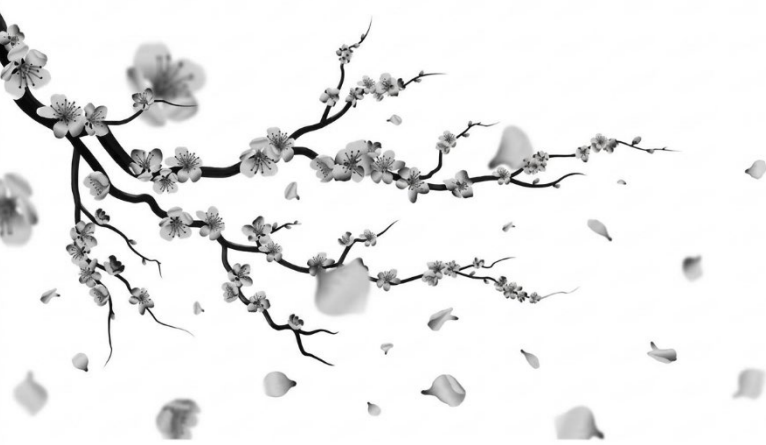
Everyday circles. *All sacred.*

If Truffle could welcome the courier man as warmly as he did me, why can't we, too, widen our circles? Why can't we forgive someone we've

excluded? Or perhaps, include a part of ourselves we've rejected? Every time we expand the circle, belonging deepens.

Now, when I sit quietly, I imagine that great circle. Not just me—but Pramila, Pracchi, Rishabh. All of us pulled in by Truffle's invisible wagging tail. He was the glue in our *WhatsApp* group before WhatsApp even existed. An emoji more powerful than any you will find out there. The unconditional acceptance we all craved.

And in that circle, I hear him still: "You belong. Always. Already. Completely."



CHAPTER 13

THE LANGUAGE OF PLAY

We humans have a strange relationship with *play*. As children, we revel in it—sticks become swords, cushions castles, the living room an entire cricket pitch (to Pramila’s horror)! And then, somewhere along the way, we grow up, swap our toys for to-do lists, and start calling laughter “a waste of time.”

If life were a school, play would be the subject most of us adults would miserably fail in. However, my Labrador philosopher, refused to let me get away with bunking class. For him, play wasn’t optional. It wasn’t a hobby, a language. When observed closely, it seemed as though it were a spiritual practice disguised in wagging tails, chewed slippers, and muddy pawprints!

The best part? He made sure the whole family got dragged, sometimes literally into his joyful syllabus!

Most families wake up to the beep of an alarm clock. We Bhatnagars, on the other hand, rose on a daily basis to a 35-kilo Labrador jumping on the bed, tail thwacking like a helicopter blade.

“Papa!” Pracchi would groan, half-buried under a blanket of dog fur. “Your son is awake.”

Truffle, ignoring her sarcasm, would plant a slobbery kiss on her cheek, then bound right over to Rishebh's room. If my son had dared to stay up late binge-watching a cricket match, too bad—Truffle considered that no excuse for skipping playtime.

"Bhai, he's dragging my bedsheet!" Rishebh would yell.

From the kitchen, Pramila's voice floated in, half-stern, half-amused: "Good! At least someone gets you both out of bed on time. This dog is more useful than your father's alarm."

"Excuse me!" I shouted, sipping chai. "I'm still the official alarm of this house."

"Official, yes," she replied dryly. "Effective? *No!*"

And just like that, the day began with bickering, laughter, and a Labrador with a wagging tail - one who believed mornings were sacred... because they meant more time to play!

Truffle's favourite game was *theft*. Not jewellery, not wallets, no, his loot of choice was *socks*.

One winter morning, I found myself hopping on one leg, shouting, "Where is my other sock?"

"Ask your son," Pramila said, without looking up from the newspaper.

"I'm here!" Rishebh protested.

"Not that son. The furry one."

Sure enough, Truffle sat smugly in the corner, sock dangling from his mouth like a pirate showing off his freshly-plundered treasure.

"Drop it!" I commanded.

He stared at me, tail wagging, eyes sparkling with mischief. And then—zap! —he bolted.

What followed was less of a chase and more of a family relay. I lunged, Pracchi blocked his path, he spun around, Rishebh dived dramatically, Pramila shouted, "Careful with the vase!" and Truffle zoomed past all of us, sock still firmly clenched.

By the time we cornered him, we were panting harder than he was. He looked at us with that goofy Labrador grin, as if to say, “See? You all finally played with me. Mission accomplished.”

That sock, by the way, was never the same again. It went to the laundry stiff with drool and returned stretched like chewing gum...

Rishebh, being the sporty one, decided once that Truffle could be trained into a proper cricket fielder. A noble idea albeit only *on paper*.

The first test match happened in the living room. Rishebh threw a soft ball. Truffle caught it mid-air. The family cheered. Hope soared. Then, instead of returning the ball, he dashed under the sofa and refused to come out.

“Arrey, bring it back!” Rishebh pleaded.

Truffle wagged his tail and lay flat on the floor; ball wedged under his chin like it were the Kohinoor diamond.

“Papa, this is cheating,” Rishebh groaned.

“It’s called *strategy*,” I corrected him. “Your opponent is smarter than you.”

Pracchi clapped, “Yay! Truffle wins again!”

Even Pramila, pretending to be annoyed, had the faint trace of a smile on her lips. “This house is not a stadium,” she scolded, but she too couldn’t resist laughing when Truffle suddenly darted out, ball still in mouth, zooming around like a four-legged Sachin Tendulkar who had just hit a century.

By the end of the match, the sofa was scratched, the ball was punctured, and our hearts were lighter. Truffle had no interest in trophies. His only victory was seeing us laugh together.

Play, for Truffle, was non-negotiable. It didn’t matter what else you were doing.

Once, during Diwali pooja, just as the aarti began, he dropped his squeaky toy at my feet and barked in a manner that seemed to plead for my attention.

“Not now!” I hissed.

He tilted his head, confused. Surely God wouldn't mind a quick tug-of-war mid-prayer?

Another time, during a serious phone call with a client, he arrived with a rope in his mouth, nudging my knee. I waved him off. He nudged harder. Finally, he barked so loudly into the speaker that my client asked, "Sir, do you need to... um... handle something?"

"Yes," I admitted. "My business partner insists we play tug-of-war."

The client laughed. And strangely, so did I.

Pramila summed it up best:

"This dog has better timing than a comedian. He knows exactly when you need a break."

Looking back, I realise Truffle wasn't just fooling around. He was *teaching*:

1. Presence is the real prize.
He didn't care if we threw the ball ten times or once. What mattered was that we were there, eyes on him, fully engaged.
2. Mistakes aren't disasters.
Knock over a vase? So, what? Lose a sock? Buy another! Play doesn't demand perfection.
3. Joy is contagious.
No matter how tired or grumpy we were, five minutes of chasing him melted it all away.

Pracchi once said, half-laughing, half-serious,

"Papa, I think Truffle is secretly a therapist. Instead of charging fees, he charges socks."

She wasn't wrong. Years later, our conversations often circled back to his antics.

"Remember the day he ran off with the mithai box?" Rishebh recalled, grinning.

"And then had the audacity to share one laddoo with the neighbour's dog," Pracchi added.

Pramila shook her head fondly. “I had to bribe him with rotis to get that box back. The mithai was half-gone, but he looked so pleased with himself.”

We laughed until tears came, realising those moments of chaos were the glue that stitched us tighter.

Play, I realised, is not childish. It’s what keeps us *human*. We adults bury it under schedules, but joy doesn’t need appointments. Truffle dragged it out of us, sometimes literally by the sleeve! He reminded us that laughter at the dinner table matters more than the news channel mindlessly blaring away. That chasing a dog around the living room can heal more stress than an expensive spa. That socks, however messed they be with drool, can turn into priceless family heirlooms.

When Truffle passed, the house grew quiet. *Too quiet*. No squeaky toys interrupting pujas. No sock thefts. No cricket matches hijacked. For a while, it felt as though joy itself had slipped away but slowly, in the sacrosanct corridors of memory, that precious play returned. Now, when we sit together, we still argue about who was the better fielder—Truffle or Rishebh. We still laugh about the pooja interruption. And we still, sometimes, find ourselves instinctively checking for missing socks.

That’s the true language of play it doesn’t die. It lingers on, binding one and all together.

One evening, Pracchi asked, “Papa, do you think Truffle is still playing somewhere?”

I smiled. “Of course. Probably teaching some poor angel how to fetch.”

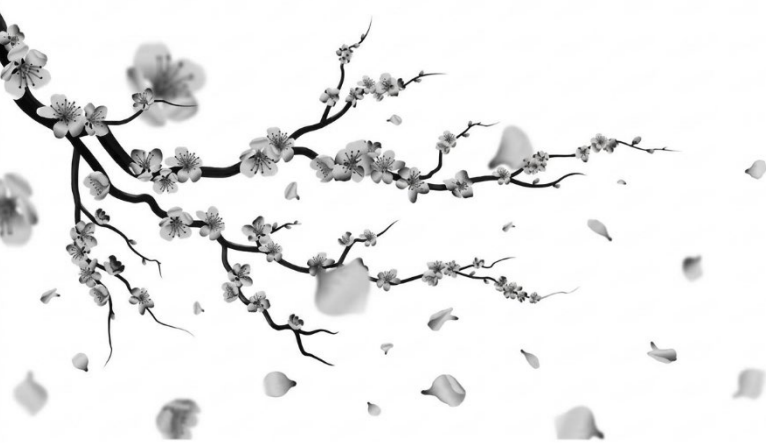
“And making sure heaven’s laundry always has missing socks.” My wife added softly.

Even Rishebh, pretending to be serious, muttered, “If he’s still playing cricket, I demand a rematch.”

We laughed, and in that laughter, he was with us again.

In the end, it’s not about winning or losing, neither is it about toys or games. It’s about joy shared, hearts lightened, bonds deepened. Truffle spoke that language fluently. And thanks to him, so do we.

The truth is, life isn't measured by the seriousness of our schedules but by the moments we dropped everything, chased a sock, laughed till our sides hurt, and remembered that joy is always waiting... tail wagging, eyes shining, ever ready to play!



CHAPTER 14

THE WEIGHT OF “SHOULD”

We humans might not realize it, but most of us walk through life slightly *bent* not from age, arthritis, or poor posture, mind you, but rather, owing to the invisible backpacks strapped to our shoulders. These bags aren’t filled with bricks or stones, but with something far sneakier (and far heavier):

Two words.

“You should.”

It’s truly amazing, how those two innocent-sounding words can creep into every corner of our lives. They usually arrive dressed up as advice, sprinkled with good intentions by parents, teachers, relatives, or even, society at large. Over time, though, they turn into full-blown dictators.

“You should study harder.”

“You should settle down by now.”

“You should buy a house, otherwise people won’t respect you.”

“You should smile more—why such a long face?”

“You should be grateful, it could be a whole lot worse.”

And my personal favourite:

“You should think about what people will say.”

(As if “people” have a monthly conference to discuss *my* life.)

Indeed, one can only be truly free when they realize that the cage they live in is made entirely out of thoughts. Thoughts such as, the ones above. The worst part is, it begins early. As children, we're encouraged to dream wildly. "You should pursue painting, beta, you're so talented—you'll be world famous!" Parents proudly showcase their child's crayon drawings to every visiting guest. Fast-forward a decade, and the same child says, "I want to be a painter." Suddenly, the encouragement vanishes. "Aarey baba, forget painting. You should do an MBA instead. Painting won't pay the bills."

Welcome to the great bait-and-switch of life!

I sometimes think, childhood is like downloading software. We arrive fresh, wide-eyed, and open to the world. Then slowly, the 'should' updates start installing:

- Don't cry, you should be strong.
- Don't run around too much, you should behave.
- Don't talk back, you should respect your elders.
- Don't dream too wildly, you should be practical.

Before you know it, your wild, colourful inner world gets wrapped in beige wallpaper!

Truffle, of course, never downloaded this software. If he wanted to chase a butterfly, he did. If he felt like plonking himself smack in the middle of the living room, blocking everyone's path, he did it with the authority of a king. If he wanted to beg shamelessly for food, he did it without a trace of embarrassment, eyes wide open as though to say: "You *should* be feeding me more, Dad."

Meanwhile, we humans the clever creatures that we are, grow into masters of self-editing. We shapeshift into the versions of ourselves who get rewarded, no matter how alien those versions might be to our real selves. We tuck away our dreams, our spontaneity, and our real voices. We trade freedom for approval, foolishly thinking it's the price of love.

One evening over chai, I brought this up with the family.

“You know,” I said dramatically, waving my cup for effect, “I think most of my stress comes from all these invisible ‘shoulds’ weighing me down.”

“You *should* stop blaming words for your stress.” Said my wife.

Pracchi grinned. “Papa, you *should* stop lecturing us about life lessons every time we’re trying to enjoy chai.”

And from across the seas, my son chimed in over video call: “You *should* stop writing books and just publish Truffle’s autobiography. It’ll sell faster.”

Even Truffle, sitting loyally at my feet, added his two cents by thumping his tail on the floor, which I could swear translated to: “You should stop talking and bring out the biscuits.”

It was unanimous. My family had officially become the United Nations of *Should*.

Perhaps the most unforgettable lesson on ‘should’, came from none other than Truffle himself. One winter morning, I decided he *should* wear a sweater. Everyone else’s dogs were wearing them, and I thought it would look cute. So, I slipped a bright red sweater over him, expecting him to prance around like a Christmas postcard.

Instead, he froze. Absolutely still. Like a statue. He gave me a look that said: “This is not me. This is *your* issue, not mine.” Then, in one of the greatest performances of canine theatre, he flopped to the ground like a Shakespearean hero meeting his tragic end. No barking, no protest. Just - total surrender to drama!

The moment I removed the sweater, he sprang back to life, shook himself vigorously, and bolted outside, free. That was Truffle’s way of saying:

“Don’t suffocate me with your ‘shoulds.’ I know who I am. Sweaters are not part of my truth.”

I sometimes think of that moment whenever I’m about to do something just because it’s *expected*. Am I wearing an invisible sweater? Truth be told, we all have them. Let me list a few greatest hits from my own life:

- “You *should* reply on the family WhatsApp group immediately, otherwise they’ll think you don’t care.”
- “You *should* lift dumbbells at the gym, not laddoos at the dining table.”
- “You *should* keep your boss happy, even if you’re miserable.”
- “You *should* see Sharma ji’s son—why can’t you be like him?”

Each of these comes wrapped in the language of responsibility, love, or duty. However, the cost is far too heavy: Exhaustion, resentment, and a constant feeling of living someone else’s life!

Once, during a family dinner, I tried being the perfect host. I circulated like a politician during elections, smiling at everyone, topping up plates, laughing at jokes that weren’t even remotely funny.

Meanwhile, Truffle decided he wanted belly rubs. So, mid-conversation, he flopped onto the floor, rolled over, and thumped his tail against the carpet until someone noticed.

“Not now, Truffle,” I whispered.

However, he persisted, thumping his tail even louder, and staring at me with those big eyes. Eventually, the guests noticed, laughed, and happily succumbed to rubbing his belly. Within minutes, the focus of the entire evening had shifted.

The lesson? People didn’t need me to perform as the perfect host. They just needed authenticity... and maybe, a Labrador rolling on his back!

Another time, we all dressed up formally for a puja. Crisp clothes, polished shoes, everyone looking respectable. As we stepped out, Truffle spotted a glorious mud puddle and made a beeline for it.

“No!” we all shouted in chorus. Too late. He dived in with abandon, emerging like a victorious wrestler after an intense wrestling match.

Pracchi shrieked, “Papa! You should control him!”

Pramila sighed, “You should have seen this coming.”

I muttered under my breath, “I should have just stayed home.”

And Truffle? He shook himself vigorously, showering us with muddy droplets, tail wagging as if to say: “You should all try this it’s fun!”

Here’s the truth: every time we say yes to a ‘should’ while our insides scream ‘no’, we abandon ourselves. The body knows it too. It tightens the shoulders. It clenches the jaw. It steals sleep. The resentment builds quietly, leaking out in sighs, sarcasm, or simmering frustration. Truffle never carried such burdens. If he didn’t like a treat, he merely spat it out. If he didn’t want to walk, he planted his bottom and stoutly refused. His truth was simple, clean, unapologetic.

One liberating practice I tried was making two lists.

On one side: all the things I thought I *should* do.

On the other: what I actually *wanted* to do.

It looked like this:

- I should stay in this job—it pays well.
→ I *want* to do something that makes me feel alive.
- I should keep the peace in the family.
→ I *want* to be honest, even if it rocks the boat.
- I should be over my grief by now.
→ I *want* to give myself permission to feel it as long as it takes.

Reading it aloud felt terrifying - like standing naked in public *Vulnerable. Strange. Free.*

When I read it out to Truffle, he tilted his head, wagged his tail once, and licked my face. Translation: “Finally, human. You’re catching up. Took you long enough.”

Here’s something you can try right now. Closing your eyes, place a hand on your chest and take a deep breath. Now ask: “What do I truly want, if no one is watching or judging?”

That soft whisper you hear? *That’s* your truth. The voice buried beneath layers of ‘shoulds.’

Truffle's version of this was simple: flop on his back, paws in the air, tongue lolling, daring me to rub his belly. No shame. No apology. Just undiluted *authenticity*.

At dinner recently, I told the family: "I've decided to stop living under the weight of shoulds."

Pracchi clapped sarcastically. "Bravo, Papa. You should have figured that out earlier."

And Pramila, with her classic poker face, said: "You should start by cleaning up after your guru here. He just shed half his body weight in fur on the sofa."

Everyone laughed, myself included. Because, somewhere in that laughter, rested the lightness of truth:

Maybe life is meant to be lived more like Truffle did without shame, without apology, without unnecessary sweaters.

'Should' says: *shrink, comply, endure*.

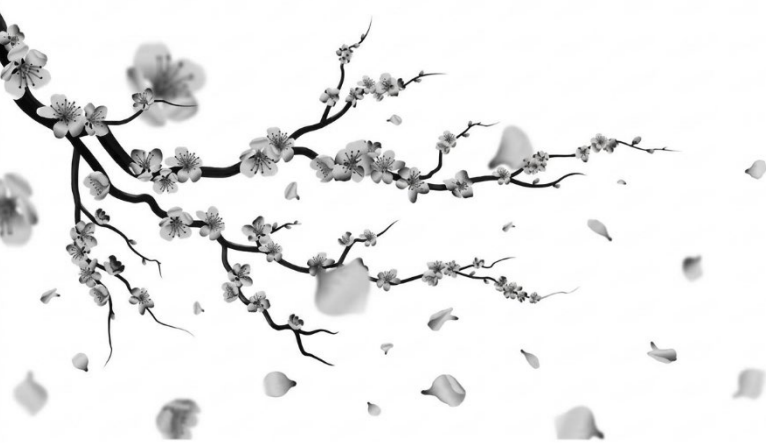
Your soul says: *breathe, expand, live*.

Every time you choose the second, you stand taller, freer.

Maybe the goal of life isn't to be endlessly responsible, endlessly pleasing, endlessly perfect. Maybe it's to be unapologetically yourself, the self that God intended you to be, before the world drowned you in rules. Truffle, sprawled across the sofa in his favourite "I-own-this-place" pose, would put it far more simply:

"Forget *should*. Want a treat? Ask. Want a nap? Sleep. Want love? Wag your tail and demand belly rubs. Life's too short to do otherwise."

And honestly? He was right.



CHAPTER 15

NOISE VS. VOICE

The world is a noisy place. If you don't believe me, just try eating your breakfast in peace!

Picture this: I'm at the dining table with a steaming cup of chai, one cautious eye on the toast that's dangerously close to burning. The TV blares in the background with a news anchor announcing yet another 'Breaking News' story (honestly, when do they not *break*?). My phone buzzes every ten seconds—half the pings are from The Bhatnagar family WhatsApp group, where my cousin is forwarding 'miracle cures' for everything from hair loss to Wi-Fi problems. Meanwhile, the neighbour's car alarm decides to join in the chorus, as though auditioning for Indian Idol!

And smack in the middle of this orchestra of chaos? *Truffle*. My Labrador sage. Sprawled on the cool floor, eyes half closed, gently snoring—blissfully unimpressed.

I remember one time, looking at him and muttering, "How can you sleep through this racket?"

Pramila, rolling her eyes while buttering toast, replied, "Maybe he's the smart one. He knows none of this matters."

Pracchi, scrolling through Instagram reels, added, “Papa, at least Truffle doesn’t compare himself to huskies on Instagram. If he did, he’d be in therapy by now.”

And there it was—the truth in her joke. We humans get swallowed by the cacophony of noise that seeps through our days (and at times, nights, too). Truffle? He ignores it. He listens only to what matters: His own voice... or, more accurately, the sound of the biscuit jar opening.

Let’s be honest. Noise has professional agents working overtime.

One evening, when my phone buzzed for the 100th time, I groaned.

“Another forward?” I muttered.

Pramila didn’t look up. “Is it the one about turmeric water again? Or Bill Gates controlling 5G?”

Pracchi chimed in, laughing, “Papa, half your stress is from reading things you didn’t even ask to know!”

Meanwhile, Truffle yawned, stretched, and nudged me with his paw. Translation: *Ignore the nonsense, Dad. Biscuit jar, remember?*

Amidst this chaos, something softer tries to get your attention. Not the voice you use in meetings, or even, the polite one for dinner with in-laws. I mean the inner voice, the one that speaks in *nudges*, not noise.

The one that says:

- “This friendship is over, even if nothing dramatic happened.”
- “This job looks safe, but your soul is shrinking.”
- “That holiday felt like home. Pay attention.”
- “You just said yes, but your stomach is twisting. Listen to that.”

The problem is: whispers rarely compete with megaphones...

Once, after a long day, I sat down beside Truffle, my head buzzing with office politics, news headlines, and family obligations. He rested his chin on my knee, and his eyes exuded the most beatific sense of calm. No advice, no noise. Just presence.

And suddenly, I heard something not from him, but *within*. A small whisper: *Slow down. Breathe. You’re okay.*

Clarity doesn't shout. It just... knows.

Truffle was a genius in this department. When the newsreader droned on ceaselessly about stock markets, he snored even louder. When my phone pinged endlessly, he didn't budge. But if I whispered 'walk' from three rooms away, he came galloping like a marathon champion!

Noise? Ignored.

Voice? Trusted instantly.

And then there was the time when I tried switching his brand of kibble. The packet screamed, "*New! Improved! Vet-approved!*" He sniffed it once, gave me a look that said, "*Do I look like a fool?*" and walked away.

That was his inner compass at work. Just imagine if we humans trusted our souls like that, unimpressed by packaging, loyal only to truth. Here's the real danger: constant noise doesn't just distract you; it *programs* you. Slowly, without noticing, you start wanting things you never erstwhile wanted.

- You dream of a bigger house because everyone else seems to have one.
- You chase a 'respectable' career path even if your heart isn't in it.
- You spend weekends doing what's 'trending' instead of what nourishes you.

It's like static drowning out your favourite song—you forget what the melody even sounded like.

One morning, as I scrolled through the news over my customary, piping hot cup of chai, Truffle sighed dramatically. Pramila chuckled, "Even *he* knows you're wasting time. Why don't you try listening to him for a change?"

I shut the phone. Truffle happily wagged his tail. And you know what? The chai tasted better without the background chatter (the one that represented the world falling apart) every five minutes.

I remember once, when as a family, we tried a 'noise detox'.

Phase 1: No phones at breakfast.

“Papa, what will you do without checking forwards about turmeric?”
Pracchi teased.

“Beta, you’ll survive one meal without reels,” I shot back.

Truffle barked once, as though approving the idea.

Phase 2: No TV during dinner.

The silence was awkward at first. Forks clinked. Then, slowly, conversation trickled in. Stories, jokes, even arguments—but real ones, mind you not those pertaining to the economy or cricket scores.

Pramila said softly, “Strange. The food tastes better without Arnab shouting in the background.”

Phase 3: Walks without earphones.

This one was hardest for me. No podcasts? No news updates? Just *walking*?

However, Truffle showed the way. Nose to the ground, ears alert, tail wagging—he tuned into every leaf, breeze, and sound. I followed, at first reluctantly, then with wonder. Suddenly, I heard the rustle of bougainvillea, the distant laughter of children, even my own breathing. It felt like tuning into a forgotten radio channel.

Noise had been drowning it all out...

Let’s get this clear: I’m not saying abandon modern life and become a monk. For that matter, Truffle certainly wasn’t one—he loved his snacks, naps, and occasionally, stealing socks.

What I *am* saying is: you can choose your *tuning*.

Here are some small shifts that worked for me (and didn’t require moving to the Himalayas):

1. Morning Silence – No phone for the first hour after waking. Let your own thoughts greet you before the world barges in.
2. Breath Breaks – Before replying to any ‘urgent’ WhatsApp forward, three slow breaths. 90% of them don’t deserve a reply anyway.

3. Single-Tasking – One thing at a time. Cook while cooking. Eat while eating. Walk while walking (Not scroll while walking, nearly bumping into lampposts several times over).
4. Journaling – Scribble your thoughts. Often, your truth sneaks into the space between messy lines.
5. Nature Time – Even 15 minutes spent outdoors without earphones, resets your frequency.

Truffle's favourite? Number 5, of course. For him, every patch of grass was breaking news—without anchors screaming about it.

Hearing your voice is one thing. *Trusting* it is another.

Sometimes it tells you to quit a job without a backup. Sometimes it whispers, “Stay single” when everyone else is married. Sometimes it says, “Rest,” while the world screams, “Hustle!”

It doesn't always make logical sense, but it's consistent.

Noise will always exist, in the guise of TV anchors, forwards, alarms, and even, pesky neighbours. You can't silence them all. However, you can certainly stop mistaking them for 'truth'.

Truffle never mistook static for music. He tuned straight to the heart of what mattered: love, presence, biscuits. Maybe that's all life asks of us too! So, the next time the world screams, be certain to pause. Take a deep breath and ask: Am I listening to noise—or to my voice?

Truffle, tail wagging in memory, would agree: the biscuit jar never lies.

At home, the theme of 'noise versus voice' often turned into comic banter.

One evening, while I was scrolling furiously through WhatsApp forwards, muttering darkly about global conspiracies, Pramila walked in, shook her head, and said,

“Raajeev, that's not your inner voice speaking. That's Sharma uncle from Gurgaon.”

Pracchi, not to be outdone, chimed in:

“Papa, you always say listen to your inner voice, but yesterday your inner voice told you that Mom had made kheer. It was actually daal.”

Even Rishebh, calling from overseas, laughed as he joked, “Dad, your so-called inner voice also made you invest in that kitchen gadget we never used. Trust me, Truffle’s instincts were far sharper!”

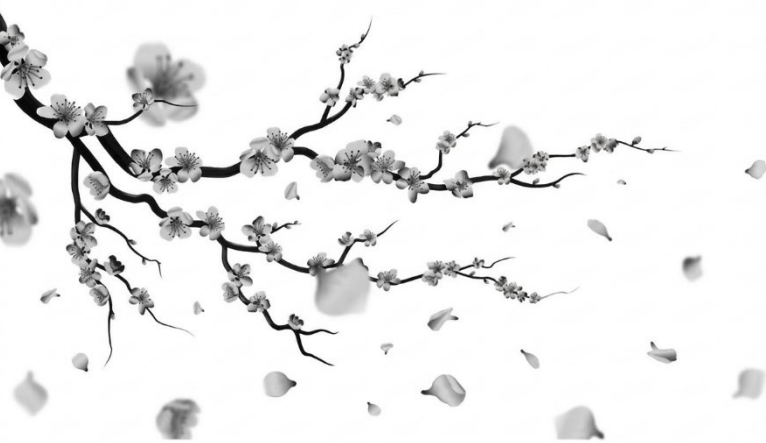
They weren’t wrong. My ‘voice’ often got drowned by the ‘noise’ of my own wishful thinking, hunger pangs, or misplaced optimism. And each time, Truffle would sit there, wagging his tail, the silent referee who seemed to say:

“Humans overcomplicate things. If the voice says *biscuit*, it *means biscuit*. Full stop.”

That, right there, was the perfect lesson. Ignore the fireworks of noise. Stay tuned to the biscuit jar of truth. Noise is everywhere and it always will be. The trick is not to fight it, but rather, to stop confusing it for truth.

Noise says: *Chase, compare, perform*. Voice says: *Trust, align, live*. And when I forget, I remember Truffle: unfazed by the loudest cracker, but fully alive to the softest crinkle of a biscuit packet. *That’s* the kind of listening I want to master. Not to every voice outside, but to the one *inside*, the one that *always knows*.

Or, as Truffle might have put it (if he could talk between yawns, that is: “Noise is just the doorbell. Voice is the biscuit jar. Choose wisely.”



CHAPTER 16

LIFE WITHOUT THE MASK

We humans are brilliant actors. Shakespeare once famously said, “*All the world’s a stage*,” and we’ve taken that memo rather too seriously! From the moment we totter into nursery school, we start collecting costumes — smiles, polite nods, rehearsed answers until one day, when we look into the mirror and can’t quite recall what our real face looks like without them.

The tragedy? The mask that once protected us, has, over the years, turned into a prison of sorts.

The comedy? Dogs like Truffle refuse to play along!

Masks are for masquerades, not for living.

Mind you, we’re not born with masks. As children, our souls are raw, curious, and delightfully unedited. We dance without rhythm, laugh without self-consciousness, and cry without apology. Then come the instructions:

- “Don’t cry too loudly, you’ll upset the guests.”
- “Don’t laugh like that, it’s not ladylike.”
- “Don’t question elders, it’s rude.”
- “Don’t dream too big, be practical.”

And so, we begin crafting masks — *The Good Child, The Responsible Adult, The Ambitious Employee, The Life of the Party*. We tailor them to fit expectations. At first, they help us survive. But slowly, *they* start wearing *us*.

Truffle, thankfully, never got the memo. If he wanted to bark, he barked at the postman, the pigeons, the passing wind. If he wanted to nap, he sprawled right across the sofa, as though rent were due in affection. His honesty was disarming. And enviable, too.

One evening, over dinner, Pramila pointed her fork at me and said, “You know, Raajeev, for someone who writes about authenticity, you do a fine job pretending to love karela.”

I tried to look dignified. “That’s called diplomacy, my dear.”

“Diplomacy,” she said, “is just a respectable mask.”

Before I could respond, Pracchi chimed in. “Papa, you even said ‘delicious’, while secretly sliding pieces of that karela to Truffle. That’s *performance art!*”

Truffle wagged his tail in agreement, the little traitor as if confirming that he’d been the unwilling accomplice in my deception.

The laughter around the table reminded me that unmasking isn’t some spiritual ordeal. Sometimes, it’s as simple as admitting you hate bitter gourd.

A few nights later, my son called from Vancouver. “Dad,” he said, “I read your last chapter draft — deep stuff. But when was the last time you were real with *yourself?*”

“Excuse me?” I said, mildly offended.

“You always sound calm, composed, Zen. It’s nice, but a tad suspicious. You could lose your temper once in a while — it’ll make you more relatable.”

I laughed. “You mean, like you losing your patience when your food delivery is late?”

“Exactly,” he said, cheerfully. “*Authenticity*, Dad!”

The irony was unforgettable. The son teaching the father how to drop pretence. But he was right; even calm can become a mask, if you wear it to hide frustration.

Pretence is exhausting. The polite laughter at jokes you don't find funny. The "I'm fine" when you're clearly not. The agreeable nods in meetings when every cell in your body wants to say, "This is nonsense."

It's not the noise of the world that drains us; it's the *performance*. The constant editing of ourselves to fit the script *someone else* wrote.

Your body always knows. Tight shoulders, shallow breathing, unexplained fatigue — these are the body's protest letters. Mine used to arrive regularly, until I learned to recognise them for what they truly were: Signs that I was living rehearsed lines.

Truffle never rehearsed. If he liked you, he showed it by planting himself on your foot. If he didn't, he turned his back with royal indifference. There was no middle ground, no polite *wag of the tail* for social obligation.

It was both admirable and, occasionally, mortifying.

Once, a distant relative came visiting, the kind who greets you with exaggerated affection, but whose energy feels like a tax audit! Truffle took one look, yawned, and walked out of the room.

"Does he not like me?" the relative asked, slightly hurt. Pramila smiled sweetly. "He's just very intuitive."

Translation: Truffle had no time for emotional pretence.

We fear rejection more than we crave truth. The mask buys us safety — or at least, the *illusion* of it.

We wear 'The Dutiful One' to please family.

'The Perfect Professional' to impress bosses.

'The Easy-Going Friend' to avoid conflict.

'The Calm Parent' so our children don't see our panic.

But here's the paradox: safety bought with self-betrayal, is never safe. It's a deal with fine print that says, "*You may keep peace, but you'll lose yourself in instalments.*"

It's as though one might be making a deal with the devil: They get what they want, only to realize (too late) the hefty price they have paid for the same.

Truffle, in contrast, had a one-line philosophy: *What you see is what you get.*

The office mask is perhaps the heaviest of all. I remember sitting through endless meetings where everyone nodded like they were dashboard toys in a moving car. Even when the boss said something absurd, there was a collective murmur of "Excellent idea, sir!"

Truffle, if he had been there, would've barked mid-presentation, bringing much-needed honesty to the proceedings.

At home, the 'digital mask' takes over. We post smiling photos while secretly wishing we were in bed. We respond to family WhatsApp groups with "😂😂" while muttering under our breath.

One evening, I accidentally replied "Wonderful news!" to a message about someone's back pain. Pramila looked horrified.

"You really should read before reacting," she said.

I sighed. "Automatic politeness, dear. My reflexes are on autopilot."

Truffle tilted his head as though to say, "You see what happens when you trade instinct for emojis?"

One day, I decided to test life without a mask. Small steps.

First, I said *no* to an invitation I didn't want. My finger hovered over 'Send' for a full minute before I hit it. And you know what? The world did not implode!

Next, I told a colleague, "I don't know." He blinked in shock, as though I'd confessed to treason. But strangely, it opened space for *real* collaboration.

And then one night, instead of pretending to be 'fine,' I told Pramila I felt anxious for no reason. She simply placed her hand on mine and said, "Then let's not fix it. Let's just sit with it."

That small honesty broke something open. The quiet that followed wasn't awkward. It was *healing*.

Truffle watched from the corner, yawning approvingly — the Buddha in a fur coat.

One Sunday morning, over masala chai, Pramila announced, "I have an idea. No masks allowed at home for a whole week."

Pracchi's eyes widened. "You mean, no pretending we like your experiments in 'healthy cooking'?"

"Exactly," said Pramila with mock menace.

Rishebh, on a video call, joined in. "So, Papa can't pretend he's patient with slow Wi-Fi either?"

"Now, *that's* unrealistic," I said, grinning.

The week turned out to be hilarious.

By day two, the house seemed as though it were straight out of a sitcom.

- Pracchi: "Mummy, this quinoa salad tastes like sadness."
- Pramila: "Honesty noted. Dinner will be rajma chawal."
- Me: "I love this no-mask rule!"
- Truffle: *Woof* (Translation: "Finally! Sanity!")

Interestingly, something had shifted. The humour made truth easier. The air felt lighter. We laughed more, argued less, and somehow, grew closer. Turns out, the fear of honesty is worse than honesty itself.

Not everyone appreciates unmasking. When you stop pretending, certain relationships lose the 'glue' that keeps them together. Some colleagues distance themselves when you quit 'playing the game.' A few friendships fade into oblivion, when you stop being the perpetual 'listener' or 'entertainer'.

At first, it hurts terribly. But soon, you realise they weren't rejecting *you*; they were attached to your *costume*.

Truffle, of course, never faced this dilemma. He had no 'social circle' to maintain, no networking anxiety. His world was gloriously simple: *family, walks, treats, naps*. And yet, his relationships ran deeper than most

human ones – all because, they were built on the foundation of that highly underrated quality: *Truth!*

One morning, I looked at myself in the mirror after a long walk with Truffle. I noticed lines, weariness, and something else — *relief*.

It struck me then: We spend so long curating how we appear to others, that we forget to *appear to ourselves*.

So, I asked the mirror softly, “Who are you beneath the roles?”

A husband. A father. A friend. A writer. Yes. But also, just *me*. The one who laughs too loudly at old jokes, forgets where he kept his keys, and occasionally cries while watching reruns of *Anand or Kal Ho Na Ho*.

Truffle wandered in; head tilted. His reflection beside mine seemed effortlessly content. No mask. No confusion. Just presence.

“Teach me that,” I told him. He sneezed in response, as though to say, “Start by dropping the act.”

Unmasking doesn’t always involve deep revelations. Sometimes it’s wonderfully ordinary:

- Laughing without checking if it’s appropriate.
- Saying, “I don’t feel like talking today.”
- Admitting you’re scared not weak, just human.
- Eating the last gulab jamun without the remotest trace of guilt.
- Sending a message that says, “I miss you,” instead of pretending you’re too busy.

These micro-truths slowly dismantle the grand façade. Each one says, “I’m *here*. I’m *real*. Take me *as I am*.”

And as you practice them, something remarkable happens: You start attracting people who prefer reality over performance.

Indeed, Truffle’s honesty bordered on the divine. He never pretended to be brave when frightened by thunder. Rather, he’d jump into my lap, trembling slightly, unashamed of seeking comfort. He never hid joy, either. The sound of my car returning home turned him into a living cyclone of happiness. No inhibition, no composure. Just raw love.

And when he was tired, he'd retreat to his corner quietly, teaching me that even withdrawal can be authentic if done with self-awareness.

One could argue that dogs are incapable of pretence but maybe it's the other way around: they're too evolved to bother with it!

The more I practiced honesty, the simpler life became. I no longer needed elaborate excuses to avoid commitments. "No" became a complete sentence. "Yes" became sacred.

I stopped wasting energy over trying to guess what others expected. Instead, I started asking, "What *feels true*?" And in that simplicity, joy returned.

Pramila was the first to notice it. "You're lighter," she said one evening. I smiled. "Maybe I finally took off the metaphorical sweater."

Truffle looked up, tail wagging ferociously, as though saying, "Told you so."

That same winter, we took a short family trip to the hills. The mornings were crisp, the mist hung low, and Truffle, predictably, refused his sweater yet again.

"Let him be," Pramila sighed. "If he gets a cold, it's his problem."

"His philosophy," I said, "is working for me too."

On the third day, as we sat warming ourselves around a small bonfire, Pracchi asked, "Papa, what does it mean to live without masks, really?"

I thought for a moment. The flames danced, Truffle snored beside us, the stars peeked through thin clouds.

"It means," I said slowly, "you stop trying to be impressive, and start trying to be true. You stop chasing acceptance and start practising self-respect. You let people see *you* not the *filtered* version, but the *real* one."

Rishebh, on a video call, nodded. "So basically, live like Truffle."

Exactly.

We laughed, the fire crackled, and in that easy laughter was everything that mattered, warmth, truth, belonging.

Living without a mask isn't about stripping away every filter overnight. It's about softening the armour. Letting yourself breathe through the cracks.

Some days, you'll slip back into old habits. You'll smile when you don't mean it, agree to doing something you regret, play safe when your heart covets wildness. That's okay.

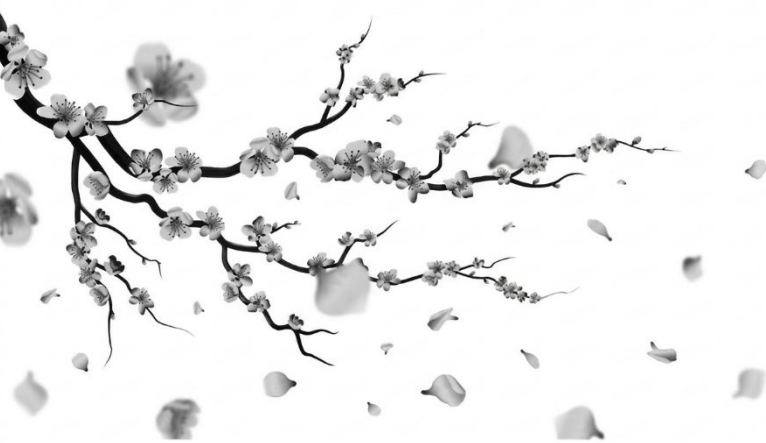
Awareness is progress.

Each time you choose truth over pretence, you reclaim a little more of yourself.

And one day, maybe while brushing your teeth or sitting quietly with your tea, you'll realise: You're no longer *acting*. You're simply *being*.

That's when you'll meet yourself again, familiar, imperfect, and unguarded.

Truffle will be sitting nearby, of course, watching with that knowing look that says, *"Finally, human. You've learned the trick. Be nakedly yourself. It's warmer than you think."*



CHAPTER 17

THE COURAGE TO WALK AWAY

There comes a time - after you've learned to live without the mask - when the world begins to look a little different. Rooms you once loved start to feel smaller. People you once couldn't imagine life without begin to drain you, though they're as kind as ever. The chatter you once found thrilling now sounds faintly exhausting.

And then, somewhere right between your morning chai and your late-night introspection, comes that stubborn whisper in the chest: "Can I stay here and still be myself?"

If the answer is "no," you've just reached one of life's most sacred thresholds: the courage to walk away.

We humans are professional *over-stayers*. Truly, if there were Olympic medals for hanging on too long to jobs, friendships, WhatsApp groups or even, expired jars of pickles, we'd bring home the gold!

We stay:

In jobs that long ago became joyless because "I've put too many years in."

In relationships that barely breathe because "What will people say?"
At dinner parties, nodding politely while the host lectures us on mutual funds, because "it's rude to leave early."

Truffle, on the other hand, had absolutely no confusion in the said matter. Invite him to a gathering, and within ten minutes he's done his social duty: wagged his tail, collected compliments ("Such a good boy!"), and sniffed each of the four legs of the dining table for spiritual context.

Once he decides the evening's peaked, he stations himself by the main door, tail tapping like a metronome, waiting for someone sensible to take the hint.

Not one to fake small talk, he never flatters dull company. He simply... *leaves!*

Imagine the time, energy, and therapy bills humanity could save if we all learned that art.

From the time we're small, we're taught that loyalty is noble. And yes, loyalty rooted in love is, indeed, one of life's most beautiful attributes. But the same loyalty when rooted in fear? That's a slow-burning poison.

We're told that staying is strength, sticking it out admirable, quitting weak. However, staying when your soul is quietly screaming *no* isn't loyalty, it's self-betrayal with better PR!

Truffle was loyal, fiercely so. But even his loyalty has boundaries. If dinner was late, love doesn't stop him from barking. If the toy disappears, affection doesn't stop him from pressing his nose into the sofa until justice is served. He loves me deeply but he also loves his stomach. The lesson? Love that silences your needs isn't love. It's martyrdom in disguise.

The older you grow, the more you realize that life is too short to be doing the things you don't want to. Your circle gets smaller, and you find joy in things that you would have earlier passed on, in search of something 'bigger and better'.

Humans adore the fantasy of the 'perfect' moment to leave.

We say:

- "Once I'm financially stable, *then* I'll quit."
- "Once everyone understands, *then* I'll go."
- "Once Mercury exits retrograde..."

Spoiler: the perfect moment never arrives.

Walking away is messy. People misunderstand. Your mind wobbles. The heart second-guesses. But there's one truth sharper than all the others:

Every extra day spent in a space that demands your mask, is a day spent abandoning yourself.

And, betrayal of one's self is the costliest betrayal of all.

The body is wise. It whispers before the mind can speak.

That tightness in the chest before a meeting? A *clue*.

The heaviness that hits before seeing certain people? A *sign*.

That restless fatigue that follows forced smiles? A message.

Ignore these whispers, and they grow louder until one day, the body simply refuses to cooperate.

Truffle doesn't need therapy to decode such things. If you rub his fur the wrong way, he simply gets up and walks off. No guilt. No explanation. No need to 'make it work.' He trusts his body implicitly.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we humans could reclaim even a fraction of that instinct? An instinct, mind you, that has been buried deep down within ourselves for far too long.

Last December, Pramila and I were invited to one of those 'polished' parties where everyone talks about property rates, gym memberships, and 'the market.'

The food was nice. The conversation, *beige*!

Twenty-seven minutes in, I peered down and saw Truffle sitting by the door, eyes pleading, tail still. He didn't bark or whine. He simply *stared*, the kind of stare that says, "Father, we are above all this nonsense."

I whispered to Pramila, "Truffle's ready to go."

She gave me a knowing smile. "Are you sure it's him, not you?"

By minute twenty-nine, we were both ready. We left with polite smiles, citing Truffle's imaginary tummy troubles. The moment the front door shut behind us, he burst into a triumphant gallop toward the car. I swear his tail wagged in victory all the way home.

Sometimes freedom looks exactly like the road outside a party you didn't want to attend.

Over post-escape chai, the household held its usual evening council.

Pracchi grinned. "Papa, you and Truffle are the same. Neither of you can survive small talk beyond dessert."

Pramila added, "You both start yawning at the same time, too."

"I prefer to think of it as heightened spiritual sensitivity," I protested.

My son, calling from Vancouver, chimed in through video chat. "No, Papa. It's called low boredom tolerance. Genetic, clearly!"

Truffle barked in agreement. I considered that an unfair vote.

In that laughter, however, lay a profound truth:

Walking away with grace isn't rejection. It's self-respect.

Sometimes, the hardest thing to leave isn't pain — it's comfort. I once stayed in a consultancy job years after it had stopped challenging me. Everything was predictable: the coffee machine, the corridors, the same people complaining about the same people. It wasn't joy, but it was familiar.

And familiarity, my friend, is the most seductive jailer of all.

The day I finally walked out. The sky looked bluer. The traffic noise sounded musical. Even the honking seemed celebratory.

The unknown, it turns out, isn't terrifying once you realise the known was slowly killing your spirit.

Truffle's decision-making manual fits on a fridge magnet:

"If the tail doesn't wag, the paws don't stay."

That's it - his entire philosophy of boundaries!

He never required flowcharts or self-help books. He simply trusted *energy*. If it doesn't feel right, he would leave joyfully, unapologetically. Maybe that's why he's always well-rested.

Ah, that first rush after walking away, intoxicating! The lightness, the liberation, the deep breath and then comes the wobble. The late-night

questions. “Did I overreact?” “Was I selfish?” “Maybe I should’ve stayed?”

It’s but natural. Silence feels strange when you’ve lived with noise for years. But soon, that silence begins to resonate with a feeling of peace.

It’s like pruning a tree. At first it looks bare, almost wounded. But then, new shoots appear — fresh, green, alive.

That’s you, post-walk-away: tender, vulnerable, but gloriously free.

When we finally leave something, it’s tempting to drag the memory around like evidence, proof that we were right, proof they were wrong. Bitterness, on the contrary, is a heavy souvenir. Gratitude travels lighter.

Thank the job for teaching *discipline*. Thank the friendship for showing *limits*.

Thank the heartbreak for revealing *capacity*. Then drop the bag and move on.

Truffle, as usual, modeled this with style. If you happened to give him a stale biscuit for the very first time, he’ll forgive you immediately — but he’ll never take snacks from you again until he smells butter.

Boundaries with grace is the perfect combo.

Courage is a muscle built on small repetitions. Start tiny.

- Decline the plan you dread.
- Say “no” without an essay.
- Notice how your shoulders feel when you say “yes” versus “no.”
- Imagine your future five years ahead if nothing changes — does that picture inspire or suffocate?

And my favourite: the Truffle Test. Would Truffle sit through all of this with unbridled enthusiasm? If not, why should you? Walking away often feels like stepping into fog. You can’t see the path, just your feet. The mind whirs with what-ifs. But the instant you move, something inside you clicks — the inner compass flickers back to life. You may not see the destination, but you begin to feel *direction*.

The fog, you realise, wasn't an obstacle. It was a filter, keeping out what no longer belonged.

One evening at the park, I was sitting on a bench, lost in thought. A man nearby was forcing his dog to play fetch, even though the poor creature clearly wasn't interested. Truffle watched, then turned to me with the most judgmental expression a dog can manage. He sauntered off, found a shady tree, and flopped down with regal indifference.

Message received: "Play should never feel like duty."

Walking away, even from fun, is sacred when the joy's gone.

Every tradition speaks of this moment of departure.

Moses left Egypt.

Buddha left the palace.

Arjuna dropped his bow before picking it up anew.

Walking away is not rebellion; it's *realignment*. It's the sacred migration from noise to truth, from comfort to calling. And yes, sometimes the 'desert' you walk into feels lonely. But deserts are the very place we rediscover thirst and through thirst, grace.

One Sunday, feeling extra-philosophical, I proposed: "Let's each choose one thing this week to walk away from."

Pracchi immediately declared she'd stop doom-scrolling at midnight. Pramila decided to walk away from multitasking (this lasted till lunchtime).

Rishebh, from Vancouver, vowed to stop apologising for everything ("Sorry," he added instantly).

They looked at me.

"I'm walking away from karela forever," I announced.

Truffle barked, his tail wagging as though to show solidarity for all anti-bitter movements.

By dinner, the experiment was in full swing. Pracchi caught herself about to check her phone mid-conversation. Pramila tried doing one task at a time and declared, "This feels illegal." We laughed until our sides hurt.

Even small walk-aways bring lightness. Sometimes, we're not the ones walking away. Sometimes *others* walk away from us. It stings. You question your worth, replay every word, wonder what you did wrong. But if you look closely, their departure often clears space for someone or something *else* that's meant to arrive.

Not all exits are losses. Some are blessings disguised as silence.

Even Truffle has faced rejection — once, by a cat he tried to befriend. He took the hiss with grace, sighed dramatically, and moved on to nap under my chair, a master-class in detachment, indeed.

Once you begin saying no to the wrong things, life starts saying yes to the right ones. Your laughter changes. Sleep deepens. Even the way the light falls through your window, feels softer. Freedom is not the absence of responsibility. It's the presence of authenticity. And yes, people will talk. They always do. But better to be gossiped about for living honestly, than applauded for pretending well.

Sometimes you simply can't walk away as of yet. Maybe the mortgage needs paying, or perhaps, the family depends on the very stability you are trying to escape from. In times like these, begin internally. Stop feeding what drains you. Withdraw your emotional energy quietly. Nurture your escape plan in your journal, not your gossip group.

Freedom doesn't merely imply the moving of one's feet. Truffle understands this, too. When visitors he disliked overstayed, he would growl and make his way to another room, he simply retreats to his corner, chin on paws, eyes closed. *Spiritual disengagement in progress.*

Before courage comes compassion.

You stayed:

Because you hoped things would change.

Because you didn't know how to leave.

Because loyalty, fear, and love wore the same mask.

Forgive yourself. Every over stay was a classroom. Now you graduate with clarity.

Truffle doesn't dwell on yesterday's misjudged nap spot. He simply finds a sunnier patch today.

- The silence afterward doesn't ache; it exhales.
- You stop rehearsing imaginary arguments.
- Music sounds like music again.
- Your shoulders drop.
- You catch yourself smiling, unprompted.

That's your soul whispering, "Thanks for returning."

One evening, I was writing this very chapter when Pramila peeked in. "Deep thoughts again?"

"Profound," I said. "On walking away."

She smirked. "Just don't walk away from dinner."

I grinned. "Tempting, but this one's worth staying for."

Truffle was already sitting by the dining table, tail sweeping the floor like an enthusiastic janitor.

Some commitments, it seems, are divine.

When you finally master the art of walking away, you discover five quiet gifts waiting on the other side:

1. Lightness — You no longer drag what isn't yours.
2. Integrity — You trust yourself again.
3. Clarity — Decisions simplify, noise fades.
4. Depth — Fewer relationships, but richer ones.
5. Freedom — The joy of unshackled being.

These aren't momentous displays of fireworks, no. They're gentle recognitions that whisper, "You made the right turn."

If Truffle could deliver a TED Talk to humanity, he'd probably say: "Listen, humans.

If the room feels wrong, leave.

If the company doesn't make your tail wag, trot away.

If the biscuit's stale, don't eat it out of politeness.

Life's too short to sit nicely in uncomfortable spaces.

Wag where your soul wants to wag."

And then, without applause or the requisite Q&A, he'd curl into the shape of a donut and fall asleep, just the sound of deep, guilt-free rest.

Walking away isn't giving up. It's refusing to give yourself away.

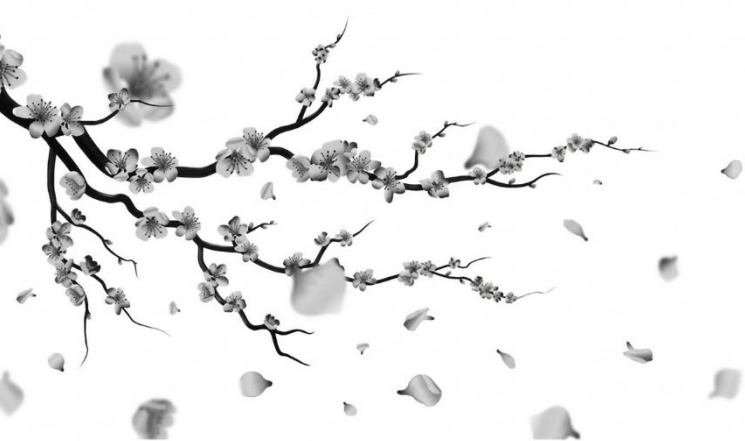
Each time you exit a false space, you reclaim a piece of your spirit. At first, it feels like loss.

Soon, it feels like *flight!* After all, you were never meant to live chained to what shrinks you. You were meant to walk, to wander, to soar.

And sometimes, all it takes to embark upon that process of soaring, is to do what Truffle did the best:

Stand quietly by the door, look in the direction of freedom, and whisper to your own heart —

“Enough. It's time.”



CHAPTER 18

BUILDING A LIFE THAT FITS THE SOUL

There comes a moment in your life when you are met with a sacred pause.

After you've shed the masks and learned to walk away from what doesn't serve you, you suddenly find yourself in a strange no-man's-land. It's quiet. Disorienting. Both empty and full. Empty of noise, roles, and expectations; ripe with possibility, like the moment before dawn when the world holds its breath.

It's the space between the life you were told to live, and the one your soul has been whispering about all along.

Most people panic when they reach this point in their lives. The mind starts fidgeting: "What now? What's next? Should I enrol in something? Update my LinkedIn profile? Learn pottery?"

However, the soul doesn't rush. It isn't interested in LinkedIn announcements or five-year plans. Rather, it speaks in whispers, not in deadlines. It asks only one thing:

"Will you have the courage to build a life that *fits*?"

The in-between is unnerving because it lacks background applause. No one congratulates you for sitting still.

When you were walking away, at least there was drama — decisions, exits, new beginnings. But now? Nothing but silence and uncertainty. No grand soundtrack to help us ride through this life as though we might be characters straight out of a Netflix series.

One evening, Pramila found me sitting in the veranda, staring at the bougainvillea that had suddenly decided to bloom after ignoring us all winter.

“What’s this look on your face?” she asked.

“Existential,” I said solemnly.

“Existential or just hungry?” she asked, holding a plate of pakoras in front of me.

She knows me too well. Sometimes spiritual hunger and literal hunger are separated by a single samosa!

The thing is, however, she wasn’t entirely wrong — I *was* hungry, just not for food. I was hungry for direction, for rhythm, for the sense of belonging that comes after chaos.

The ‘pause’ after ‘un-becoming’ can feel like standing in an empty house after you’ve moved out all the furniture. There’s echo. There’s dust. But there’s also space. And space, if you let it in, is nothing but *grace*.

Truffle, as always, was my teacher in this strange, silent phase.

He never worried about what to ‘become.’ He never looked at Labradors on Instagram and thought, “Hmm, maybe I should reinvent myself. Poodle is trending this season.”

He just *was*.

He lived with the confidence of someone who knew his place in the universe — preferably the exact spot of sunlight on the living room floor.

His days were not about achievement; they were about *alignment*. He didn’t chase goals. He chased *joy*. He didn’t plan outcomes. He responded to *life*.

The conundrum about constantly trying to ‘become something we’re not’, lies in the very phrase itself. You will always want to be what you’re not, and hence, will never be satisfied by any given outcome!

Every time I’d look at Truffle, snoring softly, head tilted to one side like an enlightened monk mid-meditation, I’d think: Perhaps this is what the sages meant by ‘being in harmony with the self.’

The irony? It takes a lifetime of human effort to reach what a dog does naturally before breakfast!

When you start building a new life, the temptation is to rush.

“Quick, replace the old!”

The soul, however, is patient, maddeningly patient. It asks you to lay your foundation slowly.

These foundations aren’t made of ambition. They’re made of *truth*.

Truffle’s foundations are simpler:

A full meal, a soft bed, and an audience for his drama.

He guards these fiercely. Miss one, and you’ll face the kind of passive-aggressive sigh that could shame an Oscar-winning actor!

Maybe we should all be a little more like that — fiercely loyal to what truly nourishes us, unwilling to compromise the essentials.

When you tear down an old structure, the ego panics. It wants quick replacement: new job, new project, new identity — anything to fill the void.

But the soul knows better. The soul prefers slow cooking to fast food.

Rushing to rebuild leads to what I call ‘cosmetic change’: different paint, same walls.

True change is *architectural*. It starts deep, unseen, and unhurried.

I once asked Pracchi, “How do you know if something you’re doing fits your soul?”

She said, “Papa, when I finish it and don’t feel like checking my phone immediately.” A simple but devastatingly accurate litmus test, indeed! The soul craves resonance, not validation.

Somewhere along the way, we decided joy was *indulgent* like dessert after a responsible meal. Joy is not a luxury, though; it's sacred navigation.

Joy says: "This is where you belong."

Not comfort. Not approval. Joy.

When Truffle found joy, he didn't question it. Whether it was a squeaky toy or a patch of mud, his whole being shouted, "YES."

He didn't analyse it. He didn't consult ten opinions. He followed it. Completely.

Imagine if we all did that, following our joy as faithfully as dogs follow smells.

You'd quit that soul-sucking project. You'd dance more. You'd write that book. You'd finally forgive yourself.

And maybe just maybe you'd wag your (metaphorical) tail a little more!

Here's the hard truth: once you start building a life that fits your soul, not everyone will fit in it.

Some people belong to your old chapters. Others are waiting in new ones. A few might straddle both. When your energy shifts, your ecosystem rearranges itself. It's not rejection; it's recalibration. Truffle use to get this instinctively. He was polite to every dog, but selective about friends.

Some are playmates for a day. Some are lifelong sniffing buddies. No drama. No guilt. Just alignment.

We humans complicate matters needlessly. We hold on out of nostalgia — like keeping jeans that stopped fitting ten years ago "just in case."

Let go of people gracefully. Thank them for the lesson. Move forward with love.

As Rumi said:

"Be like a tree and let the dead leaves drop."

Even folding laundry with presence is a kind of prayer. Cooking with love is worship.

Scratching Truffle's ears with awareness, was meditation in motion.
We overestimate enlightenment and underestimate laundry.

One evening over dinner, Pramila suggested, "Maybe we should do a little audit — to see if our life actually *fits*."

I raised an eyebrow. "Audit? That sounds dangerously close to work."
She laughed. "Not the tax kind. The soul kind."

So, the next day, the four of us made lists.

Pracchi's was titled "*Things That Make Me Feel Alive*."

Rishebh, calling from Vancouver, told us his "*What Keeps Me Grounded (Besides Coffee)*."

Mine read "*How to Stop Pretending to Like Boring Conversations*."

Truffle, of course, had his own:

1. Walks.
2. Treats.
3. Sunlight on fur.
4. Not being left out of lists.

We read them aloud and laughed till our sides hurt. It felt silly, but also sacred. We were acknowledging what mattered. Naming it. And claiming it.

Building a life that fits begins exactly there in honest lists and shared laughter.

Even after you've rebuilt, the old masks linger nearby, whispering.

They wait for your tired days, your lonely evenings. They say, "Come back. Pretend again. It was easier then."

It's true, pretending *is* easier. For a while. But it costs your peace. When I feel that pull, I remember Truffle's rule for selective hearing.

He could sleep through thunderstorms, traffic, and my lectures on philosophy but the faintest sound of a biscuit wrapper, and he was instantly alert.

The soul is like that too.

Ignore the noise. Respond only to what nourishes.

The world keeps shouting, “More!”

More achievements, more possessions, more followers.

Truffle never worried about status. He cared about snacks. His joy wasn’t measured in accumulation but rather, in sufficiency.

He didn’t need ten toys — just one favourite ball.

He didn’t need applause — just our presence.

Imagine how different life would feel if we too stopped chasing ‘more’ and started honouring ‘enough.’

Sometimes, when you start rebuilding, the life you create seems smaller than the one you left.

There’s less noise. Fewer people. Simpler days.

At first, it feels like loss. But slowly, you realise: this smaller life has space for *you*.

And then the realization hits. It’s not smaller. It’s *sharper*. Not quieter. Just *truer*.

Pramila once said, “It’s funny, Raaj. Our life is simpler now — but somehow, it feels richer.”

She’s right. Simplicity isn’t poverty. It’s precision. It’s knowing what to keep and what to bless and release.

When you live a life that fits, joy stops being fleeting. It becomes baseline.

It’s not fireworks, but rather, a steady flame. Like the comfort of your own bed after travel.

Or perhaps the warmth of Truffle, curling by your feet at the end of the day, like that first sip of tea at dawn.

This is the quiet joy of *alignment* where nothing spectacular happens, and yet, everything feels right.

People will question you.

They’ll say, “Why so quiet lately?”

Or, “You’ve changed.”

Or, “Are you sure this simplicity thing isn’t a phase?”

You'll smile and say, "Maybe it is. But it's the happiest phase I've ever had."

Not everyone will understand your peace because they're still addicted to chaos.

That's okay. Keep building anyway.

That's it. The entire secret to enlightenment, written entirely in pawprints!

A life that fits isn't built in a day. It's shaped in conversations, prayers, walks, and ordinary Tuesdays. It's not about perfection. It's about *rhythm*. You'll falter. You'll slip back. You'll forget. But each time you return to silence, to gratitude, to your truth and you strengthen the foundation. It's like tuning an instrument daily. The music depends on the 'quiet adjustments.

Here's the paradox: when you stop living to please others, you actually start loving them more. Because love given freely, not from obligation, regains its purity. When you no longer need to perform, affection becomes authentic. You stop loving for approval, start loving for joy.

Truffle's love was always like that, unconditional yet discerning. He gave it fully but never forced it.

Love, like life, fits best when it *breathes*. In a life that fits, even the ordinary becomes sacred. Morning tea. Folding laundry. Watching rain fall. Each moment shimmers quietly when seen through the lens of *presence*.

It's what Brother Lawrence called "*The practice of the presence of God*." Truffle called it "Thursday."

Because for him, holiness was not something to be found merely temples. It lay embedded in naps, walks, meals, and love. He made the ordinary divine by simply being *fully in it*.

One evening, as we sat together watching an old movie, Pracchi turned to me and said,

"Papa, this version of you... you're calmer. Happier. Even your WhatsApp replies have fewer exclamation marks."

Pramila added, “Yes, and you’ve stopped pretending to enjoy every social invitation.”

I laughed. “Truffle taught me that. He walks out of boring parties, unapologetically.”

Rishebh’s voice echoed from the phone: “So, basically, Papa, you’re turning into Truffle.”

Honestly? I couldn’t think of a greater compliment. A life that fits doesn’t need grandeur. It just needs grace.

Enough love to stay soft.
Enough work to stay humble.
Enough rest to stay whole.

And perhaps, just one loyal companion, who reminds you daily to wag that tail more, worry less, and nap with conviction.

If Truffle could speak like a human, and English at that, too, he’d probably look up from his nap and say:

“Stop trying to live everyone else’s dream, Dad. Stop running in shoes that give you blisters. Find your patch of sunlight. Curl up there. If it fits your soul, it’s home. That’s all you need to know.”

Then he’d stretch, yawn, and fall asleep, the very image of a life perfectly, unapologetically fitted to its soul.

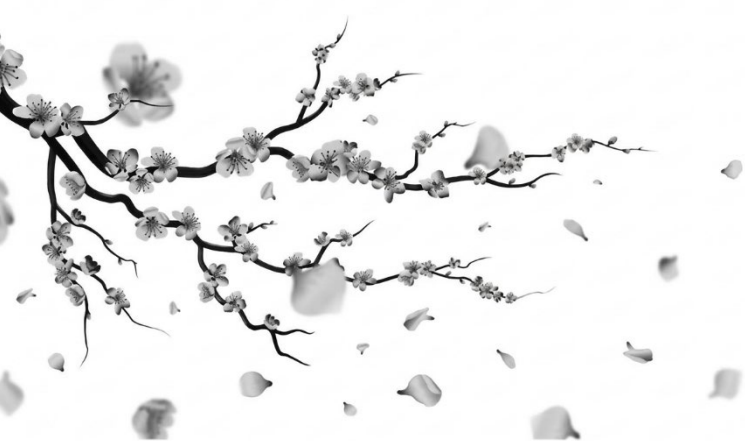
The purpose of ‘un-becoming’ was never emptiness. It was to create space for something truer, a life built with your own hands, your own heart, your own rhythm.

Not a performance. Not a costume. But instead, a sacred garment, woven with truth, stitched with joy, and roomy enough to let love in. When you finally wear it, something extraordinary happens. You stop searching. You start living.

The soul exhales.
And God smiles.

And Truffle — wise, wordless, ever-present — curls beside you in quiet approval.

You’ve finally found your spot.



CHAPTER 19

THE HOMECOMING WITHIN

They say every journey leads somewhere, but the real ones — the ones that change you and lead you home. Not the home with walls, rooms, and furniture, but the one you've carried all along quietly, stubbornly, inside your own chest.

The road winds, the maps blur, you lose your way more than once and then one day, usually when you stop chasing and just sit down, life whispers, "*Welcome back.*"

That whisper - that's home.

If I look back now and I don't mean just physically turning my neck, but really *looking back* I realise I've been on the road home for decades.

From ambition to acceptance. From noise to silence. From wanting to belonging.

In my younger years, 'home' was a destination something to be earned, built, displayed. You worked hard, bought a house, filled it with furniture, and invited the world to see how well you'd done.

But over time, I discovered that you could have the most well-lit drawing room and still sit there in utter darkness. Because home isn't a place, it's a peace, too. That's the difference between having a house and a home, really. A house is made of bricks and mortars; a home, with feelings such

as peace. Peace, I've learned, doesn't arrive with a mortgage cleared or a milestone achieved. It arrives quietly, like Truffle trotting into the room and resting his head on your knees, saying nothing, demanding nothing, just *being there*.

There was a time when our household buzzed as though it were a carnival. Phones ringing, television murmuring, family conversations colliding mid-air - every corner hummed with purpose - or at least, what we *called* purpose back then.

Pramila managed the kitchen like an orchestra conductor, ensuring three meals, three snacks, and occasional 'extras' for surprise guests who more often than not seemed to appear just when the last chapati had disappeared into someone's tummy.

Pracchi buzzed around our home like a bee: between calls, laughter, and her endless playlist of motivational podcasts.

And me? I pretended to be busy while scrolling news headlines that mostly made my blood pressure rise!

Evenings were the best though when all of us gathered together, Truffle included. There was an endless stream of conversations, jokes, debates, and Truffle's tactical interventions whenever he sensed conflict brewing usually by placing his paw gently on the person most likely to explode. He was our unofficial peacemaker, though he demanded belly rubs as payment.

But after Truffle left, the house sounded... different.

Not quieter, just different. The silence wasn't absence. It was plain and simple *awareness*.

You suddenly noticed the sound of your own breathing. The creak of the floorboard. The whisper of the wind through the curtains. That's when I realised that silence isn't empty. It's *full*.

Full of memories. Of meaning, of everything you never had the time to hear before.

It was one of those still evenings, when everything seemed suspended — light, time, even thought, for that matter. As for me? I sat in the

veranda with a cup of tea, staring at the faint orange sky melting into night.

Pramila came out, wiping her hands on her apron. “You’ve been staring at that tree for half an hour. Are you meditating or plotting something?”

“Neither” I said. “Just sitting.”

“That’s suspicious,” she said with a smile. “You only sit like that when you’re writing or worrying.”

She was right. For years, stillness to me had meant *inactivity*. But that evening, it wasn’t so. It was something else — a quiet kind of fullness.

Then she said softly, “You know, this silence doesn’t feel empty anymore. It feels... peaceful.”

It was such a nonchalantly uttered sentence. Yet, it hit me as though it might be a benediction of sorts. Maybe that’s what homecoming feels like when even silence becomes company.

A few weeks later, both kids were home, a rare celestial event worthy of documentation.

Rishebh arrived from Vancouver with a suitcase full of maple syrup, hoodies, and unsolicited advice about how the “Indian internet is prehistoric.”

Pracchi, ever the multi-tasker, had transformed the dining table into her “work-from-home command centre,” complete with laptop, planner, and tea mug that read *‘Manifesting Magic’*.

Within twenty-four hours, the house was alive again - laughter, chatter, the smell of parathas laden with ghee, and, of course, utter chaos!

On the second day, the Wi-Fi died.

Now, you must understand in our home, the Wi-Fi is less a utility and more a family member. Its sudden demise caused panic of biblical proportions.

“Papa, did you pay the bill?” asked Pracchi, as if I were personally responsible for the collapse of global connectivity.

“I did,” I said a tad indignantly. “Yesterday, I think.”

Pramila sighed. “You *think*? That’s very reassuring.”

“Calm down,” said Rishebh. “I’ll fix it.”

Half an hour later, I found all three crouched near the router like doctors around a patient in critical condition.

Truffle would’ve loved that scene — three humans frantically arguing over blinking lights.

After some comic attempts (including blowing on the router as if it were a dying candle), the Wi-Fi finally came roaring back to life. Cheers all around!

And in that simple, silly moment of shared victory, I felt it again, that feeling called *home*. Not because of the restored internet, but because of the laughter that followed.

Sometimes, belonging hides in the most ridiculous moments.

Even after all these months, Truffle’s corner remains sacred. His rug still sits under the window, worn soft with years of loyalty. On some evenings, when the light falls just right, I swear I can still see the outline of his body there — that golden shape curled in quiet assurance.

Once, while I was rearranging the room, I almost moved that rug. Pramila stopped me.

“Leave it,” she said. “He’s still here.” I nodded.

Sometimes, love doesn’t leave footprints but leaves *frequency*. It hums beneath the surface of daily life. I feel it when I pour Truffle’s old bowl of water into the plants. When I hear a bark in the distance and instinctively turn. When I sit down for tea, and a breeze touches my hand the way his paw used to.

That’s when I realise home isn’t only where the living dwell. It’s where love lingers.

Each room in our house is characterized by its own heartbeat.

The kitchen is a space of laughter and spice.

The living room filled with arguments, and reconciliation.

The veranda has the silence that heals.

Truffle’s room is the source of eternal warmth.

When you live long enough in one place, it becomes a mirror of your evolution. You can almost trace your growth through the walls. There's a corner in my study where I wrote the first few chapters of this very book, full of uncertainty, self-doubt, and tea stains. Now, the same space feels different as though the walls themselves exhale peace.

Maybe it's not the walls that have changed. Maybe it's *me*.

It's funny how the simplest beings become our greatest teachers. Truffle taught me presence. Not through sermons, but by being utterly *here* — no past, no future, no pretence. He taught me love that asks for nothing. To pause before reacting. And most importantly, he taught me that joy isn't earned. It's *noticed*.

Humans make spirituality sound complex, fasting, rituals, pilgrimages. But perhaps the simplest act of devotion is to live honestly, love deeply, and nap unapologetically. Truffle did all three perfectly.

Our garden has grown wild over the years. Not manicured, not perfect — but alive.

Every evening, as the sun dips low, the air changes. Birds return, light softens, and even the leaves seem to sigh in gratitude. Pramila waters her plants while humming softly. Pracchi photographs the sky. I sit in my old wicker chair, mug in hand, watching the shadows lengthen.

Sometimes, the wind carries a familiar scent — earthy, warm, comforting. I smile then, knowing full well that Truffle's spirit is part of this garden now.

Homecoming, I think, isn't about return. It's about *recognition*, recognising that everything you longed for was never lost. You just stopped noticing.

Dinner is still the most sacred ritual in our home. Not because of what's on the plate, but because of *who's at the table*. That night, as we sat down, Pramila served the rotis with her trademark precision.

"Papa," said Pracchi between bites, "I hope your next book is laced with fewer sermons and more humour."

"Humour?" I protested. "This *is* humour!"

“Maybe for philosophers,” she teased.

Rishebh grinned through the video call from Vancouver. “You should call your next book *‘The Dog Whispered, and Dad Overheard.’*”

Everyone laughed. Even I couldn’t resist. “Fair point. But remember, wisdom always barks before it speaks.”

Truffle would’ve approved.

After dinner, I stepped out again — to the same verandah, same sky, same silence that once felt unbearable.

And it hit me: *This is it.*

The search, the wandering, the questioning - all of it was never leading me to a destination. It was simply bringing me closer to this *stillness*.

The home I sought in people, in achievements, in travels, it was never ‘out there.’ Rather, it was this feeling of ease in my own skin. The unhurried rhythm of breathing. The quiet knowing that life is enough, and I am, too.

That’s home.

Home now feels less like a noun, more like a verb. It’s not something I have. It’s something I *do*.

It’s in every time I listen without interrupting. In every meal shared without hurry. In every morning that begins with gratitude instead of anxiety. In every memory that returns not to haunt, but to *heal*.

The world outside may stay noisy, unpredictable, and restless. But inside, within this quiet, lived-in heart, there’s a peace that doesn’t shake anymore.

I finally understand what all those saints meant when they said, “Be still and know.”

Stillness isn’t laziness. It’s *intimacy with life*.

Sometimes, when I close my eyes, I see Truffle running along the edge of a calm lake, tail wagging, water shimmering gold in the sunlight. He turns to look back, eyes full of mischief, as if saying, “*You coming or what?*”

I smile. Not yet, my friend. There's still laughter to indulge in, tea to pour, sunsets to watch.

But I'll get there. And when I do, I know he'll be waiting same wag of the tail, same warmth, same wordless welcome.

The thing is: Love never leaves home. It just waits there, patiently, until you remember the way back.

I used to think spiritual awakening was a thunderbolt moment — light bursting through clouds, divine voices, dramatic epiphanies.

Now, I know better.

Awakening is the slow, tender process of coming home to yourself. It's when your outer world and inner world finally shake hands. When you stop *performing* and start *existing*. When you can sit quietly, doing nothing, and feel whole. It's not grand - it's *gentle*. Like the sound of Truffle's old collar jingling in my memory — soft, reassuring, eternal.

I've spent a lifetime chasing purpose, meaning, identity. And now, in the soft twilight of this journey, I realise I was never searching for enlightenment. I was searching for *home*.

And at long last... I've arrived.

The lamp glows softly in the corner. Pramila is reading, glasses slipping down her nose.

Pracchi hums a song in the next room. Rishebh's laughter crackles faintly through the phone speaker. And somewhere, maybe solely in memory, perhaps in spirit — Truffle sighs in contentment.

Outside, the wind moves gently through the trees. Inside, everything feels aligned. And the realization hits me:

Home isn't a place I built.

It's a peace I finally allowed.

Tonight, as I close this chapter, I can almost hear Truffle whisper —or maybe it's my own heart —

“Welcome home, Raajeev.”

AFTERWORD: THE LAST WAG

Every story finds its silence.

Not an ending — just the soft hush after the final note.

The music doesn't stop; it simply changes form.

When I began this book, I thought I was writing about life and its lessons, losses, laughter.

Somewhere along the way, I realised I was writing about *love*. Not just love for people, places or dreams, mind you but instead, the love that stays even when everything else moves on.

Truffle taught me that.

He never spoke a word, yet somehow, he said everything worth saying.

He taught me that home isn't built, it's *felt*.

That silence isn't empty, it's *sacred*.

That joy isn't found, it's *remembered*.

And that love, real love, never says goodbye but it only changes rooms.

Now, when the world gets noisy again, I sometimes hear that familiar rhythm — a faint jingling of a collar, a thump of a tail against the floorboards of memory.

It's enough. It reminds me to *breathe*.

To *listen*. To *live*.

The truth, I've discovered, doesn't roar, it wags its tail!

And maybe that's exactly how I'll remember Truffle, not as one of this book's chapters, but as the quiet heartbeat beneath them all. Every word I wrote, every pause I took, every tear and laugh — somewhere, firmly ensconced in them all was his gentle nudge, his gaze, saying: "*You're doing fine, human. Keep walking.*"

So, if you've read these pages and felt a smile rise, or a tear slip, or a whisper stir inside you, then perhaps, his tail wagged once more.

For love never dies.

It just keeps finding new ways to say hello.

— **Raajeev A. Bhatnagar**

WRITER'S NOTE

When I first sat down to write *Living My Truth*, I wasn't sure what I was really writing: was it to become a memoir, a meditation, or simply a conversation with myself?

What began as scattered notes and reflections slowly wove itself into a journey, not of seeking answers, but of learning to *live the questions*.

Somewhere along the way, life's teachers appeared in unexpected forms. Silence. Family. Loss. Love. But, most importantly, there was that one golden Labrador who taught me more about presence and grace than any book ever could.

Each chapter of this book, then, is a footprint — a moment of arrival after a long wandering. The words you've read are not declarations, but invitations. To pause. To breathe. To remember that what we keep searching for outside — peace, purpose, love — has been quietly waiting within us all along.

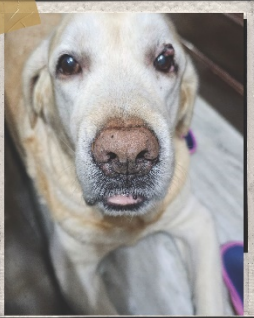
If these pages made you smile, reflect, or sit still for a while... then perhaps they've done their job. All said and done, writing this book has been an act of *homecoming* to my truest self, to the quiet between thoughts, and to the infinite love that continues to flow through the laughter of my family, and the wag of a memory that refuses to fade into oblivion.

Thank you for walking with me.

May you find, in your own way, what I found in mine, that truth is not somewhere you arrive.

It's what happens when you finally stop running.

**With gratitude and gentle joy,
— Raajeev A. Bhatnagar**



**OUR DAYS WERE
BRIGHTER
BECAUSE OF
HIM.
OUR HEARTS
ARE FULLER
BECAUSE OF HIS
LOVE.**

