

Dear
Shiva,
Kindly Stop
Ignoring Me

A Devotee's Guide to Divine Negotiations

A NOVEL

MEENAKSHI
SHASHANK PATWA



BlueRose ONE
Stories Matter

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Dear Shiva, Kindly Stop Ignoring Me

“A devotional story about Faith, Family, and FIFTY crores p.a.”

Prologue

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By the age of forty-eight, Meenakshi Joshi had reached three conclusions about life.

The first was that no plastic container in an Indian kitchen ever died. It merely lost its original lid and entered into a deeply incompatible relationship with another container.

The second was that Mumbai traffic was proof that human beings had collectively offended someone powerful enough to punish them creatively.

The third—and by far the most important—was that Lord Shiva had become impossible to reach.

Not unavailable.

Selective.

She arrived at this conclusion on an oppressively humid Tuesday morning while chopping coriander with the focused irritation of a woman who had already fought three battles before breakfast.

The coriander was limp.

The tomatoes had become expensive again.

The milk had boiled over.

The Wi-Fi had disappeared halfway through paying the electricity bill.

And somewhere in the building, a child had been practicing the same four notes on a keyboard for what felt like three consecutive lifetimes.

Meenakshi looked toward the small framed photograph of Shiva hanging beside the kitchen window.

The frame was old enough that the silver border had faded into an undecided shade of grey. Someone else might have replaced it years ago.

She never had.

To Meenakshi, God was not some distant cosmic force floating beyond human inconvenience. He was:

- a silent roommate
- an unreliable emergency contact
- an emotionally unavailable family member
- an occasional miracle provider

And unfortunately for Lord Shiva, she had absolutely no hesitation complaining directly to Him.

"You've become very difficult to contact," she said, scraping chopped coriander into a steel bowl.

No answer.

Naturally.

She nodded to herself.

"That's what I thought."

Behind her, the pressure cooker released a long, indignant whistle.

At the dining table, her husband Prakash turned the newspaper page with the concentration of a Supreme Court judge examining constitutional amendments. Newspapers, according to him, deserved complete silence. Marriages apparently did not.

Their son, Aditya, was sitting in front of an open mathematics textbook while his phone reflected tiny cricket highlights onto his glasses.

Their daughter, Riya, had been staring at an online shopping page for fifteen minutes with the solemn expression usually reserved for choosing heart surgeons.

Meenakshi watched her daughter click *Add to Cart*.

Another handbag.

She closed her eyes.

"Mahadev," she said without looking at the photograph, "I have only one request."

Prakash murmured from behind the newspaper.

"He has heard that sentence before."

"I haven't even said it yet."

"He knows."

She ignored him.

"Please give my daughter better financial judgment."

Riya looked up.

"I can hear you."

"I intended that."

"It was on sale."

"You said that about the last handbag."

"That was a different sale."

Meenakshi pointed toward the ceiling.

"See? This is exactly what I'm talking about."

Prakash lowered the newspaper just enough to reveal one eyebrow.

"Talking to whom?"

"Management."

He looked at the photograph of Shiva.

"Oh."

Then, after years of marriage had taught him that some questions were dangerous, he quietly returned to the newspaper.

This was how most mornings began.

Not with prayer.

With conversation.

Meenakshi had never been particularly good at being religious in the traditional sense.

She forgot temple timings.

She lost count during the rosary.

She became distracted halfway through aarti because she suddenly remembered she hadn't soaked the rajma.

She had once broken a fast by absent-mindedly eating dal chawal forty-five minutes before the officially acceptable time and had spent the rest of the day arguing that intention should count for something.

Priests exhausted her.

Spiritual influencers puzzled her.

Anyone who described inner peace using imported English words immediately made her suspicious.

Yet every night, without fail, she sat beside the bedroom window with a cheap blue pen and an even cheaper notebook.

And she wrote.

Om Namah Shivaya.

Again.

And again.

And again.

Page after page.

Notebook after notebook.

Year after year.

Not because she believed repetition alone could impress God.

Because she believed consistency mattered.

"If banks reward recurring deposits," she often explained to anyone unfortunate enough to ask, "then surely God appreciates long-term investment."

Nobody ever knew how to answer that.
Least of all Prakash.
Beneath their bed sat three large iron trunks.
Visitors assumed they contained old blankets or wedding saris.
They were wrong.
Inside those trunks lived forty years of conversations.
Thousands upon thousands of handwritten mantras.
But also grocery lists.
Medicine reminders.
Recipes.
Arguments.
Bad jokes.
Receipts stapled to pages.
Complaints about neighbours.
Observations about relatives.
Prayers she never spoke aloud.
Some pages simply read:
Om Namah Shivaya.
Others wandered unexpectedly.
Need to buy turmeric.
Why are onions behaving like luxury items?

Mahadev, kindly improve Prakash's emotional intelligence. No urgency, but noticeable progress would be appreciated.

Every notebook became less a prayer journal and more an unofficial record of an ordinary life.

There was another habit she told almost no one about.

Whenever the family visited one of Shiva's great temples—whether Mahakaleshwar in Ujjain, Kashi Vishwanath in Varanasi, or any ancient shrine that drew thousands of pilgrims—Meenakshi carried a tiny pocket diary in her handbag.

The diary would already be full.

Thousands of handwritten mantras packed into impossibly small pages.

She would wrap it carefully inside a fresh five-hundred-rupee note, glance around with unnecessary secrecy, and slip the bundle into the temple donation box.

Not because she believed God needed the money.

Because paperwork, she felt, should accompany requests.

Gold crowns were for wealthy devotees.

Documentation was for middle-class people.

The first time Prakash caught her doing it, he stared in disbelief.

"What exactly are you depositing?"

"Evidence."

"Evidence of what?"

"Loyalty."

She thought for a moment.

"And page forty-three contains an important update regarding my cholesterol."

Prakash looked toward the temple ceiling as though hoping someone else would intervene.

No one did.

If God existed—and Meenakshi never seriously doubted that He did—then she refused to believe He wanted polished speeches.

Life wasn't polished.

Why should prayer be?

She spoke to Shiva while washing utensils.

While hanging clothes on the balcony.

While waiting for local trains.

While untangling earphone wires that appeared to have acquired advanced engineering degrees overnight.

She complained.

Negotiated.

Occasionally threatened to stop speaking to Him for exactly one day.

She even filed what she privately called "follow-up reminders."

One evening, while filling another notebook, she paused between two lines of *Om Namah Shivaya* and added in the margin:

Mahadev, yearly income of fifty crores are still pending. Kindly update status.

Riya, passing through the room with a face pack on and absolutely no respect for privacy, stopped.

"Mummy..."

"Hmm?"

"Why fifty crores?"

Meenakshi didn't even look up from the notebook.

"Because thirty sounds financially insecure."

She turned the page.

"And a hundred sounds greedy."

Riya blinked.

"That's... oddly specific."

"It is called balance."

"But where exactly do you think fifty crores will come from?"

Meenakshi smiled to herself.

"That," she said, writing another mantra with complete serenity, "is Shiva's problem."

She underlined the sentence once.

Satisfied.

Then continued writing.

Outside, Mumbai carried on as it always did.

Local trains roared across bridges.

Street vendors argued over change.

The sea breathed patiently against Marine Drive.

Someone somewhere celebrated.

Someone somewhere grieved.

Millions of people whispered millions of different prayers
into the same vast, invisible silence.

Most would never know whether anyone was listening.

Neither did Meenakshi.

She only knew that talking to Him had become as natural as
breathing.

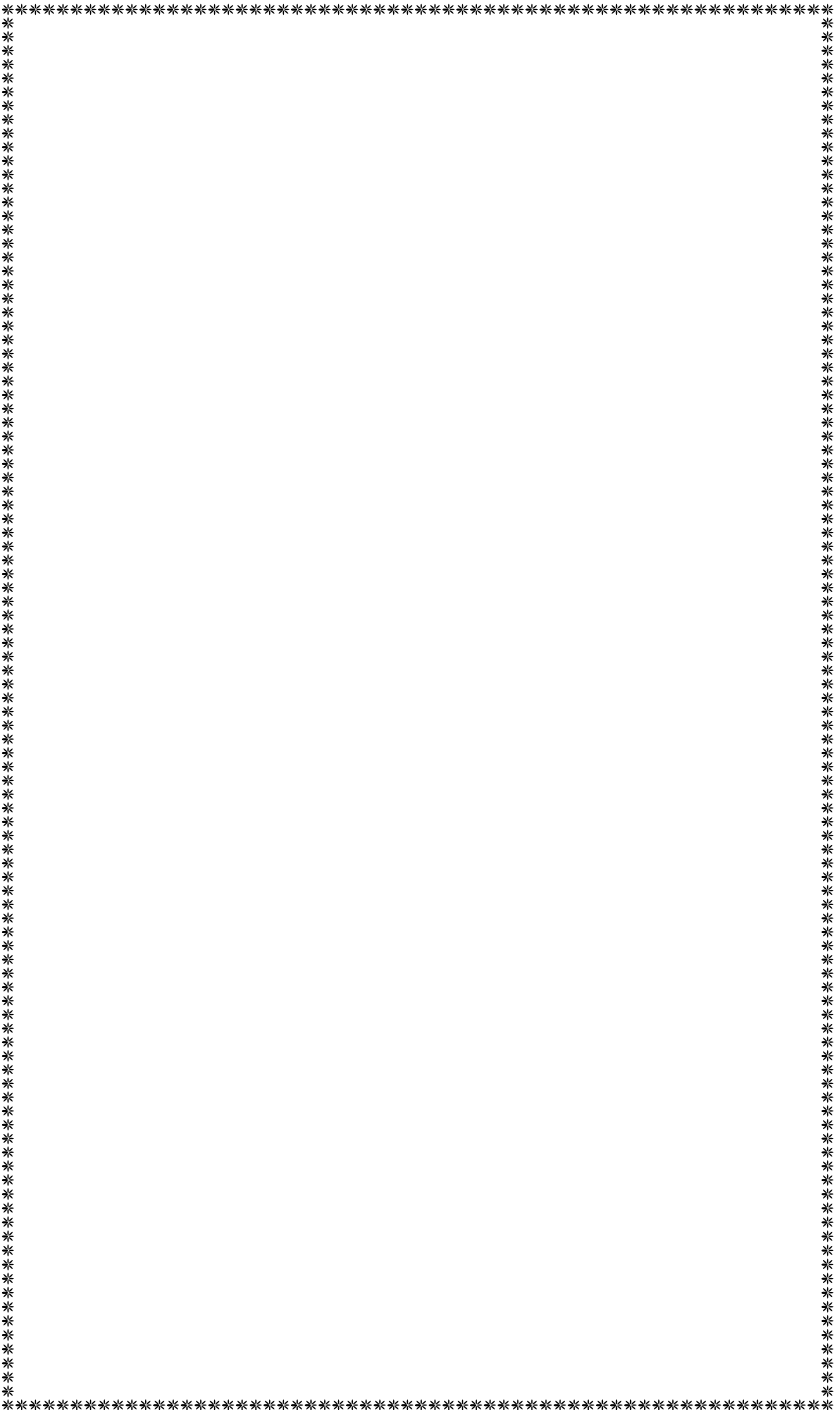
And somewhere beyond her understanding—beyond ritual,
beyond coincidence, beyond the boundaries between dream
and waking—a patient listener had never really stopped
listening at all.

It would take one ordinary Mahashivratri night...

one cup of cutting chai...

and one conversation that should have been impossible...

for Meenakshi Joshi to discover that silence is not the same
thing as absence.

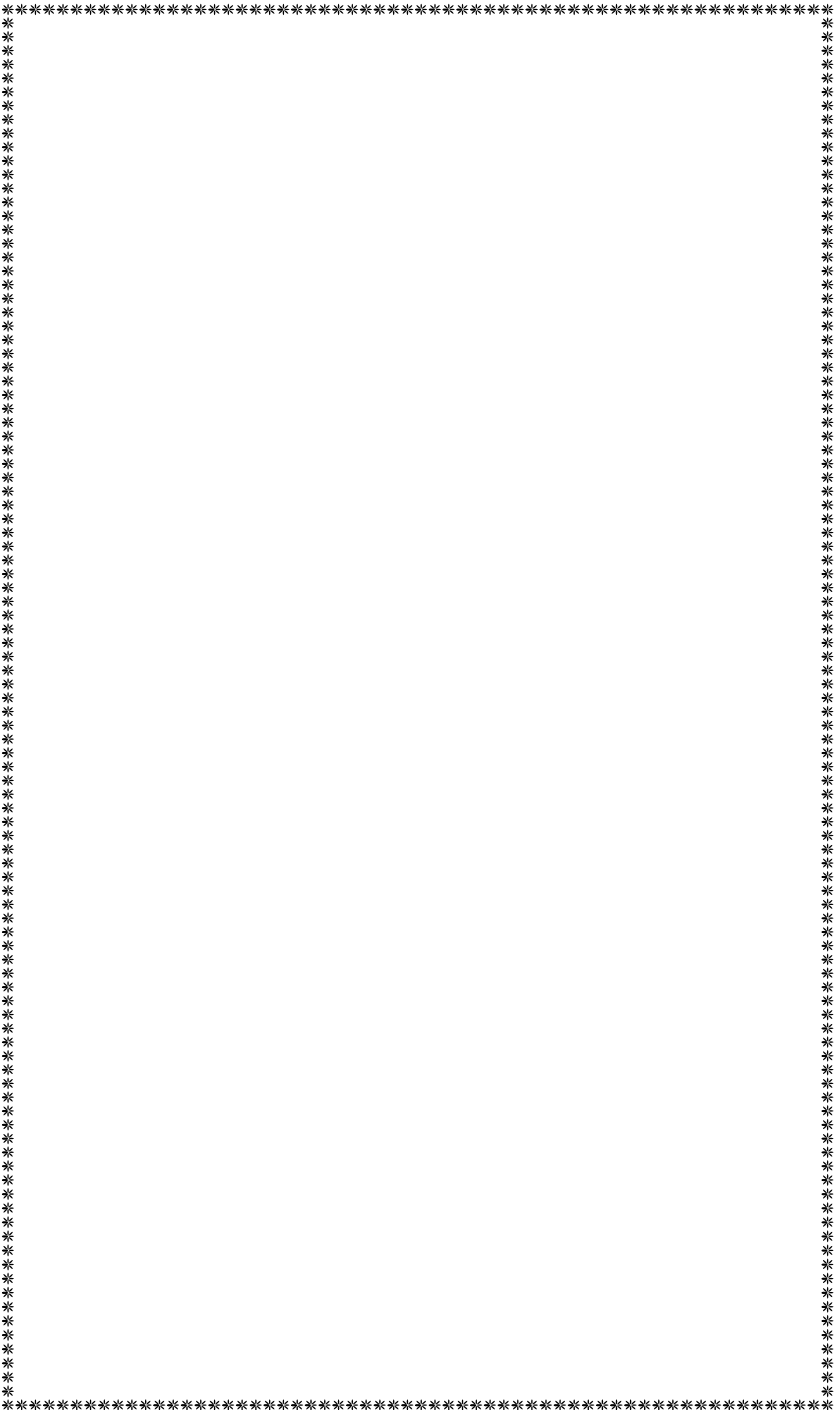


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Part I —
“CUSTOMER SERVICE
COMPLAINTS TO GOD”



Chapter One

Om Namah Shivaya & Other Financial Investments

Every night at exactly ten-thirty, after the dinner plates had been washed, the kitchen wiped dry, the leftovers labelled with alarming precision, and the rest of the family disappeared into their own worlds, Meenakshi Joshi began her second job.

She never announced it.

No one paid her for it.

There was no annual appraisal.

Yet she approached it with a discipline that had outlasted governments, smartphones, and rising onion prices.

She pulled a cheap notebook from the bedside drawer, uncapped a blue Reynolds pen, adjusted her reading glasses, and began to write.

Om Namah Shivaya.

The first few pages always flowed quickly.

Her handwriting was steady, almost elegant, each letter carrying the ease of a habit repeated for decades.

Then, somewhere around the twentieth page, her concentration wandered—as it always did.

Without warning, the mantras gave way to thoughts.

Then the thoughts became conversations.

And the conversations became negotiations.

She paused, tapped the pen thoughtfully against her chin, and added another line beneath the latest mantra.

**Mahadev, yearly income of ₹50 crores is still pending.
Kindly update status.**

She looked at it for a moment.

It seemed polite.

Firm, but polite.

Satisfied, she resumed writing.

Om Namah Shivaya.

Om Namah Shivaya.

Om Namah Shivaya.

A shadow fell across the notebook.

Riya stood in the doorway wearing oversized headphones around her neck and holding a bowl of ice cream.

"Mummy..."

"Hmm?"

"What exactly is this?"

Meenakshi didn't look up.

"Prayer."

Riya leaned closer.

"It says you're asking Lord Shiva for fifty crores a year."

"Yes."

"Every year."

"That is generally how annual income works."

Riya stared at her mother, waiting for the punchline.

None arrived.

"Why specifically fifty crores?"

Meenakshi finally looked up over the rim of her glasses, considering the question with complete seriousness.

"Because thirty sounds financially insecure."

She turned another page.

"And a hundred sounds greedy."

Riya blinked twice.

"So... fifty is morally acceptable?"

"It demonstrates restraint."

"You've created an ethical framework for imaginary wealth?"

"I have created balance."

Riya laughed despite herself.

"You know this isn't how prayer works."

"How do you know?"

"I just do."

Meenakshi clicked her tongue.

"No one ever reads the user manual properly."

"There isn't a user manual."

"Exactly. Which means we're all experimenting."

She returned to writing.

Om Namah Shivaya.

Riya watched silently for another minute.

"Where do you think fifty crores will come from?"

Without missing a stroke, Meenakshi replied, "That is Shiva's problem."

She continued writing.

"I don't believe in interfering with His project management."

Riya shook her head, smiling as she walked away.

Only her mother could negotiate with the Almighty as though following up on a delayed insurance claim.

Prakash found her half an hour later.

He had perfected the nightly ritual of pretending he was going to sleep while secretly waiting for Meenakshi to finish writing so he could complain about the bedside lamp.

"You'll spoil your eyes."

"They're already spoiled."

"Then sleep."

"I will."

"When?"

"When the Lord finishes reviewing today's submissions."

Prakash sighed.

"I hope He has assistants."

"He doesn't."

"Poor man."

She smiled without looking up.

"No. Poor me."

He glanced at the growing stack of filled notebooks on the bedside table.

"How many now?"

"I stopped counting."

"There must be hundreds."

"Closer to a thousand."

He whistled softly.

"If someone reads these after we're gone, they'll think you were writing the longest autobiography in Indian history."

"They'll be wrong."

"What is it then?"

She closed the notebook for the night and rested her palm gently over its cover.

"It isn't the story of my life."

"What is it?"

"It's the story of my conversations."

There was something in the way she said it that made Prakash pause.

Not dramatic.

Not sentimental.

Simply true.

He looked at the notebook again.

From the outside, it was utterly ordinary.

A faded blue cover bought in bulk from the stationery shop near the railway station.

The corners were bent.

The pages had yellowed.

Nothing about it suggested importance.

Yet Meenakshi handled it with the same care another person might reserve for family photographs.

He switched off the bedside lamp.

The room settled into darkness.

Within minutes, Prakash's breathing became slow and steady.

Meenakshi, however, remained awake.

Moonlight slipped through the curtains and fell across the iron trunks beneath the bed.

Three of them now.

Almost full.

Sometimes she wondered what they looked like to God.

Did He really read them?

Or did they simply disappear into the vast filing cabinet of unanswered prayers?

She smiled at the thought.

If heaven had a records department, someone was probably cursing her name by now.

The next morning began, as all respectable middle-class mornings did, with urgency.

The pressure cooker hissed.

Tea threatened to boil over.

Someone had misplaced the television remote.

Someone else had forgotten to soak the rice.

The doorbell rang three times before eight o'clock.

Milk.

Newspaper.

Garbage collection.

The apartment seemed to breathe in interruptions.

By nine, Meenakshi stood in the kitchen preparing breakfast while mentally calculating the month's expenses.

School fees for Aarav's coaching class—

No, she corrected herself.

Not Aarav.

That was her grandson now.

Aditya's tuition.

Funny how memory folded time.

Cylinder booking.

Electricity bill.

Riya's birthday gift.

Medicine refills.

Vegetables.

There was always another number waiting patiently behind the last one.

She opened the spice cabinet.

Three containers of cumin.

Two of mustard seeds.

No turmeric.

Again.

"Mahadev," she muttered, reaching for the shopping list pinned to the refrigerator, "if You can create galaxies, surely You can make turmeric stay where I leave it."

No answer.

She nodded knowingly.

"Thought so."

She added *turmeric* to the list.

Then, after a moment's consideration, added another line beneath it.

Also, fifty crores are still pending.

Just in case.

That afternoon, on her way back from the market, Meenakshi stopped outside the familiar stationery shop.

The owner looked up and smiled before she spoke.

"The usual?"

"The usual."

He reached automatically for a bundle of inexpensive notebooks.

"You know," he said as he packed them into a paper bag, "most people buy one notebook at a time."

"Most people don't have ongoing correspondence."

"With whom?"

Meenakshi accepted the bag, paid the exact amount, and smiled the mysterious smile of someone who believed she possessed insider information.

"With someone who replies very slowly."

She walked home through the crowded Mumbai lane, the notebooks tucked beneath her arm like precious documents.

Around her, the city rushed without pause.

Street vendors called out prices.

Auto-rickshaws squeezed through impossible gaps.

Children in oversized school uniforms chased one another across broken pavements.

Above it all, hidden behind apartment balconies and tangled electric wires, the afternoon sky stretched wide and indifferent.

Meenakshi glanced upward.

"You know," she said softly, "I don't actually need fifty crores."

She thought about it for another few steps.

Then smiled.

"But I would still like the option."

A warm breeze drifted through the lane, carrying with it the faint fragrance of incense from a nearby temple.

It brushed past her face like the briefest touch.

She looked around instinctively.

There was no one there.

Only the city.

Only the noise.

Only another ordinary day.

And somewhere, unnoticed by everyone except perhaps one patient listener, another conversation had quietly begun.

Chapter Two

The God Who Ignores Middle-Class People

If Mumbai had a religion, Meenakshi often suspected it wasn't Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, or anything found in a census.

It was the local train.

Every morning, millions surrendered themselves to it with unquestioning faith.

They believed—against all available evidence—that there would be just enough room for one more person.

Sometimes there was.

Mostly there wasn't.

Meenakshi had been riding Mumbai's local trains for more than twenty-five years, and she had developed an intimate relationship with disappointment.

The 8:42 train was late.

Again.

The platform was already overflowing with office-goers balancing backpacks, lunch carriers, coffee cups, and fragile optimism.

Someone's phone blasted motivational quotes at full volume.

A college student yawned without covering his mouth.

A woman expertly braided her daughter's hair while standing in the queue for the ladies' compartment.

Nobody seemed surprised.

This was simply Tuesday.

The train finally rolled in with its familiar metallic groan.

Before it had properly stopped, the platform erupted into a choreography that only Mumbaikars understood—a dance of calculated elbows, apologetic shoves, and miraculous acts of balance.

Meenakshi was swept forward by the crowd before she could decide whether she wanted to board.

The city had made the decision for her.

Inside, every inch of space had already been claimed.

A young woman shifted half an inch.

Another passenger pulled her handbag closer.

Someone said, "Aage chaliye."

No one could.

The train lurched forward.

The compartment swayed.

Conversations resumed as though personal space had never been invented.

Meenakshi found herself wedged between a schoolteacher correcting notebooks, a software engineer answering emails before nine in the morning, and an elderly woman reciting the *Mahamrityunjaya Mantra* so softly it sounded like breathing.

She closed her eyes for a moment.

"Mahadev," she began silently, "I have one small observation."

The train screeched around a curve.

"I think Your customer service has become extremely selective."

No answer.

"As usual."

She looked around the compartment.

Women of every age and profession stood shoulder to shoulder, each carrying invisible weight.

One held a sleeping toddler whose head rested against her collarbone.

Another clutched a file marked **Medical Reports**.

A young girl revised chemistry formulas under her breath.

Someone in the corner quietly wiped away tears before answering a phone call with a perfectly cheerful voice.

The train did not pause for anyone's private sorrow.

It simply carried all of them together.

Meenakshi sighed.

"I've been watching," she continued inwardly. "You seem very busy these days."

A pause.

"Film stars ask for success."

Granted.

"Influencers ask for followers."

Granted.

"Businessmen ask for sea-facing apartments."

Granted.

She tightened her grip on the overhead handle as the train jolted violently.

"I ask for stable Wi-Fi."

Silence.

"I ask for coriander that doesn't cost as much as saffron."

Nothing.

"I ask for my daughter to stop buying handbags she doesn't need."

Still nothing.

A woman beside her glanced over.

"You said something?"

Meenakshi smiled politely.

"No, no. Internal discussion."

The woman nodded with complete understanding.

No explanation required.

Anyone who travelled in Mumbai locals for long enough eventually developed internal discussions.

The train slowed at the next station.

Another impossible number of passengers climbed aboard.

Meenakshi wondered briefly whether railway engineers secretly studied advanced geometry.

There had to be some mathematical theorem explaining how forty people consistently occupied a space designed for twenty.

A group of young women standing near the door began discussing a famous actress who had recently bought a sprawling bungalow overlooking the Arabian Sea.

"Beautiful house," one of them sighed.

"She deserves it."

"Of course she does."

Meenakshi listened for a while before looking upward through the grimy train window.

"See?" she whispered.

"I rest my case."

The sky, predictably, offered no defence.

"If I wore handwoven Himalayan shawls," she continued, "spoke very slowly in English, and called everyone 'beautiful souls'... would You finally notice me?"

The image amused her immediately.

She pictured herself posting sunrise videos from the mountains.

"Detach yourself from material desires," she would say while secretly comparing grocery prices online.

She almost laughed aloud.

Instead, she caught her own reflection in the scratched train window.

A woman in a faded cotton sari.

Hair escaping its clip.

Cloth shopping bag hanging from one shoulder.

A forehead glistening slightly in the morning humidity.

No halo.

No serenity.

Just another middle-class woman trying to arrive somewhere on time.

Her reflection looked tired.

Older than she remembered.

For a fleeting moment, the humour slipped.

Maybe that was the real reason these conversations with Shiva had become so regular.

Not because she expected miracles.

Because she didn't want to disappear.

Mumbai had a way of making ordinary people invisible.

The city remembered celebrities.

Industrialists.

Politicians.

People whose faces appeared on billboards.

Women like her left no monuments.

Only clean kitchens.

Balanced budgets.

Children who grew up.

Parents who survived.

Entire lives quietly poured into other people.

The thought settled somewhere deep inside her before she could push it away.

The train emerged briefly from between buildings.

Sunlight flashed across the compartment.

For one suspended second, the city opened around them.

The sea shimmered in the distance.

Blue.

Patient.

Unimpressed by human urgency.

Meenakshi found herself smiling despite everything.

"All right," she said silently.

"I'll admit one thing."

She watched the sunlight flicker across the water before the train disappeared back into the shadows of apartment blocks.

"You've built a beautiful city."

A child standing near the window suddenly laughed.

Not at anything in particular.

Just laughed.

The sound spread through the compartment with surprising ease.

Someone smiled.

Then someone else.

The tension softened almost imperceptibly.

The elderly woman who had been chanting looked at Meenakshi and said, quite unexpectedly, "He listens in strange ways."

Meenakshi frowned.

"I'm sorry?"

The woman blinked.

"Asking about Dadar station," she said, looking momentarily confused. "Does this train stop there?"

"It does."

"Oh."

The conversation ended as abruptly as it had begun.

But something about the sentence lingered.

He listens in strange ways.

Coincidence, she told herself.

Nothing more.

The train finally pulled into her station.

The doors opened.

The crowd poured onto the platform like water released from a dam.

Meenakshi stepped out, adjusted the strap of her shopping bag, and joined the current of people flowing toward the exit.

As she climbed the footbridge, she passed a blind musician seated near the stairs.

His harmonium was old.

His clothes were worn.

His voice, however, carried effortlessly above the noise of the station.

He was singing a familiar bhajan dedicated to Shiva.

Not loudly.

Not theatrically.

Simply.

People hurried past without stopping.

Some dropped coins into the small steel bowl beside him.

Most didn't.

Meenakshi searched her purse for change.

She found only a ten-rupee coin.

She placed it gently into the bowl.

The musician smiled without opening his eyes.

"May Mahadev answer the prayer you haven't spoken aloud," he said.

She froze.

"I've spoken all of mine," she replied automatically.

The old man chuckled.

"No."

He tilted his head slightly, as though listening to someone standing just behind her.

"The important one."

Before she could ask what he meant, another wave of commuters swept between them.

By the time she reached the bottom of the stairs and looked back, the musician had disappeared into the moving crowd.

She stood there for a long moment.

She stood there for a long moment.

Then she shook her head.

"Mumbai," she muttered to herself.

"Even coincidences travel by local train."

By the time she reached home, the morning had already settled into its usual routine.

The neighbour on the first floor was arguing with the cable operator.

Someone upstairs was grinding chutney with more enthusiasm than necessary.

A pressure cooker announced itself from at least three different kitchens.

Life, reassuringly, had returned to being ordinary.

She bent to pick up the two milk packets lying outside her door.

One was the regular brand.

The other made her stop.

She turned it over once.

Then again.

Across the packet, in bold blue letters, were the words:

SHIVA DAIRY

Meenakshi narrowed her eyes.

"Hmm."

She looked at the packet.

Then at the small framed photograph of Shiva visible through the open kitchen window.

"So..."

A pause.

"This is today's response?"

Silence.

She nodded slowly.

"I must say..."

"...Your communication skills still need work."

She carried the milk into the kitchen.

Halfway through making tea, she looked at the packet again.

A smile escaped before she could stop it.

Coincidence.

Obviously.

Mumbai had dozens of dairy brands.

One of them was bound to be called Shiva.

Still...

She placed the empty packet carefully in the recycling basket instead of throwing it away immediately.

Just for the day.

No particular reason.

As she stirred the tea, she realised something had changed.

Not in the world.

In herself.

For the first time in a very long while, she wasn't waiting for an answer.

She was paying attention.

Chapter Three

Please Fix My Family Before Fixing Humanity

Meenakshi Joshi firmly believed that the world would become a significantly better place if everyone simply listened to her.

This belief was supported by absolutely no evidence.

It was, however, reinforced every single day by her family.

By eight o'clock on Monday morning, she had already solved three national problems, five society issues, and at least seventeen domestic crises—none of which anyone else seemed aware existed.

The pressure cooker hissed impatiently.

The washing machine thudded through another cycle.

The ceiling fan squeaked in protest.

Outside, Mumbai had begun its daily performance of organised chaos.

Inside the Joshi apartment, the performance was no less dramatic.

Meenakshi stood at the kitchen sink washing utensils while conducting what had become her regular morning briefing with Lord Shiva.

She never folded her hands for these conversations.

There was no ceremony.

No incense.

No temple bells.

Just soap bubbles, stainless steel plates, and an invisible Listener she had long ago stopped treating formally.

"Mahadev," she began, rinsing a kadai with unnecessary force, "before You improve humanity, could You kindly look at my family first? They're a much smaller project."

She balanced the utensil upside down to dry.

"It'll save everyone time."

Her first concern arrived precisely at 8:17 a.m.

Riya floated into the dining room wearing office clothes, sunglasses on her head despite being indoors, and carrying a shopping bag with the unmistakable confidence of someone who had spent money she considered "an investment."

Meenakshi noticed the glossy logo immediately.

"A new handbag?"

Riya smiled.

"Mmm."

"Didn't you buy one last month?"

"That was different."

"How?"

"That was for work."

"And this?"

"This is... versatile."

Meenakshi narrowed her eyes.

"How much?"

Riya busied herself checking messages.

"It wasn't that expensive."

Prakash lowered his newspaper by exactly two inches.

He had been married long enough to know that the phrase *not that expensive* usually translated into *prepare yourself emotionally*.

Meenakshi folded her arms.

"Tell me."

"Mummy..."

"Tell me."

Riya reluctantly mentioned the amount.

The kitchen fell silent.

Even the pressure cooker seemed to pause respectfully.

Meenakshi stared at her daughter as though she had just confessed to purchasing the Taj Mahal.

"...That handbag costs more than our refrigerator EMI."

"It's branded."

"So is Tata Salt."

Riya blinked.

"What?"

"So is Tata Salt," Meenakshi repeated patiently.

"Nobody behaves like this for salt."

Prakash buried his face behind the newspaper.

His shoulders began shaking.

Riya sighed.

"Mummy, you don't understand fashion."

"No," Meenakshi agreed. "Fashion clearly doesn't understand mathematics."

She looked toward the framed photograph of Shiva hanging near the kitchen window.

"You are witnessing this, aren't You?"

The photograph, as usual, remained diplomatically silent.

By the time breakfast ended, Meenakshi had mentally prepared her evening prayer.

She was merely waiting for additional evidence.

Evidence arrived before lunch.

Aditya wandered into the kitchen looking for something to eat.

He opened the refrigerator.

Closed it.

Opened it again.

Stood staring into it with deep concentration.

"What are you looking for?" Meenakshi asked.

"I don't know."

"You opened the refrigerator without knowing?"

"I thought seeing inside would help me remember."

She closed her eyes.

"Mahadev..."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"I'm conserving energy for tonight."

The afternoon brought the neighbour's Bluetooth speaker.

Every morning at precisely ten minutes past twelve, Mrs. Purohit believed the entire building deserved devotional music.

Unfortunately, her definition of devotional music involved electronic beats, enthusiastic auto-tune, and enough bass to awaken ancestors who had achieved liberation centuries ago.

The walls trembled.

The steel glasses on the shelf vibrated.

A framed photograph tilted slightly.

Meenakshi looked upward.

"You're hearing this too, right?"

The song reached an especially energetic chorus.

She waited.

Nothing happened.

She sighed.

"I suppose divine intervention has office timings."

By evening she had folded two baskets of laundry, untangled three charging cables, found the missing television remote inside the linen cupboard, and spent twelve full minutes searching for a Tupperware lid that eventually turned out to be underneath the very container it belonged to.

She held the lid triumphantly above her head.

"There you are!"

Then she looked toward Shiva's photograph.

"Do You hide these things?"

No answer.

"Hmm."

"Suspicious."

After dinner, the apartment finally became quiet.

Prakash settled into his chair with a book.

Aditya disappeared into his room.

Riya continued browsing handbags online with the dedication of a research scholar.

Meenakshi carried her familiar blue notebook to the dining table.

The ritual never changed.

She uncapped her pen.

Wrote slowly.

Om Namah Shivaya.

Again.

Again.

Again.

The steady rhythm calmed her in ways she never spoke about.

When the page was half full, she stopped and began writing underneath the mantras.

Mahadev,

Today's family report is attached for Your immediate attention.

Item One: Kindly improve Prakash's emotional intelligence. He thinks making tea counts as emotional support.

Item Two: Please convince Aditya that refrigerators are not memory recovery devices.

Item Three: Riya has purchased another handbag whose price exceeds our refrigerator EMI.

She says it is branded.

So is Tata Salt.

Nobody spends this much money on salt just to post photographs with it.

If improving her financial decision-making is difficult, then at least reduce her attraction toward handbags with international accents.

Item Four: Please remove Mrs. Purohit's Bluetooth speaker from existence. Temporary disappearance will also be appreciated if permanent action requires additional paperwork.**

Lastly, if coriander could become free again, future generations would remember this era as the beginning of true prosperity.

She reread the page.

Nodded once.

Satisfied.

Then, as always, she added one final line.

Yours faithfully (and somewhat impatiently),

Meenakshi

She closed the notebook gently.

Across the room, the small framed photograph of Shiva caught the light from the kitchen.

For the briefest moment, it almost looked as though the faintest smile had appeared at the corner of His lips.

Meenakshi noticed it.

She pointed her pen toward the photograph.

"Don't smile."

"I'm serious."

The room remained perfectly quiet.

But somewhere, beyond the sounds of trains, traffic, and another ordinary Mumbai night, it seemed almost possible that Someone had laughed.

Chapter Four

The Temple Deposit Scheme

Every Indian family has one relative who believes all vacations should be spiritual.

In the Joshi family, that relative was Meenakshi's elder cousin, Sudha.

She possessed an alarming enthusiasm for pilgrimage planning.

Where ordinary people saw holidays, Sudha saw divine itineraries.

Where travel websites suggested beaches, she suggested Jyotirlingas.

And where everyone else asked, "*How many days?*", Sudha asked, "*How many temples can we cover before lunch?*"

Which was how, one bright October morning, Meenakshi found herself standing in the winding lanes of Kashi, moving with thousands of pilgrims toward the sacred temple of **Kashi Vishwanath**.

The city smelt of incense, sandalwood, old stone, river water, and freshly fried kachoris.

Temple bells echoed across narrow alleys.

Priests called out instructions.

Shopkeepers offered rudraksha malas, brass bells, framed photographs, miniature Shivalings, and enough devotional souvenirs to furnish a small shrine.

Pilgrims walked with folded hands.

Some chanted softly.

Some cried quietly.

Some simply stood still, overwhelmed by the centuries gathered inside those ancient walls.

Meenakshi admired the devotion around her.

Then adjusted the heavy handbag hanging from her shoulder.

Unlike everyone else, she had arrived carrying paperwork.

The handbag contained a tiny notebook.

It was no larger than her palm.

Its blue cover had faded from years of being carried to temples across the country.

Inside were nearly five thousand handwritten mantras.

Every page began faithfully.

Om Namah Shivaya.

Again.

And again.

And again.

But somewhere between those endless repetitions lived another version of her.

The pages carried grocery reminders squeezed into margins.

Recipes copied from neighbours.

Complaints about relatives who overstayed their welcome.

Requests for her children's happiness.

Worries about medical reports.

Tiny celebrations after difficult months.

Arguments with Shiva.

Apologies to Shiva.

Fresh arguments after the apologies.

If anyone else read the notebook, they would probably assume it belonged to a woman who had never quite learnt where prayer ended and ordinary life began.

Meenakshi would have considered that an accurate assessment.

The security line moved slowly.

Pilgrims shuffled forward inch by inch.

Prakash glanced at her.

"You're smiling."

"I am."

"That's dangerous."

She looked offended.

"I smile all the time."

"You smile like that only before doing something questionable."

"I am going for darshan."

"I know."

"Then why are you suspicious?"

"Because I've been married to you for thirty years."

She couldn't argue with that.

Inside the temple complex, the atmosphere changed.

The noise of the city faded behind thick stone walls.

The air felt cooler.

Older.

As though countless whispered prayers had settled permanently into the carved pillars.

Meenakshi folded her hands instinctively.

For a few moments, even she forgot her running commentary.

The sight of the sacred Jyotirlinga silenced something inside her.

She closed her eyes.

Not to ask.

Not to negotiate.

Simply to be present.

It lasted exactly twelve seconds.

Then her practical mind returned.
She discreetly opened her handbag.
The tiny notebook waited inside.
Wrapped carefully in a crisp ₹500 note.
Protected from curious eyes.
Protected from accidental damage.
Protected, she liked to imagine, from being mistaken for
ordinary stationery.
She glanced around.
Sudha was completely absorbed in prayer.
Prakash was looking toward the sanctum.
The priest was blessing another family.
Excellent.
This was her opportunity.
Like a seasoned secret agent conducting an operation of
national importance, Meenakshi approached the donation
box.
She slipped the folded bundle through the narrow opening
with practised precision.
It disappeared inside with the faintest whisper of paper.
Mission accomplished.
She folded her hands respectfully.
Then leaned forward ever so slightly.

"Mahadev," she whispered.

"I've enclosed additional documentation."

She nodded once.

"Please read carefully."

A thoughtful pause.

"Important matters are mentioned on pages thirty-two and forty-seven."

She straightened.

Then remembered something.

"Oh—and page fifty-eight."

Another pause.

"That one concerns cholesterol."

Unknown to everyone else, page thirty-two contained a carefully written note.

Not dramatic.

Not poetic.

Simply practical.

It read:

Also, regarding previous request of ₹50 crores annually—

Open to instalments.

Quarterly payments are acceptable.

Even monthly transfers can be considered if administratively convenient.

Below it she had added another line.

Please don't reject entire proposal due to budget constraints.

Page forty-seven wasn't much better.

Neighbour still owns Bluetooth speaker.

Situation deteriorating.

Meenakshi firmly believed in keeping divine correspondence properly updated.

After all, if banks required documentation, surely heaven appreciated organised paperwork.

The family slowly moved toward the exit.

Just before leaving, an elderly priest who had been arranging offerings near the donation box looked up.

His eyes rested briefly on Meenakshi.

Not searching.

Simply noticing.

He smiled.

"Receipt mil gaya."

Meenakshi stopped.

"Ji?"

The priest pointed toward the donation box.

"Donation receipt," he clarified. "If you need one, collect it from the counter outside."

"Oh..."

She nodded, feeling faintly foolish.

"No, thank you."

The priest smiled again and turned back to arranging flowers.

That should have been the end of it.

It almost was.

As the family reached the outer courtyard, another young priest hurried past carrying a stack of temple receipts.

Without slowing down, he called to someone behind him,

"Arre, pages sambhaal ke! Don't let them get mixed up."

Pages.

Such an ordinary word.

Temple offices dealt with registers and receipts all day long.

Still...

Meenakshi instinctively tightened her grip on her handbag before remembering the notebook was no longer inside it.

She glanced back toward the sanctum.

The donation box looked exactly as it had a minute ago.

Old.

Heavy.

Entirely uninterested in her.

She smiled to herself.

"Fine."

"You've acknowledged the courier."

A pause.

"Now read it."

Prakash looked over.

"Talking to yourself again?"

"No."

She adjusted the end of her saree.

"I'm following up."

Prakash nodded with complete seriousness.

"Good."

"Government departments respond only after reminders."

She laughed.

"So does heaven, apparently."

Together they walked out into the narrow lanes of Kashi, where the bells kept ringing, pilgrims kept arriving, and nobody—not even Meenakshi—could say with complete certainty whether anything unusual had happened at all.

The rest of the day unfolded like every family pilgrimage.

They argued about footwear.

Someone misplaced a mobile phone.

Sudha insisted everyone drink temple prasad milk despite uncertain stomach conditions.

Prakash bought books he would never finish.

Riya photographed every doorway except the people standing in front of it.

Life resumed its familiar rhythm.

Yet Meenakshi remained unusually quiet.

That evening, sitting on the ghats overlooking the Ganga, she watched hundreds of lamps floating across the dark water.

Each tiny flame drifted away carrying somebody's hope.

Some asked for wealth.

Some for health.

Some for children.

Some for peace.

Perhaps, she thought, all prayers looked equally small once they reached the river.

She smiled to herself.

"Mine probably arrives with attachments."

The thought made her laugh softly.

Back at the hotel that night, while everyone else slept, Meenakshi opened a fresh notebook she had packed for the journey.

She wrote several pages of *Om Namah Shivaya*.

Then, beneath the last line, she added:

Mahadev,

Kindly confirm receipt of today's submission.

If pages thirty-two and forty-seven require clarification, I remain available for discussion.

P.S.

Please don't let anyone accidentally throw away my notebook before You finish reading it.

She closed the diary.

Switched off the bedside lamp.

And for reasons she couldn't explain, she slept more peacefully that night than she had in months.

Far below, the Ganga flowed through the darkness as she had for centuries.

Temple bells rang somewhere in the distance.

And inside an overflowing donation box beneath ancient stone ceilings, a tiny notebook rested quietly among thousands of offerings.

Gold ornaments.

Currency notes.

Folded prayers.

Fresh flowers.

And one little diary that contained five thousand mantras...

...a grocery list...

...a complaint about cholesterol...

...an application for ₹50 crores in manageable instalments...

...and the complete, unedited heart of an ordinary woman
who still believed that if God was patient enough to create
the universe,

He was surely patient enough to read her handwriting.

Chapter Five

The Coconut Incident

Every devotee carried a private theory about how prayer worked.

Some believed God answered immediately.

Some believed He answered only after years of patience.

Some believed every unanswered prayer concealed a larger blessing.

Meenakshi belonged to an entirely different school of theology.

She believed Shiva occasionally ignored perfectly reasonable requests simply to test her blood pressure.

It had already been a difficult morning.

The vegetable market had declared war.

The tomatoes looked magnificent but were priced as though they had earned engineering degrees.

The coriander seller had reduced each bunch until it resembled a polite suggestion of coriander rather than the vegetable itself.

The onion vendor, a man who negotiated with the confidence of an international diplomat, had refused to lower his price by even two rupees.

"Madam," he had said solemnly, "these onions are premium quality."

Meenakshi had stared at him.

"They're onions."

"They're special onions."

"They'll still make me cry."

He had smiled.

"So you already know their value."

She walked away before she committed a crime that would require legal representation.

By the time she reached the nearby Shiva temple, she was carrying two cloth bags, one bruised ego, and a rapidly deteriorating opinion of humanity.

The temple was alive with its usual rhythm.

Children chased pigeons across the courtyard.

An elderly couple sat beneath the peepal tree reciting prayers together.

The fragrance of incense drifted lazily through the warm morning air.

Temple bells rang every few minutes, each note dissolving into the steady murmur of chanting.

Meenakshi removed her sandals, adjusted her sari, and walked inside.

She folded her hands before the Shiva Linga.

Closed her eyes.

Then the vegetable market returned to her memory.

The tomatoes.

The onions.

The coriander.

Inflation.

The neighbour's Bluetooth speaker.

Riya's latest online purchase.

Prakash's mysterious inability to locate objects directly in front of him.

"Mahadev," she thought irritably, "you know what coriander costs today?"

No response.

Naturally.

"You help billionaires build temples but ordinary people are negotiating for coriander like international diplomats."

Still silence.

Meenakshi narrowed her eyes slightly toward idol.

"Honestly, your priorities need review."

By now, the prayer had become something else entirely.

A performance review.

"Mahadev," she murmured, keeping her voice low enough that only He—or so she assumed—could hear, "I'm trying very hard to remain spiritually mature."

A pause.

A loud crack split through the temple.

The top coconut in the stack suddenly rolled free.

It bounced once.

Then twice.

Gathering remarkable confidence as it travelled.

The priest, who had been carrying a brass plate overflowing with flowers and camphor, turned at exactly the wrong moment.

The coconut struck his foot with astonishing precision.

"Har Har Mahadev!"

The priest yelled—not entirely in devotion.

The brass plate flew upward.

Marigold petals exploded into the air.

A bell rang accidentally.

Someone screamed.

Another devotee instinctively shouted, "Miracle!"

The child who had been chasing pigeons applauded enthusiastically.

An old woman near the back of the temple folded her hands and smiled.

"See?"

"Bholenath always has perfect timing."

"Or terrible timing," muttered the priest, still hopping on one foot.

Nobody seemed entirely sure which was true.

Within seconds, complete temple chaos erupted.

Three volunteers rushed toward the injured priest.

An elderly man declared the coconut had fallen because of "negative planetary alignment."

Another insisted it was a sign of divine blessing.

A woman immediately promised to observe sixteen consecutive Mondays of fasting.

Someone else started recording the entire incident on a mobile phone.

The priest, meanwhile, sat on the temple steps clutching his foot and expressing opinions that probably shouldn't be repeated inside sacred premises.

In the middle of all this stood Meenakshi.

Frozen.

Absolutely motionless.

Her folded hands slowly lowered.

Her eyes moved from the fallen coconut...

...to the Shiva Linga...

...then back again.

"No..."

she whispered.

Her heart began beating much faster.

"No, no, no..."

Surely that was coincidence.

Coconuts fell all the time.

Gravity existed.

Physics existed.

Stacking mistakes existed.

She nodded vigorously.

Yes.

That explained everything.

She took one cautious step backward.

Then another.

Just as she turned to leave, a young temple volunteer picked up the coconut and remarked casually to another priest,

"Strange."

"What?"

"I checked this stack ten minutes ago."

"It was stable."

The older priest shrugged.

"Then perhaps someone upstairs had other plans."

Meenakshi stopped walking.

Very slowly, she looked upward.

The temple ceiling, predictably, offered no clarification.

Outside, she slipped on her sandals with unusual haste.

The vegetable bags suddenly felt much heavier.

She walked through the crowded lane almost mechanically.

Her mind replayed the moment again and again.

"Make that coconut fall."

Thud.

Impossible.

Coincidence.

Definitely coincidence.

Probably.

Almost certainly.

She stopped at a tea stall.

"One cutting chai," she said automatically.

The tea vendor handed her the glass on a small steel saucer.

As she reached for it, her eyes drifted to the glass jar beside the cash box.

Inside were coconut biscuits.

She stared at them for a second.

"No."

The tea vendor looked puzzled.

"Madam?"

"Nothing."

She picked up the chai.

"I'm being followed by coconuts."

The vendor decided not to pursue the subject.

Some customers came with shopping bags.

Some came with philosophy.

"You look worried, Madam."

"I may have accidentally conducted an experiment."

He nodded as though that explained everything.

She took a sip.

The hot, sweet tea steadied her nerves.

Almost.

Back home, Prakash found her unusually quiet.

"You've been gone a long time."

"Hmm."

"Everything all right?"

"Hmm."

"You bought vegetables?"

"Yes."

"You fought with the onion vendor again?"

She looked at him.

"I won."

"You look like you lost."

She ignored the comment.

Instead, she unpacked the vegetables one by one.

Tomatoes.

Potatoes.

Green chillies.

Coriander.

Finally, she placed a coconut on the kitchen counter.

Prakash frowned.

"We didn't need a coconut."

"I know."

"You bought it anyway?"

She stared thoughtfully at the coconut.

"No."

"It insisted on coming home."

Prakash decided this conversation required less curiosity than usual.

Marriage had taught him many survival skills.

One of the most valuable was recognising when a question would produce more confusion than clarity.

He wisely returned to his newspaper.

That night, Meenakshi opened another notebook.

She wrote pages of *Om Namah Shivaya* in complete silence.

When she finally stopped, she added a single note beneath the last line.

Mahadev,

Regarding today's coconut demonstration...

I sincerely hope it was unrelated to my request.

If it was related...

Please understand that many of my prayers are spoken emotionally and should not be treated as immediate work orders. Please do not respond so aggressively in public places.

Also, kindly apologise to the priest on my behalf.

He seemed like a decent man.

She stared at the page.

Then added one final sentence.

I am beginning to suspect You have an unusual sense of humour.

She closed the notebook.

Switched off the light.

And lay awake longer than usual.

For the first time in years, a tiny, unsettling thought refused to leave her.

What if she hadn't been talking to silence all this time?

She closed the notebook.

Switched off the light.

And lay awake longer than usual.

Every sensible explanation still existed.

Coconuts rolled.

Stacks shifted.

Gravity had not suspended itself on her behalf.

She knew all that.

She truly did.

And yet...

Somewhere between the temple, the frightened priest, the applause of the little boy, and the coconut biscuits beside her evening chai, the world had become just slightly more difficult to dismiss.

She turned toward the framed photograph of Shiva on the opposite wall.

"I know that wasn't You."

Silence.

She waited.

Then sighed.

"But if it was..."

A small smile appeared.

"...next time, kindly choose a less dangerous fruit."

She closed her eyes.

For a long while, nothing happened.

Or perhaps, she thought just before sleep claimed her...

nothing had happened.

That uncertainty, oddly enough, comforted her more than certainty ever could.

Chapter Six

The Saree Worth One Small Miracle

There are two kinds of sarees.

The ones women buy because they need them.

And the ones they stop walking to admire in shop windows.

Meenakshi Joshi had spent most of her life wearing the first kind.

Cotton sarees for everyday use.

Simple printed sarees for festivals.

A handful of silks reserved for weddings that had gradually faded with time but refused to retire.

Whenever she entered a saree showroom, she instinctively walked toward the section with discount boards.

Not because she disliked expensive things.

Because she had trained herself not to desire them.

Middle-class women possess a remarkable ability.

They learn to admire beautiful things without believing those things belong to them.

Cousin Neeta's daughter's wedding had become the social event of the season.

The family WhatsApp group had been buzzing for weeks.

Photographs of jewellery.

Matching blouses.

Designer sandals.

Salon appointments.

Every conversation somehow ended with someone saying,

"It's a destination wedding."

As though that single sentence automatically justified every outrageous expense.

Meenakshi looked at the messages and quietly placed her phone face down.

She wasn't jealous.

Not exactly.

Just... tired.

She knew what would happen.

The banquet hall would be filled with women wrapped in shimmering Kanjeevarams, Banarasis, Paithanis and designer silks that seemed to glow under chandeliers.

Someone would casually mention where they had bought theirs.

Someone else would casually mention how much it cost.

And Meenakshi would smile politely while mentally calculating how many months of electricity bills that amount could have paid.

A few days before the wedding, she accompanied Riya to a large saree showroom.

Riya was helping a friend choose outfits.

Meenakshi insisted she was "only looking."

That was a lie.

Everyone who enters a saree shop is looking.

Some are simply better at pretending otherwise.

As the salesman unfolded one magnificent silk saree after another, colours flowed across the counter like liquid sunsets.

Emerald green.

Deep maroon.

Royal blue.

Then he opened one in a muted shade of silver-grey with a delicate temple border woven in antique gold.

The fabric seemed to catch the light without demanding attention.

Elegant.

Graceful.

Quiet.

It reminded her of moonlight resting on still water.

For a long moment, she forgot to breathe.

"Would you like to try it, Madam?" the salesman asked.

She smiled and gently shook her head.

"No, thank you."

She didn't ask the price.

Some dreams remain prettier before numbers are attached to them.

But the salesman, experienced enough to recognise admiration, volunteered it anyway.

Meenakshi's smile remained in place.

Only her heartbeat changed.

She folded the saree herself before handing it back.

"It is beautiful."

"It deserves someone richer," she murmured under her breath.

That evening, while rinsing rice in the kitchen, she glanced at the small framed photograph of Shiva near the window.

"You know..."

she said casually,

"I've never asked You for diamonds."

She drained the water.

"I've never asked for luxury cars."

She measured lentils into a pressure cooker.

"I haven't even insisted on fifty crores today."

She smiled.

"Just once..."

She paused.

"Before I leave this world... let me wear one truly beautiful saree."

She looked at the photograph.

"Not for showing off."

"Just to know how it feels."

There was, as always, no reply.

She shrugged.

"Worth asking."

The next afternoon, Meenakshi decided to reorganize the old steel cupboard in the bedroom.

It had become a museum of middle-class history.

Plastic folders labelled in fading handwriting.

Expired warranty cards.

Instruction manuals for appliances that had stopped existing years ago.

Recipe books with turmeric stains older than her children.

She pulled out an old brown envelope tucked inside a cookbook.

Across the front, in her own handwriting, were the words:

Important Papers. Do Not Throw.

Inside lay a small bundle of bank documents.

She frowned.

"I don't remember these."

She sat down on the floor and began sorting through them.

Old passbooks.

Insurance receipts.

Electricity bills from another decade.

Then one folded certificate caught her attention.

It was a recurring deposit she had opened nearly fifteen years earlier.

She stared at it.

Slowly, memories returned.

It had been during one of their most difficult financial years.

She had quietly set aside a small amount every month without telling anyone.

Not because she was hiding money.

Because saving it made her feel less frightened.

Eventually life had become busier.

The deposit had matured.

The paperwork had disappeared into the cupboard.

And she had forgotten it entirely.

The next morning she visited the bank.

The young officer smiled after checking the records.

"Madam, your deposit matured years ago."

"I noticed."

"It has been waiting for you."

He printed the updated amount.

Interest accumulated over the years had quietly grown the savings into something far more substantial than she remembered.

As she looked at the figure, she felt an odd shiver.

It wasn't a fortune.

It wasn't life-changing.

But it was almost exactly what the silver-grey saree would cost.

She sat there for a long moment, smiling to herself.

When she stepped out of the bank, she instinctively looked toward the sky.

"You waited fifteen years to remind me?"

The sky offered no explanation.

She returned to the same saree showroom.

The salesman recognised her immediately.

"The silver-grey one?"

She nodded.

"I've been thinking about it."

He unfolded it once again.

It looked just as beautiful.

Perhaps even more.

When he calculated the bill, he frowned.

"Madam..."

"Yes?"

"This piece has been selected for our festival promotion today."

He adjusted the amount.

"You'll receive an additional discount."

Meenakshi blinked.

The new total was almost identical to the amount she had just withdrawn from the bank.

She looked at the bill.

Then at the saree.

Then somewhere beyond the showroom ceiling.

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"This is becoming very specific."

On the evening of the wedding, she stood before the mirror draping the saree carefully.

The silk settled around her like it had always belonged there.

Prakash looked up from adjusting his cufflinks.

For a moment, he simply stared.

"You look..."

He searched for the right word.

"...beautiful."

She smiled.

"Careful."

"I'll start expecting compliments regularly."

He laughed.

"You'll bankrupt me faster than your fifty-crore proposal."

She adjusted the pallu over her shoulder.

"That proposal remains active."

Before leaving for the wedding, she stood for a moment before the small photograph of Shiva.

She folded her hands.

Then immediately unfolded them again.

Formalities had never suited their relationship.

"So..."

she said softly.

"I got the saree."

A pause.

"Thank you."

Another pause.

"But don't think this closes all pending matters."

She pointed a finger toward the photograph.

"The annual fifty-crore file is still under review."

"But honestly, you could have responded faster. Inflation is not waiting."

The evening sunlight slipped through the kitchen window.

For a fleeting second, it danced across the silver border of the saree.

And if Meenakshi hadn't known better...

she would have sworn someone, somewhere, was smiling.

Chapter Seven

Bluetooth Speaker Destruction Prayer

Every residential building had one neighbour who believed music was a public service.

In Meenakshi's building, that honour belonged to Mrs. Purohit.

She was, by every measurable standard, a perfectly decent woman.

She made excellent pickle.

She remembered everyone's birthdays.

She watered other people's plants when they travelled.

She never returned empty containers without refilling them.

Unfortunately...

she also believed that devotion should be shared with the entire neighbourhood at six o'clock every morning.

Through a Bluetooth speaker.

At maximum volume.

Not ordinary bhajans.

Those Meenakshi could have tolerated.

No.

Mrs. Purohit had developed a passionate affection for devotional remixes.

Traditional hymns accompanied by electronic drumbeats.

Ancient Sanskrit chants interrupted by synthesizers.

Bhajans with bass powerful enough to wake ancestors.

Every morning, without fail, the building echoed with music that sounded as though a nightclub had accidentally achieved enlightenment.

The first morning, Meenakshi assumed it was a festival.

The second morning, she assumed it was a special occasion.

By the fifth consecutive day, she realised this was now policy.

She stumbled into the kitchen, hair escaping its bun, eyes half-closed, still wearing her faded nightgown.

The opening beats of a remixed "*Har Har Shambhu*" vibrated through the apartment walls.

The steel containers inside her kitchen cupboards rattled sympathetically.

Even the pressure cooker looked offended.

Prakash sat calmly reading the newspaper.

"You can sleep through this?"

He lowered the paper.

"I've adapted."

"You've surrendered."

"I've accepted reality."

She looked toward the small photograph of Shiva near the kitchen window.

"I refuse."

The following Monday, the music began at precisely 6:01 a.m.

Not 6:00.

Not 6:02.

Mrs. Purohit apparently respected punctuality even while assaulting public peace.

Boom.

Boom.

Boom.

"Har Har Mahadev..."

Boom.

Boom.

Boom.

Meenakshi opened one eye.

Then the other.

She stared at the ceiling.

For several long seconds, she fought the urge to march next door in her slippers.

Instead, she sat up slowly and addressed the ceiling.

"Mahadev."

Her voice was still thick with sleep.

"I have tolerated many things."

She swung her legs off the bed.

"Inflation."

She searched blindly for her glasses.

"Power cuts."

She found them.

"Political debates."

She stood.

"But this..."

The next bass beat shook the bedroom window.

"...this feels personal."

She shuffled into the kitchen.

Poured herself tea.

Took one sip.

Wincd.

Even the tea hadn't fully awakened.

The music reached another enthusiastic chorus.

Meenakshi looked at Shiva's smiling photograph.

"If You truly care about my mental peace..."

She took another sip.

"...destroy that speaker."

She paused.

Not dramatically.

Not even angrily.

Simply with the tired sincerity of a woman who had reached the edge of her patience.

Then she added, almost as an afterthought,

"Preferably without harming Mrs. Purohit."

Experience had taught her to be specific.

She remembered the coconut.

She took another sip of tea and shook her head.

"Honestly..."

"I'm not even asking for fifty crores this morning."

The kitchen remained stubbornly silent.

Outside, Mrs. Purohit's remix reached another enthusiastic chorus.

A moment later, Meenakshi's mobile phone vibrated on the dining table.

A promotional message.

She almost ignored it.

Almost.

For no particular reason, she picked it up.

The sender's name flashed across the screen.

SHIVA ELECTRONICS

She frowned.

It was one of those companies she vaguely remembered buying an extension board from years ago.

The message read:

Exchange your old speaker today! Limited-time offer.

Meenakshi stared at the screen.

Then slowly looked toward the small framed photograph of Shiva.

"...Subtle."

Silence.

"I appreciate the effort."

She deleted the message, finished her tea, and went about her day.

By lunchtime she had forgotten all about it.

The day unfolded normally.

Vegetables were purchased.

Laundry was folded.

Bills were paid.

By evening, she had forgotten the prayer entirely.

Life possessed a remarkable talent for distracting people from their own dramatic declarations.

The next morning...

Silence.

Meenakshi woke before her alarm.

She frowned.

Something was wrong.

The building felt... peaceful.

No drums.

No synthesizers.

No amplified spirituality.

Only birds.

Actual birds.

She lay perfectly still.

Had she gone deaf?

She snapped her fingers beside her ear.

No.

Hearing intact.

The silence continued.

Suspiciously.

She hurried to the balcony.

Across the corridor, Mrs. Purohit stood outside her apartment looking devastated.

Two electricians surrounded the infamous Bluetooth speaker like doctors performing emergency surgery.

One of them pressed the power button repeatedly.

Nothing.

He plugged it into another socket.

Still nothing.

He removed the battery.

Examined the wiring.

Shook his head gravely.

"Madam," he said at last, "it's completely dead."

The younger electrician turned the speaker over, looking genuinely puzzled.

"I've never seen one fail this suddenly."

The older electrician shrugged.

"Everything has its time."

He picked up his toolbox.

"Even speakers."

Mrs. Purohit gasped.

"But it was working yesterday!"

"Now it isn't."

"Can you repair it?"

The electrician looked at the silent speaker with professional resignation.

"I don't think so."

She looked genuinely heartbroken.

"It was imported."

"I'm sorry."

Mrs. Purohit sighed deeply.

"I'll have to buy another one."

The electrician nodded sympathetically.

"But perhaps not the same model."

"No."

She looked at the lifeless speaker.

"I've lost faith."

From her own balcony, Meenakshi instinctively folded her hands toward Shiva's photograph visible through the kitchen window.

Not a full namaskar.

Just... a tiny acknowledgement.

"Thank you."

Then, after a brief moment of consideration, she lit one extra agarbatti before the photograph.

Insurance, she thought.

Better to remain on good terms.

Prakash wandered into the kitchen a few minutes later.

"Strange morning."

"Hmm."

"No music."

"Hmm."

"You look unusually cheerful."

"I slept."

He poured himself tea.

"I heard Mrs. Purohit's speaker died."

"What a tragedy."

Her face remained impressively solemn.

He looked at her over the rim of his cup.

"You didn't..."

She looked scandalised.

"Prakash!"

"I'm only asking."

"You think I have that kind of influence?"

"No."

He smiled slowly.

"I think you know someone who might."

She stared at him.

Then both of them burst out laughing.

Later that afternoon, Mrs. Purohit knocked on the door carrying a bowl of fresh mango pickle.

"My speaker is gone," she announced sadly.

"I heard."

"It simply stopped working."

"These things happen."

"I've decided not to buy another Bluetooth speaker."

"Oh?"

"I'll sing myself."

Meenakshi's smile froze.

Mrs. Purohit continued cheerfully.

"My voice may not be perfect, but devotion comes from the heart."

She left.

The apartment door closed.

Meenakshi remained motionless.

Very slowly, she turned toward Shiva's photograph.

"You have misunderstood."

Silence.

"I requested removal of the speaker."

She raised one finger.

"Not... replacement with live performance."

Still silence.

She sighed dramatically.

"This is why proper consultation is important."

That evening, as the sun dissolved into a hazy orange over Mumbai's skyline, Meenakshi sat by the window writing in another notebook.

The city below carried on with its endless rhythm.

Children played cricket in the lane.

Pressure cookers whistled from a dozen kitchens.

Someone argued with an auto-rickshaw driver.

Life, as always, continued.

She finished a page of mantras before adding another note.

Mahadev,

Firstly, thank you for addressing the Bluetooth speaker issue.

Prompt action appreciated.

However, I would like to clarify that future requests should be interpreted with greater attention to possible consequences.

Mrs. Purohit has now begun singing personally.

She is enthusiastic.

The problem has changed form.

Kindly advise.

She read it once.

Her phone buzzed again.

Another promotional message.

This time from the same company.

Need a new speaker? We've got you covered.

She looked at the message.

Then at Shiva's photograph.

"No."

A pause.

"Now You're showing off."

She deleted the message before Prakash could wander in and accuse her of finding divine meaning in marketing campaigns.

Then smiled and added one final line.

**P.S. Please don't misunderstand this letter as a complaint.
It's feedback.**

She closed the notebook and looked out into the gathering twilight.

Somewhere in the building, Mrs. Purohit had indeed begun singing.

Softly.

Without electronic beats.

Without blaring bass.

Her voice wandered occasionally away from the correct note, but it carried something the speaker never had.

Sincerity.

Meenakshi listened for a while.

Then smiled to herself.

Perhaps, she thought, not every answered prayer arrived exactly as requested.

Sometimes God removed the noise...
and quietly left the devotion behind.

Chapter Eight

The Lost Notebook

Every marriage has one recurring argument.

Some couples fight about money.

Some are about in-laws.

Some are about whose turn it is to throw the garbage.

Prakash and Meenakshi argued about putting things in "safe places."

According to Meenakshi, a safe place was somewhere so secure that even thieves would never find it.

According to Prakash, neither would she.

The disagreement resurfaced at least twice a year.

Usually over jewellery.

Occasionally over important documents.

Once over the pressure cooker whistle.

But never over the notebooks.

Those never left the bedside drawer.

Until one Tuesday.

It began like every other evening.

Dinner.

Television.

The neighbourhood's daily debate over whose scooter was blocking whose parking space.

At ten-thirty, Meenakshi opened the drawer beside her bed.

Pens.

Reading glasses.

A packet of Vicks.

A half-used strip of Crocin.

Three old temple receipts.

No notebook.

She frowned.

She lifted everything out.

Still no notebook.

Strange.

She distinctly remembered buying a fresh bundle only a few days ago.

Perhaps she had moved it.

She checked the second drawer.

Nothing.

The cupboard.

Nothing.

The shelf above the television.

Nothing.

By the time Prakash wandered into the bedroom, he found every drawer standing open like surprised mouths.

"What happened?"

"My notebook."

"What about it?"

"It's missing."

Prakash looked around.

"It's probably somewhere."

"It was here."

"It still exists."

"I know it still exists."

"Then we'll find it."

She folded her arms.

"It didn't walk away."

"No."

"It didn't grow legs."

"No."

"So where is it?"

Prakash had been married long enough to know that this was not a question.

It was an invitation to participate in a household investigation.

Within minutes, Riya was recruited.

"Mummy, it's a notebook."

"It is my notebook."

"I know."

"You don't sound like you know."

Riya sighed.

"I know."

Together they searched.

Bedsheets.

Cupboards.

Kitchen shelves.

The dining table.

Inside the newspaper pile.

Behind the microwave.

Even inside the refrigerator.

Prakash watched silently.

"You checked the fridge?"

"I'm eliminating possibilities."

"What was the theory?"

"I don't have one yet."

The search expanded.

The blue notebooks all looked alike.

She counted them.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

...

Twenty-three.

There should have been twenty-four.

She counted again.

Still twenty-three.

Now she was certain.

One notebook had disappeared.

Not misplaced.

Disappeared.

Prakash suggested making tea.

It was his universal solution.

Headache?

Tea.

Guests?

Tea.

Bad news?

Tea.

National crisis?

Probably tea.

Meenakshi accepted without arguing.

That worried him.

She sat quietly at the dining table while he placed the cup in front of her.

She didn't touch it.

"I had almost filled that notebook."

"I know."

"There were things in it."

"I know."

She looked at him.

"No, you don't."

Her voice wasn't angry.

It was softer than that.

"There were conversations."

Prakash nodded.

"I remember what I wrote."

She shook her head.

"Not all of it."

Silence settled between them.

For the first time, he realised that those blue notebooks were not records.

They were evenings.

One ordinary day after another, carefully folded into paper.

He reached across the table and covered her hand with his.

"We'll find it."

The next morning, the search resumed.

Every cupboard surrendered its contents.

Old photographs emerged.

Warranty cards for appliances that no longer existed.

Single socks whose partners had clearly chosen independent lives.

Three umbrellas.

Seven reusable shopping bags.

Enough plastic containers to open a small wholesale business.

No notebook.

Riya held up an ancient mixer-grinder manual.

"Mummy, should we throw this?"

"No."

"It expired before I was born."

"What if we need it?"

"For what?"

"The manual."

Riya looked at her mother.

Then at the manual.

Then quietly put it back.

Some battles were generational.

By evening, Meenakshi stood before the small photograph of Shiva in the living room.

Hands on hips.

"Very funny."

Silence.

"I know this is You."

Silence.

"You've finally decided to read one."

Silence again.

She nodded slowly.

"Fine."

A pause.

"But bring it back."

Then, after a moment,

"I hadn't finished talking."

For the next three mornings, she continued opening the bedside drawer before remembering it was empty.

Habit, she discovered, reached for things long after memory caught up.

On the second afternoon, while buying vegetables, the stationery shop owner called after her.

"Madam!"

She turned.

"You forgot these."

He held up a bundle of the same little blue notebooks she bought every few months.

"I kept them aside. Thought you might need them."

Meenakshi smiled politely.

"I still have plenty."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

He shrugged.

"I don't know why," he said, "but today I kept thinking someone had taken one from your stack."

She blinked.

"What?"

The shopkeeper frowned, trying to remember.

"Nothing."

He laughed at himself.

"Old age."

"I probably imagined it."

She walked away slowly.

People imagined strange things all the time.

So did she.

Still...

The sentence lingered longer than it should have.

Three days later, Prakash was looking for an old electricity bill.

He pulled a cardboard carton from the top shelf of the cupboard.

Inside were winter blankets, old Diwali decorations, and the pressure cooker box they had kept because "good boxes should never be thrown away."

He opened it.

There, lying peacefully between folded newspapers, was the missing notebook.

He stared at it for several seconds.

Then laughed.

Not loudly.

Just enough for the notebook to know it had been found.

Meenakshi took it from his hands as though someone had returned a child who had briefly wandered away.

She turned the pages quickly.

Every word was still there.

Every prayer.

Every complaint.

Every impossible financial request.

She smiled with relief and began flipping through the pages once more.

A small, dry bilva leaf slipped out from between two pages and floated onto the floor.

She stared at it.

It wasn't impossible.

The notebook had travelled to enough temples over the years.

A leaf could easily have been pressed between the pages and forgotten.

She bent, picked it up carefully, and tucked it back exactly where she had found it.

"No conclusions," she murmured to herself.

"Absolutely no conclusions."

Nothing had changed.

She closed the notebook and rested it against her chest.

Prakash smiled.

"So?"

She looked toward Shiva's photograph.

"I knew it."

"What?"

"He was reading."

Prakash followed her gaze.

"And?"

A small smile spread across her face.

"He reads very slowly."

That night, at exactly ten-thirty, she opened the notebook to the first blank page.

She uncapped her faithful blue Reynolds pen and wrote:

Dear Mahadev,

If You want to borrow a notebook, kindly issue a receipt next time.

Yours faithfully,

A regular customer.

Then she smiled, turned the page, and began again.

Om Namah Shivaya.

Om Namah Shivaya.

Om Namah Shivaya.

Chapter Nine

Take My Husband Away Temporarily

Every successful marriage contains three essential ingredients.

Love.

Patience.

And periodic fantasies about temporary disappearance.

Not permanent disappearance.

Nothing dramatic.

Just enough time for the other person to appreciate your contribution to civilisation.

Meenakshi had reached that stage on a particularly humid Thursday afternoon.

The argument began, as most great marital conflicts do, over something astonishingly stupid.

The TV remote.

"Where is it?" Prakash asked from the living room.

Meenakshi didn't look up from the vegetables she was chopping.

"Where is what?"

"The remote."

"What remote?"

"The TV remote."

She stopped chopping.

Slowly.

Very slowly.

Then turned toward the living room.

"The TV remote only."

"Yes."

"The TV remote that has lived in exactly the same drawer for fifteen years."

"That remote."

"The remote you have personally used hundreds of times."

"Yes."

Meenakshi closed her eyes.

"Have you checked the drawer?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"It isn't there."

She walked to the living room.

Opened the drawer.

Removed the remote.

Placed it in his hand.

Then returned to her vegetables.

No words were exchanged.

None were necessary.

Prakash stood silently holding the remote.

After a moment he said, "It wasn't there before."

"It was."

"It wasn't."

"It was."

The argument escalated from there with remarkable efficiency.

By evening they had somehow expanded the discussion to include:

forgotten anniversaries,

misplaced documents,

whose relatives were more difficult,

the correct way to fold bedsheets,

and an incident involving a leaking water filter from 2009.

Neither of them remembered how.

Married people rarely do.

After dinner, Prakash retreated into the bedroom carrying his newspaper.

Meenakshi remained in the living room, arms folded.

The ceiling fan rotated overhead with diplomatic neutrality.

Outside, Mumbai glowed beneath thousands of apartment lights.

She looked toward Shiva's photograph.

"Do You see this?"

No response.

"Twenty-eight years."

Silence.

"Twenty-eight years of dedicated service."

Nothing.

She pointed dramatically toward the bedroom.

"And today he argued with me about a remote."

Still nothing.

Her irritation expanded.

Not dangerously.

Just enough to require divine involvement.

"Fine."

She folded her hands.

"Take him away for two days."

The words escaped before she could reconsider them.

"Just two."

She sighed.

"So he can understand my value."

A pause.

Then, because she was fundamentally reasonable:

"Bring him back afterwards."

She nodded once.

Request submitted.

The next morning, Prakash received a phone call during breakfast.

His manager.

An urgent client issue.

Unexpected travel required.

Departure: this evening.

Return: two days later.

Prakash stared at the phone.

Then at Meenakshi.

Then back at the phone.

"Huh."

Meenakshi almost dropped her teacup.

No.

Absolutely not.

Coincidence.

Just coincidence.

The city contained millions of office workers.

People travelled constantly.

And suddenly...

The place felt enormous.

For the first hour, Meenakshi enjoyed herself tremendously.

She watched television without compromise.

No news channels.

No cricket.

No documentaries about economic policy.

Only old films and complete freedom.

She ordered food she liked.

Used the good bowl.

Left the remote exactly where she wanted.

"This is wonderful," she announced to no one.

The silence agreed.

The second hour remained pleasant.

The third was acceptable.

By the fourth, reality began introducing complications.

At eight-thirty, she decided to make tea.

She reached for the gas stove, then paused.

The cylinder was not empty.

That would have been too ordinary.

Instead, she remembered she had been meaning to book a replacement cylinder for days.

She had even made a note of it on the back of a grocery list.

Which, naturally, was now somewhere in the kitchen.

She opened the drawer.

No list.

She checked the fridge door.

No list.

She checked the counter.

No list.

Finally she found the paper tucked inside a recipe book under the words:

BOOK CYLINDER

She stared at it.

"Of course."

Then she picked up her phone and dialled the gas agency.

The line rang.

And rang.

And rang.

When someone finally answered, they sounded as though she had interrupted a family emergency.

"Booking number?"

She gave it.

"Consumer ID?"

She gave that too.

"Madam, system is slow."

"I can hear that."

"Please call again after some time."

"How much time?"

"Some time."

The line went dead.

Meenakshi stared at the phone.

Then at the stove.

Then at Shiva's photograph.

"This family," she informed him, "is impossible."

The photograph remained wisely silent.

At nine-thirty, she decided to cook rice.

The pressure cooker waited patiently.

The whistle did not.

She searched the drawer.

Nothing.

The counter.

Nothing.

The shelf.

Nothing.

The dining table.

Nothing.

Half an hour later she discovered it inside a container she herself had placed in the refrigerator while reorganising the kitchen.

She sat down.

Very slowly.

"This family," she informed Shiva again, "is impossible."

The photograph remained wisely silent.

The next morning arrived far too quietly.

No newspaper rustling.

No questions about tea.

No absent-minded humming while reading headlines.

The apartment seemed strangely hollow.

Even the furniture appeared subdued.

She made breakfast.

Ate alone.

Washed dishes.

Folded laundry.

Watered plants.

Completed every task.

Yet something felt missing.

Not dramatic.

Just... noticeable.

Like a familiar sound that had disappeared from the background of life.

That evening, rain began falling across Mumbai.

Soft at first.

Then harder.

The city dissolved behind curtains of water.

Meenakshi sat by the window with a cup of tea and a packet of glucose biscuits.

The rain usually belonged to both of them.

Prakash always commented on the weather as though personally acquainted with it.

He liked predicting storms.

Incorrectly.

He liked discussing rainfall statistics.

Unnecessarily.

And somehow, without realising it, she had grown accustomed to those conversations.

She bit into a biscuit.

The apartment remained silent.

For the first time in years, silence wasn't peaceful.

It was lonely.

At ten o'clock, she opened one of her notebooks.

Not to write.

Just to hold.

Rain tapped softly against the windows.

The city lights blurred beyond the glass.

And unexpectedly, tears filled her eyes.

Ridiculous.

Absolutely ridiculous.

She had personally requested this arrangement.

Two days.

That was all.

Yet here she sat crying over glucose biscuits.

She laughed at herself through the tears.

"Mahadev."

Her voice sounded small in the quiet apartment.

"I would like to revise my request."

Nothing.

"Please ignore previous submission."

The rain continued falling.

"I may have overreacted."

A little.

Perhaps.

Possibly.

Prakash returned the following afternoon.

The moment the door opened, the apartment changed.

Not visibly.

Not logically.

Yet instantly.

Life re-entered with him.

The suitcase.

The familiar shoes near the door.

The smell of train travel.

The newspaper he had bought at the station.

The ordinary presence of another person who knew where everything belonged.

Meenakshi hurried toward the entrance.

For one dangerous second, she nearly hugged him.

Actually hugged him.

Fortunately, decades of marital pride intervened at the last moment.

She stopped herself.

Crossed her arms.

And said instead,

"You're late."

Prakash looked at her carefully.

Then smiled.

"Missed me?"

"No."

"Really?"

"Not at all."

He nodded thoughtfully.

"Interesting."

"What?"

"The TV remote is in the wrong drawer."

Meenakshi froze.

Prakash laughed.

Not loudly.

Just enough.

She tried very hard not to smile.

Failed.

Then laughed too.

That night, after dinner, she opened another notebook.

She wrote several pages of *Om Namah Shivaya* before adding a final note.

Mahadev,

Regarding the temporary husband relocation program...

Request withdrawn.

Results unsatisfactory.

Subject became more valuable after removal.

Further testing is not required.

She considered the sentence.

Then added one more line.

Also please note that loneliness is a very irritating emotion.

She closed the notebook.

Across the room, Prakash had already fallen asleep while pretending to watch television.

His glasses sat crooked on his nose.

The newspaper rested open across his chest.

Meenakshi smiled.

Walked over quietly.

Removed the glasses.

Folded the newspaper.

And switched off the light.

Outside, Mumbai continued humming beneath the night sky.

Inside, the apartment felt complete again.

Not perfect.

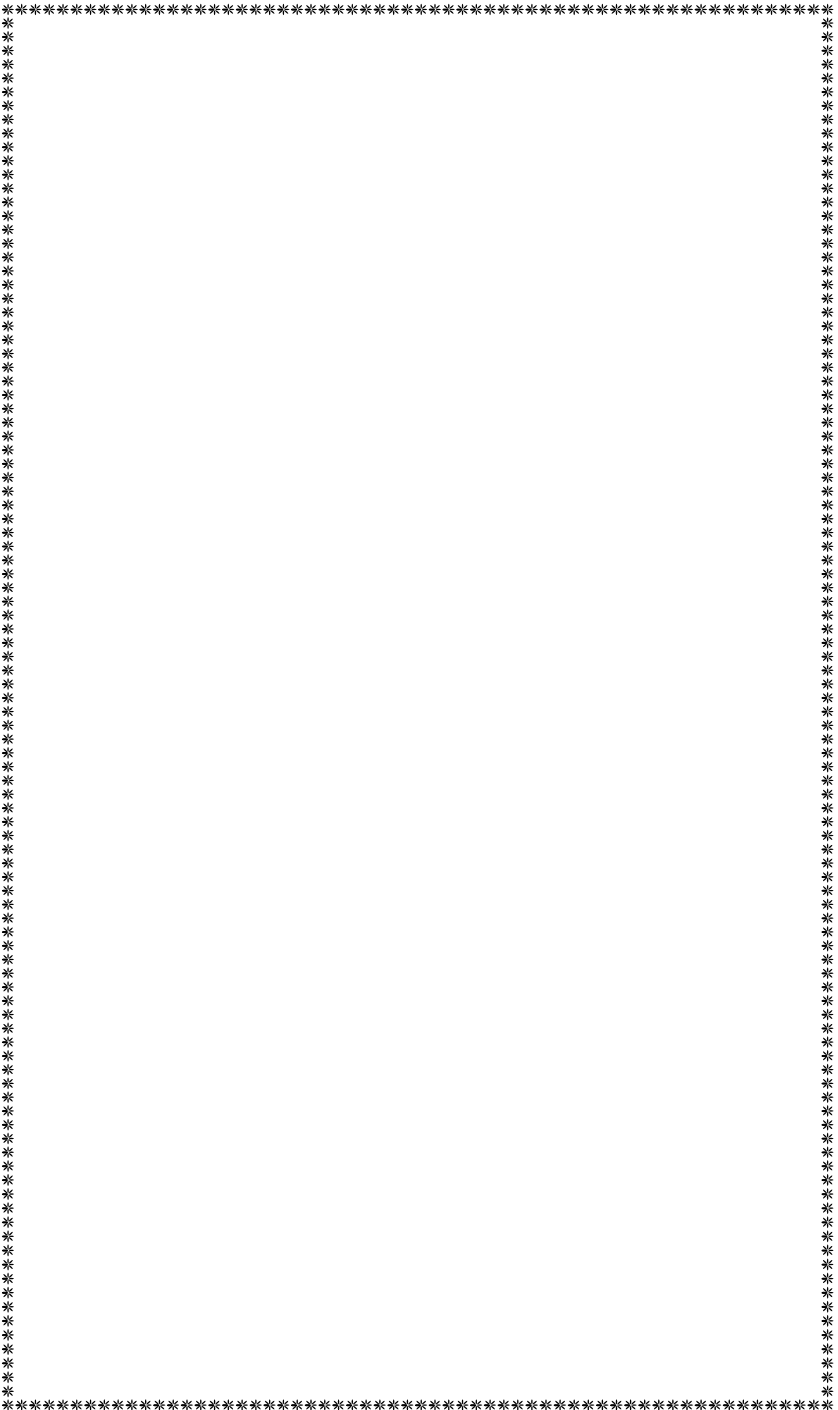
Not peaceful.

Certainly not organised.

But complete.

And for now, that felt like a miracle worth keeping.

Part II —
“THE GOD WHO REPLIES
STRANGELY”



Chapter Ten

Mahashivratri & Cutting Chai

Mahashivratri arrived in Mumbai the way it always did.

Not with silence.

With loudspeakers.

Temple bells rang before dawn. Streets filled with marigold garlands, incense smoke, and barefoot devotees carrying brass pots of water. Outside every Shiva temple, vendors sold rudraksha malas beside plastic toys, sugarcane juice, and steaming cups of tea.

In Mumbai, even spirituality learnt to stand patiently in traffic.

For Meenakshi, however, Mahashivratri had always been less about rituals and more about stubbornness.

If there was one night she refused to miss writing her mantras, it was this one.

"This," she declared every year, "is annual performance review season."

Prakash looked up from the newspaper.

"For whom?"

"For Shiva."

He folded the paper.

"I sincerely hope He has better appraisal systems."

"He should."

She tied her hair into a loose bun.

"I've been His loyal customer for decades."

"You've also filed the highest number of complaints."

"Constructive feedback."

Then, after a glance at the kitchen counter where a plate of bananas sat beside a bowl of roasted peanuts, she added with complete seriousness:

"Spiritual stamina requires carbohydrates."

Prakash stared at her.

"That is not a sentence."

"It is in this house."

He sighed.

Meenakshi had spent years believing she was spiritually forgettable. Too ordinary for miracles. Too distracted for devotion. Too middle-class for divine attention.

And yet every Mahashivratri, she behaved as though the universe had personally invited her to submit a report.

By evening the apartment carried the quiet excitement of a festival.

A brass lamp burnt before the small framed photograph of Shiva near the kitchen window.

Fresh bilva leaves rested beside the idol.

A bowl of fruits sat neatly arranged.

Even the stubborn money plant looked as though it had decided to participate.

Meenakshi had fasted with her usual interpretation of religious discipline.

Officially.

Unofficially, she had eaten enough roasted peanuts, bananas, and sabudana khichdi to ensure no actual suffering occurred.

Prakash watched her carrying another bowl into the kitchen.

"I thought you were fasting."

"I am."

"Then what is all this?"

"This?"

She looked offended.

"This is fasting food."

"You've eaten four times today."

"Exactly."

"That isn't fasting."

"It is."

"How?"

She smiled with absolute confidence.

"Because none of it counts."

Prakash had been married long enough to understand there was no winning such arguments.

As night deepened, the city refused to sleep.

Temple bells echoed through distant lanes.

Devotees sang bhajans that floated softly through the warm air.

Somewhere nearby, children burst crackers despite no known religious requirement.

Meenakshi settled cross-legged near the balcony with a fresh notebook.

A bottle of blue ink.

Three pens.

Reading glasses.

And the determined expression of someone beginning serious paperwork.

She wrote carefully.

Om Namah Shivaya.

Again.

Om Namah Shivaya.

Again.

The words flowed almost without thought.

Each line steadied her breathing.

Each page quieted the noise inside her mind.

Occasionally she paused to stretch her fingers.

Or complain.

"Mahadev..."

She continued writing.

"You know this fifty-crore matter has now been pending for several years."

Another line.

"Very poor response time."

Another.

"I understand You're busy."

Another.

"But even government offices eventually acknowledge applications."

She smiled faintly.

The conversation had become so natural over the years that she no longer noticed when she spoke aloud.

It simply happened.

As naturally as breathing.

Midnight passed.

Then one.

The apartment grew still.

Prakash had gone to bed hours earlier after reminding her twice not to stay awake all night.

She had promised.

Without the slightest intention of keeping that promise.

The notebook slowly filled.

Her handwriting, usually energetic and determined, began leaning sideways.

Letters drifted lazily across the page.

Ink smudged beneath sleepy fingers.

She rubbed her eyes.

Outside, a cool breeze slipped through the balcony grill carrying distant temple chants.

Somewhere below, a tea seller called softly into the night.

"Cutting chai..."

The words floated upward like an invitation.

Meenakshi smiled.

"Even You must like chai on nights like this."

She rested her head against the balcony wall.

Only for a minute.

Just one minute.

When she opened her eyes...

She was still sitting on the balcony.

And yet...

She wasn't.

The apartment had disappeared.

Or perhaps it remained behind her, hidden somewhere
beyond the strange softness surrounding everything.

The night looked familiar and unfamiliar at once.

The city lights shimmered gently in the distance.

The breeze carried the smell of wet earth.

The noise of Mumbai seemed strangely far away, as though
wrapped in cotton.

Someone was already sitting beside her.

A man.

Perhaps in his fifties.

Perhaps older.

Age seemed oddly impossible to guess.

He wore simple cotton clothes.

Nothing remarkable.

Nothing divine.

A faded grey kurta.

A white dhoti.

Ordinary leather sandals.

His hair fell carelessly to his shoulders.

His beard was streaked with silver.

His face was calm.

Not the calm of someone without problems.

The calm of someone who had stopped fighting them.

In one hand he held a small glass of cutting chai.
Steam curled lazily into the cool night air.
He looked at her with amused eyes.
The sort of eyes that had laughed long before meeting you.
"You complain too much."
His voice was warm.
Gentle.
Completely matter-of-fact.
Meenakshi blinked once.
Then twice.
Most people, she imagined, would panic.
Or ask who he was.
Or wonder how a stranger had entered their balcony.
Meenakshi had lived too long for unnecessary formalities.
She folded her arms.
"Then stop ignoring me."
The man took another sip of chai.
"I wasn't aware I was."
"You weren't aware?"
She stared at him.
"I've submitted notebooks."
"Hm."

"Hundreds."

"I've noticed."

"I've visited temples."

"You have."

"I even wrapped miniature diaries inside five-hundred-rupee notes."

"I remember."

"And still..."

She leaned toward him.

"...nothing."

The man smiled into his tea.

"I wouldn't say nothing."

"I would."

"You've survived."

She frowned.

"That wasn't the question."

"No."

"It was about cooperation."

He laughed softly.

The sound was unlike ordinary laughter.

Not louder.

Just... older somehow.

As though mountains might sound like that if they ever found something amusing.

"You humans are curious."

"We are."

"You ask for signs."

"We do."

"When they arrive, you call them coincidence."

Meenakshi considered this.

"Sometimes."

"You ask for help."

"Correct."

"When help arrives differently than expected..."

She sighed.

"...I file appeals."

"I know."

He looked genuinely entertained.

For a while they simply sat together.

Neither hurried the silence.

Neither seemed uncomfortable inside it.

It felt strangely familiar.

Like sitting beside someone she had known forever without remembering where.

Finally she glanced sideways.

"You know..."

"Hm?"

"You look tired."

"I've been listening to people."

She nodded sympathetically.

"That explains it."

He smiled.

"You understand?"

"I've attended housing society meetings."

He laughed again.

This time so suddenly that a little chai nearly spilt over the rim of the glass.

They watched the sleeping city together.

A train slipped across the distant darkness like a ribbon of light.

A dog barked somewhere below.

The breeze smelt faintly of jasmine and rain.

Then the man stood.

"So soon?" she asked.

"Dawn approaches."

"You'll come again?"

He looked at her for a long moment.

"As long as you keep talking."

She frowned.

"I always talk."

"I know."

He smiled.

"It would be difficult not to hear you."

He turned to leave.

Then paused.

Without looking back, he said quietly,

"By the way..."

"Hm?"

"Continue writing."

Before she could ask why...

He was gone.

No footsteps.

No dramatic light.

No miracle.

Simply...

Gone.

The first rays of morning sunlight touched her face.

Meenakshi jerked awake.

The notebook had slipped into her lap.

The pen rested between her fingers.

The lamp before Shiva's photograph had almost burnt out.

She looked around the balcony.

Empty.

Only the city is waking slowly beneath the pale sky.

She laughed at herself.

"What a strange dream."

She stretched stiffly.

Picked up the notebook.

The last page contained several unfinished lines of *Om
Namah Shivaya*.

Nothing unusual.

She was about to close it when she noticed something.

Beside her notebook...

stood a small glass.

Empty.

Its rim carried the faint brown stain left behind by cutting
chai.

She frowned.

"I don't own this glass."

She picked it up.

It was an ordinary glass.

The kind every roadside tea stall in Mumbai seemed to own.

She turned it slowly in her hand.

A faint ring of dried tea clung to the inside.

Nothing more.

She frowned.

"I don't remember bringing this home."

Perhaps she had.

Perhaps Prakash had.

Perhaps it had been sitting in the kitchen for months and she had simply never noticed.

Dreams had a peculiar way of borrowing ordinary objects.

She set it down again.

Even so...

when she lifted it once more, she found herself smiling.

It carried the faintest lingering fragrance of ginger and cardamom.

Or perhaps she was only remembering the dream.

Memory, she had learnt, was capable of seasoning reality.

She looked slowly toward Shiva's smiling photograph.

The same photograph that had watched her complain for decades.

"You..."

She stopped herself.

Silence.

Only the morning birds answered.

She placed the little glass carefully beside the lamp.

Not as evidence.

Not even as proof.

Simply because throwing it away suddenly felt impossible.

That night, before sleeping, she opened a fresh notebook.

She filled two pages with mantras.

Then wrote one final note.

Mahadev,

If last night was only a dream, it was unusually well-written.

If it wasn't...

Thank you for the chai.

P.S.

If that glass belongs to You, kindly collect it whenever convenient.

I don't know which shelf to keep it on.

Next time, please bring biscuits also.

She closed the notebook with a smile.

For the first time in many years, Meenakshi fell asleep without asking for anything.

And somewhere beyond dreams, where silence and conversation perhaps belonged to the same language, someone smiled.

Chapter Eleven

The Man Who Appears Everywhere

After Mahashivratri, Meenakshi made a sensible decision.
She decided never to mention the chai man to anyone.
Not to Prakash.
Not to the children.
Certainly not to the ladies in the society.
The last thing she needed was for someone to recommend a
neurologist.
Or worse...
a spiritual influencer.
So she said nothing.
She simply continued with life.
And life, as it often does after extraordinary moments,
behaved as though nothing unusual had happened.
At least for a while.
Three mornings later, Meenakshi boarded the 8:17 a.m.
local train.
The ladies' compartment was already overflowing.

Someone balanced three tiffin carriers.

Someone argued over six inches of seat space with the moral conviction of a constitutional lawyer.

A college student slept standing up.

A flower seller somehow occupied less space than physics considered possible.

Mumbai had mastered the art of making impossible arrangements seem routine.

Meenakshi squeezed into a corner near the window.

As the train curved past Marine Lines, she absent-mindedly looked into the glass.

For one fleeting second...

another face appeared beside hers.

The same calm eyes.

The same silver-streaked beard.

The same faint smile.

He looked out at the Arabian Sea as though he had all the time in the universe.

Before she could turn—

the reflection dissolved.

Only tired commuters remained.

She blinked twice.

"Lack of sleep," she muttered.

The woman beside her nodded sympathetically.

Sometimes he appeared across a crowded street.

Once she caught sight of him reflected in the polished steel door of a shopping mall.

Always smiling.

Always holding cutting chai.

Always disappearing before she reached him.

She began carrying her reading glasses everywhere.

Just in case her eyesight had decided to pursue creative hobbies.

The ophthalmologist declared her vision perfectly ordinary.

"Nothing unusual," he said.

She wasn't convinced.

One rainy evening, exhaustion claimed her almost the moment her head touched the pillow.

The dream arrived effortlessly.

She found herself sitting beneath the familiar banyan tree near an old roadside tea stall.

Rain drummed softly on the tin roof.

The air smelt of wet earth, ginger, and boiling milk.

The chai man was already there.

Naturally.

He pushed a glass toward her.

"You came."

"You keep calling."

"I don't remember inviting you."

"You don't have to."

She accepted the tea.

It was exactly the way she liked it.

Strong.

Not too sweet.

She narrowed her eyes.

"Now that's suspicious."

He smiled.

"You ask many questions."

"I ask necessary questions."

They sat quietly for a while, listening to the rain.

The tea stall owner moved about silently in the background, though somehow she never quite saw his face.

Finally, the man looked at her over the rim of his glass.

"I've been meaning to ask you something."

"Hm?"

"You've requested fifty crores every year."

"I have."

"What exactly will you do with it?"

Meenakshi answered without the slightest hesitation.

"First..."

She raised one finger.

"...I will buy proper storage containers."

He waited.

"With matching lids."

He blinked.

"Matching lids?"

She nodded solemnly.

"You have no idea what middle-class kitchens suffer."

He said nothing.

Encouraged, she continued.

"I have containers whose original lids disappeared sometime during the previous government."

He took another sip of tea.

"I suspect they eloped."

"They absolutely did."

She leaned forward.

"Do you know how much emotional energy is wasted finding the correct lid every morning?"

"I can imagine."

"No, you cannot."

She pointed at him.

"You've lived on Mount Kailash."

He accepted the criticism gracefully.

"Our storage conditions are admittedly different."

"Exactly."

She looked deeply satisfied.

"Every container will have its own lid."

"A noble ambition."

"It is."

She took a thoughtful sip of tea.

"Then..."

He waited again.

"I'll buy one sea-facing apartment."

The man tilted his head.

"Only one?"

"I know my limits."

She nodded wisely.

"Humidity has damaged my soul."

For the first time since she'd known him, the man burst into genuine laughter.

Not polite laughter.

Not amused laughter.

The kind that escaped before permission.

He laughed so hard that chai nearly spilt over the side of his glass.

She looked delighted.

"What?"

"I was expecting..."

"What?"

"I don't know."

"Luxury cars?"

"Perhaps."

"Private islands?"

"Possibly."

She shook her head.

"No."

She counted on her fingers.

"Matching containers."

"Yes."

"Sea-facing apartment."

"Mm-hmm."

"A proper reading chair."

"Reasonable."

"And a reliable cook."

He looked at her.

"That's all?"

She frowned.

"What do you mean 'that's all'?"

"You've asked for fifty crores."

"So?"

"That's a great deal of money."

She shrugged.

"I'll invest the rest safely."

"In what?"

She looked genuinely surprised.

"Fixed deposits."

He stared at her.

For several long seconds, neither spoke.

Then he laughed again.

Longer this time.

Warmer.

As though eternity itself had found something unexpectedly charming.

When the laughter settled, he looked at her with quiet affection.

"You think like an auntie."

"I am an auntie."

"I mean..."

He searched for the right words.

"Even your dreams remain practical."

She smiled into her tea.

"What else should dreams be?"

He watched the rain.

"You don't dream of ruling the world."

"I have enough difficulty managing my kitchen."

"You don't ask for impossible power."

"I already have relatives."

"You don't seek fame."

She made a face.

"People recognise you only when they need money."

The rain softened.

Steam curled gently upward between them.

After a while, she spoke again.

"You know..."

"Hm?"

"I don't actually know why I keep asking."

"For fifty crores?"

"Yes."

She looked down at the tea in her hands.

"Maybe because it sounds like the amount after which people stop worrying."

He didn't answer immediately.

Instead, he watched the rain falling beyond the little tea stall.

Finally, he said quietly,

"Do they?"

She looked at him.

He smiled.

"I've met many wealthy people."

"And?"

"They simply worry about more expensive things."

She considered that.

Then sighed.

"That's disappointing."

"It usually is."

She smiled despite herself.

The rain stopped.

The city beyond the tea stall shimmered beneath fresh moonlight.

The man stood.

"So soon?"

"There are many people who believe I'm ignoring them."

She laughed.

"I suppose your schedule is crowded."

"It has been for some time."

He began walking away.

Then stopped.

Without turning around, he asked,

"If I gave you the fifty crores tomorrow..."

"Yes?"

"Would you still write?"

She didn't answer immediately.

The question surprised her.

She thought about the notebooks beneath her bed.

The thousands of mantras.

The complaints.

The jokes.

The conversations.

Then she smiled.

"I probably would."

"Why?"

"Someone has to keep you updated."

He nodded once.

"As I suspected."

He walked into the moonlight.

And slowly disappeared.

Meenakshi awoke before dawn.

The apartment was quiet.

Rain tapped gently against the windows.

She sat up slowly.

For several minutes she simply smiled.

Then she opened the notebook beside her bed.

After writing a page of *Om Namah Shivaya*, she added:

Mahadev,

For the record, the storage container issue remains genuine.

Please don't underestimate domestic infrastructure.

Also...

thank you for laughing.

It has been a long time since someone laughed at my dreams without laughing at me.

She closed the notebook gently.

Outside, Mumbai was waking once again.

Inside, something subtle had changed.

The mysterious man still hadn't told her who he was.

She still couldn't decide whether he belonged to dreams, memory, loneliness, or something beyond all three.

But one thing had become impossible to deny.

For the first time in years, Meenakshi no longer felt as though she was speaking into silence.

Somewhere...

someone was answering.

Not always with miracles.

Sometimes with questions.

And somehow, those questions were changing her more than the answers ever could.

Chapter Twelve

The Crocodile That Shouldn't Exist

Dreams are strange things.

Most disappear before the first cup of morning tea.

Some remain for a few hours.

And then there are the rare ones that refuse to leave, quietly settling somewhere inside the heart.

This was one of those dreams.

It began in silence.

Meenakshi found herself standing barefoot inside an ancient Shiva temple she had never seen before.

The air smelt of sandalwood, damp stone and burning camphor.

Rows of brass lamps flickered gently against weathered granite walls.

Devotees stood with folded hands, waiting patiently for darshan.

Everything felt... real.

Not dreamlike.

Not blurred.

As though she had somehow wandered into a place that existed somewhere beyond memory.

She slowly joined the queue.

When her turn came, she stepped forward.

Then stopped.

Her breath caught in her throat.

A crocodile was sitting peacefully on the Shivling.

Not beside it.

Not carved into the temple walls.

On it.

Its massive body rested quietly around the sacred stone.

Its eyes were half closed.

It looked neither dangerous nor asleep.

Simply... at peace.

Nobody screamed.

Nobody ran.

The devotees continued praying as though nothing unusual had happened.

Meenakshi looked around in disbelief.

Finally, unable to contain herself, she hurried toward an elderly priest standing nearby.

"Excuse me!"

The priest smiled kindly.

"Yes?"

She pointed frantically toward the sanctum.

"There is a crocodile sitting on the Shivling!"

"I know."

"Then why is nobody chasing it away?"

The old priest looked genuinely puzzled.

"Why would we?"

"Because..."

She struggled to explain what seemed painfully obvious.

"...it's a crocodile."

The priest's smile deepened.

"He is also Shiva's devotee."

The answer was delivered with such effortless certainty that it somehow felt completely reasonable.

Before Meenakshi could ask another question, the temple bells rang together.

The sound filled the entire temple.

Everything dissolved into brilliant white light.

And she woke.

She sat upright in bed.

The ceiling fan turned lazily above her.

Beside her, Prakash was sleeping peacefully, completely
unaware that his wife had just witnessed what could only be
described as spiritually confusing wildlife.

She looked at the clock.

Four fifteen.

Too early for sensible people.

Too late to fall asleep again.

The dream remained astonishingly clear.

She could still see the polished stone floor.

The priest's gentle smile.

The calm eyes of the crocodile.

Most of all...

those strange words.

He is also Shiva's devotee.

At breakfast, she announced it to the family.

"I had a very unusual dream."

Prakash looked up from the newspaper.

"Dinosaur again?"

"I have never dreamt of dinosaurs."

"You once chased Godzilla with a rolling pin."

"That was different."

Riya sighed.

"What happened this time?"

"There was a crocodile sitting on a Shivling."

Silence.

Aditya buttered his toast.

Prakash slowly folded his newspaper.

"And?"

"I asked the priest why nobody was removing it."

"And?"

"He said..."

She paused dramatically.

"...that the crocodile was also Shiva's devotee."

Riya stared.

Aditya blinked twice.

Prakash reached for another biscuit.

"I think," he said carefully, "you should avoid watching wildlife documentaries before sleeping."

"I wasn't watching television."

"What did you eat?"

"The same food all of you ate."

Prakash nodded thoughtfully.

"Interesting."

"No one else dreamt of religious reptiles."

The dream refused to disappear.

Throughout the day she found herself mentioning it to almost everyone.

The neighbour laughed.

"You've been writing too many mantras."

Her cousin suggested consulting an astrologer.

The vegetable vendor confidently diagnosed excess imagination.

Even the priest at their local Shiva temple looked thoughtful before admitting,

"I have never heard of such a temple."

By evening, Meenakshi felt slightly embarrassed.

Perhaps it had simply been a dream.

Nothing more.

Still...

something about it felt unfinished.

Two days later, curiosity defeated common sense.

While everyone else watched television, Meenakshi opened the family computer.

She typed slowly.

Crocodile Shivaling temple.

Hundreds of search results appeared.

She clicked one absent-mindedly.

Then another.

And suddenly...

she stopped breathing.

There it was.

A real temple.

Mosali Ramalingeswara Swamy Temple.

East Godavari.

Andhra Pradesh.

She stared at the photographs.

Again.

And again.

The Shivling wasn't merely beside a crocodile.

It had the unmistakable form of one.

Its long shape.

Its sculpted head.

Its presence.

Different from her dream...

yet somehow exactly the same.

The same overwhelming feeling settled over her.

She whispered,

"No..."

She called out,

"Prakash!"

From the living room came the predictable reply.

"What happened now?"

"Come here."

"It sounds expensive."

"It isn't."

"Then it can wait."

"It cannot."

He walked in with theatrical reluctance.

"What?"

Without saying a word, Meenakshi turned the computer screen toward him.

He looked.

Read.

Looked again.

Then looked at her.

Neither spoke for several seconds.

Finally he asked,

"You've never heard of this place before?"

She shook her head.

"Never."

"You've never been there?"

"No."

He leaned closer to the screen.

"Hmm."

That was all he said.

But Meenakshi knew that "hmm."

It was Prakash's way of admitting he had absolutely no explanation.

Three months later, they boarded a train to Andhra Pradesh.

The journey itself became another family adventure.

Changing trains.

Missing snacks.

Arguing over luggage.

Listening to Meenakshi repeatedly declare,

"I still think this is a summons."

Prakash replied every single time,

"I have never before seen a deity send travel invitations."

"You lack imagination."

The temple was smaller than she had expected.

Quieter too.

There were no enormous crowds.

No grand announcements.

Only the comforting rhythm of bells, incense and whispered prayers.

The moment Meenakshi stepped through the entrance, a strange familiarity washed over her.

"I've been here."

Prakash smiled.

"No."

"I have."

"You dreamt of it."

She looked toward the sanctum.

"Perhaps."

The priest welcomed them warmly.

He spoke only Telugu.

Meenakshi smiled politely.

She spoke only Hindi.

For the next fifteen minutes, both sides communicated with remarkable enthusiasm and absolutely no shared vocabulary.

The priest pointed toward the sanctum.

Meenakshi nodded earnestly.

He told what was undoubtedly the temple's sacred history.

She smiled with increasing devotion.

Prakash stood beside them translating absolutely nothing because he understood just as little.

At one point, everyone laughed together.

Nobody knew exactly why.

When they finally stepped outside, Riya burst into laughter.

"We understood absolutely nothing."

Prakash nodded.

"Not one complete sentence."

Meenakshi looked back toward the temple.

"Strange."

"What?"

She smiled.

"I feel like I understood everything."

From that year onward, it became a family tradition.

Every year they returned.

Every year the priest greeted them with the same affectionate warmth.

Every year they smiled, nodded, folded their hands and failed to understand each other's language with remarkable consistency.

Yet somehow...

the conversations never felt incomplete.

On one visit, while driving back through the green fields of East Godavari, Prakash finally asked the question he had been carrying for years.

"You still don't know the full story of this temple."

"No."

"You still can't understand what the priest says."

"No."

"Then why do you keep coming?"

Meenakshi watched the evening sun disappear behind the coconut trees.

After a long silence, she answered softly,

"When someone invites you into their home..."

"...you don't ask for proof."

Prakash looked at her.

She smiled.

"I don't know why I dreamt of this place."

"I don't know why I found it."

"I don't know why I keep feeling peaceful every time I come here."

She folded her hands almost instinctively.

"I only know that some journeys begin with our plans."

"And some..."

She looked once more toward the temple growing smaller behind them.

"...begin with His."

Outside, the road stretched endlessly ahead.

Inside the car, no one spoke.

There are moments in life that refuse to explain themselves.

They simply ask to be accepted with gratitude.

For Meenakshi, the crocodile that should never have existed became one such moment.

Not proof.

Not evidence.

Just a quiet invitation.

And for reasons she would never fully understand...

she never stopped accepting it.

Chapter Thirteen

Six Kilos & One Spiritual Crisis

There are few forces in the universe more powerful than a middle-aged Indian woman attending a family wedding.

Except perhaps...

that same woman attending the wedding after discovering that every cousin she hasn't seen in three years has somehow become younger.

Or at least richer.

Or both.

It was exactly twelve days before Cousin Neeta's daughter's wedding when Meenakshi stepped onto the weighing scale.

The scale blinked.

Thought for a moment.

Then displayed a number that Meenakshi considered both inaccurate and deeply insulting.

She stepped off.

Waited.

Stepped on again.

The number remained unchanged.

She narrowed her eyes.

"I don't trust you."

The weighing scale remained firm in its convictions.

Prakash walked past the bedroom carrying his morning tea.

"What happened?"

"This scale has become arrogant."

"It only reports facts."

"It reports opinions."

He glanced at the display.

"It looks normal."

She looked at him with profound disappointment.

"You've chosen violence before breakfast."

That afternoon she stood before the mirror checking the silver silk saree she had bought with the forgotten money.

It was still beautiful.

Still elegant.

Still made her feel quietly confident.

Unfortunately...

The crisis began with a blouse.

More specifically,
a blouse that had fit perfectly three years ago and now
refused cooperation like an offended government officer.

Meenakshi stood before mirror pulling fabric sideways with increasing spiritual disappointment.

"No," she muttered. "This blouse has become arrogant."

Behind her,
Riya looked unconvinced.

"Mummy... maybe alter it slightly?"

"Alter?" Meenakshi gasped. "This blouse and I survived three weddings together. We have history."

The blouse disagreed firmly at the hooks.

She turned sideways.

Turned back.

Pulled her stomach in.

Held her breath.

Released it.

The laws of physics returned immediately.

She sighed dramatically.

"Mahadev..."

The photograph on the dressing table smiled its eternal smile.

"You've done remarkable work with mountains."

Silence.

"Galaxies."

Silence.

"The moon."

Silence.

"Surely six kilos cannot be beyond Your department."

That evening she opened a fresh notebook.

Between two pages of *Om Namah Shivaya*, she began drafting what she considered a reasonable proposal.

Respected Mahadev,

Subject: Weight Reduction Initiative

Target: Six kilos

Deadline: Before Neeta's wedding

Benefits: Improved confidence, easier blouse fitting, reduced criticism from relatives.

In return, I offer the following commitments:

1. Fewer sweets.
2. Less gossiping.
3. Monday fasting with full sincerity.

Kindly approve at the earliest.

She read it carefully.

Then underlined "*full sincerity*" for emphasis.

The first promise lasted until lunchtime.

Mrs. Purohit arrived carrying freshly made besan laddoos.

"I made extra."

Meenakshi looked at the plate.

Then at Shiva's photograph.

Then back at the laddoos.

"This..."

she announced solemnly,

"...is clearly a test."

Mrs. Purohit smiled.

"They're made with pure ghee."

"That's how temptation always arrives."

She accepted one.

Purely to avoid hurting feelings.

Half an hour later, three had mysteriously disappeared.

The second promise survived exactly two days.

On Wednesday afternoon, the society ladies gathered in the courtyard.

Someone mentioned the new family that had moved into Building C.

Within minutes, the conversation had travelled through careers, children's education, property prices, questionable parking habits, and speculation about whether the husband's frequent business trips were genuinely business.

Meenakshi contributed only occasionally.

Which, by her standards, qualified as remarkable restraint.

That evening she wrote in her notebook:

Regarding today's gossip...

"You refused them."

"I looked at them sternly."

"And?"

"They remained available."

He smiled.

"You ask for many unusual blessings."

"I ask for practical blessings."

"You've requested fifty crores."

"That remains practical."

"You've requested Bluetooth intervention."

"Necessary."

"You've requested matching storage containers."

"Essential."

He leaned back.

"And now..."

He looked thoughtfully at her.

"...six kilos."

She nodded.

"Urgent."

He stirred his tea slowly.

"You do realise the human body generally responds to diet and exercise?"

"I was hoping to bypass the administrative process."

"I see."

She took a careful sip.

"Surely You have some authority over metabolism."

He looked at her over the rim of his glass.

"And why would I interfere with metabolism?"

She answered immediately.

"You swallowed poison for the universe."

He blinked.

She continued earnestly.

"You held the Ganga in Your hair."

He nodded slowly.

"You danced creation and destruction into existence."

"So I've heard."

She leaned forward with complete confidence.

"You can handle my metabolism."

For one glorious moment...

the chai man said nothing.

Then he laughed.

Not loudly.

Just helplessly.

The laughter shook his shoulders.

He placed the glass on the wooden bench before he spilt it.

"You have extraordinary confidence."

"I have historical evidence."

"You negotiate using scripture."

"I negotiate using Your résumé."

He closed his eyes briefly, still smiling.

"I don't think anyone has ever described cosmic mythology as a résumé."

"They should."

She folded her arms.

"It is very impressive."

He looked at her for a moment, amusement still lingering in his eyes.

Then he said softly, "people who love you rarely count kilos."

Meenakshi snorted lightly to hide emotion.

"Clearly you have never attended Indian weddings."

That familiar smile returned slowly.

And somehow, without understanding why, Meenakshi felt lighter afterward.

Not physically.

Unfortunately.

But somewhere inside.

When the laughter faded, he looked at her kindly.

"Tell me something."

"Hm?"

"If you lost six kilos tomorrow..."

"Yes?"

"Would you finally stop comparing yourself with other women?"

The question lingered between them.

She looked away.

Toward the rain-dark street beyond the tea stall.

"I don't know."

"Would you?"

She wrapped both hands around the warm glass.

After a long silence she admitted quietly,

"Probably not."

He nodded gently.

"Then perhaps six kilos isn't the real weight."

She frowned.

"What does that mean?"

"It means..."

He searched for words simple enough to carry something complicated.

"...people often carry things no weighing scale can measure."

She looked at him.

Then slowly looked upward toward ceiling.

"Very funny."

Silence.

She pointed an accusing finger toward Shiva's photo.

"I specifically requested miracle. Not emotional character development."

The wedding arrived.

She wore silver saree & the blouse fit.

Not perfectly.

But well enough.

She looked beautiful.

Not because the scale had changed.

It hadn't.

But because somewhere over the previous twelve days...

something else had.

She laughed more.

Compared less.

She noticed conversations instead of jewellery.

She danced with her nieces.

She posed for photographs without asking to stand behind taller relatives.

At one point, Cousin Sudha whispered,

"You look so happy."

Meenakshi smiled.

"I slept well."

It wasn't the whole truth.

But it wasn't entirely a lie either.

That night she returned home tired, her feet aching pleasantly.

She removed the bangles.

Folded the silver saree carefully.

Then opened her notebook.

After a page of *Om Namah Shivaya*, she wrote:

Mahadev,

Weight reduction request remains pending.

However...

Thank you for making me forget about it for one evening.

That may actually have been the bigger miracle.

Still, if You happen to discover a spiritually acceptable shortcut...

I remain available.

She smiled as she closed the notebook.

Outside, Mumbai slept beneath a warm summer sky.

Inside, the weighing scale stood quietly in the corner.

Still accurate.

Still merciless.

But somehow...

it no longer had the final word.

Chapter Fourteen

The Mahakaleshwar Transaction

There are pilgrimages people undertake because of faith.

There are pilgrimages undertaken because of family tradition.

And then there are pilgrimages undertaken because one elderly aunt announces,

"Everyone is going. No excuses."

The Joshi family found themselves on the overnight train to Ujjain with three suitcases, two tiffin carriers, one perpetually misplaced water bottle, and enough homemade snacks to survive a small natural disaster.

Prakash settled near the window with a newspaper.

Aditya disappeared into his headphones.

Riya complained about the train charging ports.

Meanwhile, Meenakshi sat protectively beside her handbag.

Not because it contained jewellery.

Or money.

Or expensive electronics.

It contained something far more important.

A tiny notebook.

Wrapped carefully inside a crisp ₹500 note.

Every few minutes she checked to make sure it was still there.

Prakash finally noticed.

"What exactly are you carrying?"

"Documents."

"What documents?"

"Personal."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Government?"

"Higher authority."

He wisely chose not to ask further.

Ever since the mysterious dream had led her to the Mosali Ramalingeswara Swamy Temple in Andhra Pradesh, Meenakshi had stopped believing that she chose every pilgrimage herself. Some temples, she had quietly begun to suspect, called their devotees first.

For Meenakshi, every visit to a famous Shiva temple followed a private ritual that no one else knew about.

Years earlier, entirely on her own, she had invented what she called **The Temple Deposit Scheme**.

The logic, at least to her, was impeccable.

People donated gold.

Some donated silver.

Some offered milk.

Some offered money.

Meenakshi donated conversations.

Weeks before every pilgrimage, she bought a tiny pocket diary—small enough to disappear into the palm of her hand.

Then she filled it.

Page after page.

Line after line.

Om Namah Shivaya.

Thousands of times.

But somewhere between the mantras...

life quietly entered.

There were grocery lists.

Reminders to buy turmeric.

Notes about Prakash forgetting where he had kept important papers.

Prayers for her children's future.

Anxieties about medical reports.

Tiny victories.

Tiny disappointments.

Entire years compressed into fifty little pages.

No one knew these notebooks existed.

Not even Prakash.

To everyone else, they were ordinary diaries.

To Meenakshi...

they were annual reports submitted to God.

Mahakaleshwar Temple was already overflowing when they arrived before dawn.

The air vibrated with bells.

Conches echoed beneath ancient stone ceilings.

The fragrance of sandalwood, flowers, incense, and ghee mingled into something timeless.

Thousands of voices chanted together.

"Har Har Mahadev!"

For a few moments, even Meenakshi forgot to speak.

She simply stood there.

Watching.

Listening.

Feeling astonishingly small beneath centuries of devotion.

Perhaps, she thought...

this was why people kept returning.

Not because life became easier.

Because something inside them remembered how to become quiet.

The family joined the slow-moving queue.

Prakash folded his hands respectfully.

Riya clicked photographs whenever permitted.

Aditya tried unsuccessfully to estimate waiting time.

Meenakshi...

kept checking her handbag.

When they finally reached the sanctum and offered their prayers, she bowed deeply.

Longer than usual.

Then, as everyone moved toward the donation boxes...

her heartbeat quickened.

This was the important part.

She waited.

One family walked away.

Another approached.

A priest became occupied answering someone's question.

Perfect.

With the practised stealth of someone smuggling state secrets rather than devotion, she slipped the tiny notebook from her handbag.

The diary was wrapped carefully inside the ₹500 note.

Neatly folded.

Almost ceremonial.

She looked around.

No one seemed to notice.

Very gently...

she placed it into the donation box.

It disappeared beneath other offerings.

Money.

Envelopes.

Coins.

Flowers.

Her little notebook vanished among them.

She folded her hands.

Then whispered under her breath,

"Please read carefully."

A pause.

"Important matters mentioned throughout."

Another pause.

"And don't skip the appendix."

She smiled.

Then added softly,

"Especially page thirty-eight."

Inside that little diary...

between pages of beautifully repetitive mantras...

appeared a carefully written amendment.

In Meenakshi's neat blue handwriting, it read:

Regarding earlier request of ₹50 crores annually...

After careful review of present circumstances, I am willing to offer revised options.

If the full amount is difficult to arrange, acceptable alternatives include:

- One fully paid apartment.
- Permanent removal of knee pain.
- Children becoming sensible without reminders.
- One reliable cook who does not disappear during festivals.

Kindly prioritise according to feasibility and budget availability.

Thank you.

Below that, after a thoughtful pause, she had added one final sentence.

If none of the above are immediately possible, installments remain acceptable.

It read less like a prayer...

and more like a revised family budget.

As they left the temple, Prakash noticed she looked unusually satisfied.

"You seem happy."

"I've submitted important paperwork."

"What paperwork?"

She smiled mysteriously.

"Annual filing."

"You know..."

he sighed,

"...one day I will understand you."

"No."

She patted his shoulder kindly.

"You won't."

That night, the family stayed in a modest guesthouse overlooking one of Ujjain's quieter lanes.

The city settled into silence.

Temple bells rang softly in the distance.

Meenakshi fell asleep almost immediately.

The dream came without warning.

She found herself sitting beside the familiar tea stall again.

Only this time...

the chai man was already smiling before she arrived.

He poured two glasses without asking.

"You travelled."

"You noticed."

"I usually do."

She accepted the tea.

For several moments neither spoke.

Finally he reached into the pocket of his simple kurta.

And removed...

a tiny notebook.

Wrapped neatly inside a ₹500 note.

Meenakshi's eyes widened.

"My diary!"

He turned it thoughtfully in his hands.

"The handwriting improved this year."

She stared.

"You..."

He opened it carefully.

"I appreciated the revised proposal."

She covered her face.

"Oh no."

"The amendment was particularly professional."

"I knew I should've used black ink."

He ignored the comment.

"You've become flexible."

"I've become realistic."

He nodded approvingly.

"Kindly prioritise according to feasibility."

He looked at her with quiet amusement.

"Very considerate."

"I didn't want to create unnecessary pressure."

"You've also offered installments."

She shrugged.

"I've dealt with banks."

The chai man laughed.

Long and warmly.

"You negotiate exactly like middle-class families prepare monthly budgets."

"We have excellent training."

"I can see that."

He turned another page.

"Reliable cook."

He looked up.

"I thought fifty crores was your highest priority."

"It was."

She sighed.

"Then arthritis happened."

He smiled knowingly.

"Life revises all budgets."

She looked down into her tea.

"It does."

After a while, he closed the notebook carefully.

"I read everything."

The words were simple.

Almost casual.

Yet they entered her heart with surprising weight.

Not because they proved anything.

Not because they answered every doubt.

But because they sounded exactly like something she had quietly hoped to hear for years.

"I read everything."

Not only the requests.

Not only the complaints.

Everything.

The fears hidden between grocery lists.

The gratitude squeezed into empty corners.

The jokes were written to stop her from crying.

The pages where the ink had blurred because tears had arrived before words finished.

Everything.

She looked at him carefully.

"You don't get tired?"

"Of reading?"

She nodded.

He smiled.

"Not when someone writes honestly."

Her eyes softened.

"I thought maybe..."

She hesitated.

"...You only noticed the big prayers."

"The biggest prayers," he said gently, "are rarely the ones asking for big things."

She woke before sunrise.

The guesthouse room was quiet.

Prakash snored gently from the next bed.

Outside, the first temple bells welcomed another day.

For a long time she remained still.

Then she reached into her handbag.

The tiny diary was gone.

Of course it was.

She had left it in the donation box.

She smiled.

Opened a fresh notebook she always carried while travelling.

After writing several pages of *Om Namah Shivaya*, she added:

Mahadev,

Thank you for confirming receipt of documents.

I apologise for doubting Your filing system.

Chapter Fifteen

The Husband Reads the Diaries

Marriage has a peculiar way of making strangers out of people who have shared a roof for decades.

You learn each other's tea preferences.

You memorise medicine schedules.

You know exactly which cupboard holds the winter blankets and which sentence will begin an argument.

And yet, even after all those years, entire inner worlds can remain folded away in the drawer beside the bed.

Prakash discovered one of those worlds on a night when sleep refused to come.

The apartment had settled into its usual midnight sounds.

The ceiling fan hummed overhead.

A distant local train rattled through the darkness.

Somewhere in the building, a pressure cooker lid clanged to the floor, followed by a muffled apology.

Prakash turned over for what felt like the twentieth time.

Sleep remained stubbornly absent.

Careful not to wake Meenakshi, he slipped out of bed and walked into the living room. He switched on the small lamp

beside the bookshelf and stood there for a moment, letting his eyes wander.

The money plant still leaned dramatically toward the window.

The old clock still lost three minutes every week despite repeated repairs.

Everything looked exactly as it always had.

Then his gaze fell on the iron trunk beneath the bed.

The same trunk Meenakshi guarded with almost ceremonial seriousness.

Whenever he had jokingly asked what it contained, she had replied only,

"Evidence."

He had assumed old photographs.

Perhaps letters.

Maybe recipes inherited from her mother.

Curiosity, after nearly thirty years of marriage, finally won.

The trunk creaked open with surprising reluctance.

Inside were notebooks.

Hundreds of them.

Cheap notebooks.

Tiny diaries.

Spiral pads.

School exercise books.

Pocket journals tied together with faded ribbons.

Blue.

Brown.

Green.

Some were so old their pages had turned the colour of turmeric.

Others looked almost new.

Prakash blinked.

"What on earth..."

He picked up the first notebook.

The opening pages contained only one sentence.

Om Namah Shivaya.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Page after page.

He smiled.

"Of course."

The next few pages looked no different.

Then suddenly, between two lines of mantras, appeared:

Buy hing.

The following page read:

Om Namah Shivaya

Om Namah Shivaya

Ask plumber why bathroom tap whistles like pressure cooker.

Om Namah Shivaya

Prakash laughed softly.

He opened another notebook.

This one contained a list.

Things requiring divine intervention:

- Aditya's mathematics.
- Riya's online shopping.
- Prakash's memory.
- Society secretary's attitude.

He shook his head.

"So this is what You've been hearing."

He turned another page.

Mahadev,

Please improve my daughter's decision-making ability.

Also reduce online shopping deliveries.

The delivery boys know our family better than some relatives.

Another notebook.

If possible, kindly remove neighbour's Bluetooth speaker permanently.

Temporary miracle also acceptable.

Prakash burst out laughing.

"So that was You."

He remembered the mysterious death of Mrs. Purohit's speaker.

He looked instinctively toward the framed photograph of Shiva on the wall.

"I don't know whether to thank You or apologise."

He kept reading.

One notebook became three.

Three became seven.

Time disappeared.

The pages revealed a version of his wife he had never fully known.

Not because she had hidden herself.

Because he had never thought to look.

Some entries were gloriously absurd.

Mahadev,

Please ensure coriander prices behave responsibly this season.

Another read:

Today's pressure cooker whistle disappeared again.

Please help Prakash find objects already in front of him.

Miracles should begin at home.

Another simply said:

Today I was right.

Please make him realise it without hurting his ego.

He laughed so hard he had to cover his mouth.

Then, after a while, the laughter softened.

Prakash gently closed the notebook. He looked toward the bedroom where Meenakshi had already fallen asleep. She had trusted these cheap notebooks with everything she never said aloud. Years earlier, after buying yet another bundle of notebooks, she had said quite casually over dinner, "Promise me something."

He had barely looked up from his plate.

"Hmm?"

"When I die, don't throw these away."

He had laughed.

"As if anyone would steal them."

She had shaken her head.

"No. Put every single notebook on my funeral pyre."

He had stared at her.

"What?"

"I'll need them."

"For what?"

She had answered as though explaining something perfectly obvious.

"Documentation."

He had laughed until she became mildly offended.

"I'm serious."

"For whom?"

"Mahadev."

She had pointed toward the framed photograph in the kitchen.

"Forty years of correspondence deserves proper submission."

Prakash had promised simply because refusing to argue was often easier than winning.

Tonight, holding one of those notebooks in his hands, he finally understood.

She had never been joking.

He opened another diary.

This one was older.

The ink had faded.

The handwriting looked younger.

More hurried.

Near the bottom of one page he noticed a sentence underlined twice.

Mahadev, kindly arrange an income of ₹10 crores per annum.

Prakash blinked.

"Ten crores?"

He opened another diary from a few years later.

There it was again.

Only now it read:

₹20 crores annually would be sufficient.

He frowned.

The next notebook.

Another year.

Another request.

Now the figure had changed again.

Mahadev, before I die, kindly arrange an income of ₹50 crores per annum.

Yours faithfully,

Meenakshi

Prakash stared at the page.

Thirty seconds passed.

Then another.

Finally he whispered into the silent room,

"How exactly did we arrive at fifty?"

The following morning, Meenakshi stood in the kitchen making tea.

The apartment smelt of ginger, cardamom, and toasted bread.

Prakash entered carrying one of the notebooks.

She froze.

"Why are you holding that?"

"I couldn't sleep."

"So you committed burglary?"

"I conducted research."

"You opened my trunk."

"I did."

"You read my diaries."

"I did."

She narrowed her eyes.

"I hope you found spelling mistakes."

"I found something much more interesting."

He opened the diary dramatically.

"Can I ask a question?"

"You'll ask anyway."

"Fair."

He pointed to the page.

"From where exactly do you think fifty crores per year will come?"

Without missing a beat, Meenakshi stirred the tea.

"That is Shiva's problem."

Prakash waited.

She continued stirring.

"You are not even working."

"I know."

"So?"

She looked up as though explaining something painfully obvious to a child.

"I don't want to make His problem my problem also."

Prakash blinked.

"That's your financial strategy?"

"Of course."

She switched off the gas.

"He is Mahadev."

She poured tea into two cups.

"I am middle class."

She handed him one.

"Both of us should contribute according to capability."

Prakash laughed so violently that tea nearly escaped the cup.

"You've outsourced wealth creation to God."

"I've delegated."

"There is a difference?"

"Yes."

She took a calm sip.

"Delegation shows trust."

After breakfast, curiosity still refused to leave him.

He picked up another notebook.

"One more question."

She sighed theatrically.

"Proceed."

"I found something strange."

She folded her arms.

"In the oldest diary..."

He held up the notebook.

"...you asked for ten crores."

She nodded.

"In the next few..."

He picked up another.

"...you increased it to twenty."

Another nod.

"And now it's fifty."

She looked entirely untroubled.

"Correct."

"Why?"

She answered with complete seriousness.

"Inflation."

He stared.

"Inflation?"

She nodded as though discussing onion prices.

"Had Mahadev approved the first application..."

She held up one finger.

"...ten crores would have been perfectly adequate."

A second finger joined the first.

"But years passed."

"So?"

"Prices increased."

She shrugged.

"My expectations adjusted."

Prakash laughed again.

"You revised your prayer because of inflation?"

"Naturally."

She looked almost offended that he hadn't reached the conclusion himself.

"The Reserve Bank changes interest rates."

"The government revises tax slabs."

"I revised my request."

He leaned against the kitchen counter, unable to stop smiling.

"So why stop at fifty?"

She became unexpectedly thoughtful.

"Because..."

She looked into her tea.

"...I think fifty is the correct amount."

"Why?"

She smiled faintly.

"More than that..."

She paused.

"...will create unnecessary problems."

"What problems?"

She counted quietly on her fingers.

"More accountants."

"Higher taxes."

"Suspicious relatives."

"People suddenly remembering my birthday."

She looked at him with absolute sincerity.

"And frankly..."

Another sip of tea.

"...I'm simply not in the mood to handle more problems than the ones I already have."

The sentence landed differently.

The humour remained.

But something underneath it shifted.

Prakash noticed it immediately.

That evening, after Meenakshi had gone to buy vegetables, he returned to the notebooks.

This time he wasn't looking for jokes.

He found something else.

A diary written during the year Aditya had fallen seriously ill with dengue.

Between pages of mantras she had written:

Pretended not to panic today.

Children should never inherit their parents' fear.

Another notebook from the difficult years when money had been painfully tight.

Paid school fees.

Electricity bill can wait three days.

Thank You for somehow making everything stretch again.

Another.

Written after Prakash had lost his job unexpectedly.

He smiled in front of the children today.

He thinks I believed him.

Please give him back his confidence before You give us money.

Prakash lowered the notebook slowly.

His vision blurred.

For decades, he had believed he knew every important conversation in their marriage.

Yet here were hundreds he had never heard.

Conversations held quietly...

between his wife...

and God.

Not because she loved her family less.

Because she wanted to protect them from the weight she carried.

The notebooks were never really about fifty crores.

Or Bluetooth speakers.

Or coriander.

Or missing pressure cooker whistles.

Those were simply the language she used to survive ordinary days.

Hidden beneath the jokes was a woman who had whispered every fear into the only silence she trusted.

That night, after dinner, Meenakshi noticed the trunk had been closed more carefully than usual.

She smiled to herself.

Without saying anything, she opened a fresh notebook.

After writing a page of **Om Namah Shivaya**, she added:

Mahadev,

Prakash has finally read some of the files.

He laughed at the financial proposal.

Good.

Laughter is easier for husbands to understand than worry.

Also...

Please don't approve the fifty crores immediately.

He'll faint.

She paused.

Then, smiling to herself, she wrote one final line.

Though if You have already processed the application...
kindly ignore the previous sentence.

She closed the notebook.

Across the room, Prakash looked at her over the top of his newspaper.

Neither mentioned the diaries.

Neither needed to.

Some conversations did not begin with words.

They began with understanding.

And somewhere beyond the apartment walls, beyond the city lights, beyond everything either of them could explain...

someone who had been reading those notebooks for years...

smiled.

Chapter Sixteen

The Great Mango Miracle

Every summer in Mumbai begins with optimism.

Every summer ends with disappointment.

Especially if you are emotionally invested in Alphonso mangoes.

For Meenakshi, mango season was not merely a season.

It was a sacred annual event.

The arrival of the first Alphonso mangoes carried the emotional importance of a festival, a family reunion, and a government tax refund rolled into one.

Every year she announced,

"This time I will eat without calculating."

Every year she calculated anyway.

The first crate appeared at the neighbourhood fruit market on a blazing April morning.

Golden.

Fragrant.

Perfect.

Meenakshi stopped walking.

She inhaled deeply.

The scent alone transported her straight back to childhood summers in her parents' home.

Steel plates.

Cold mango slices.

Sticky fingers.

Afternoons that seemed endless.

Back then, mangoes had simply been mangoes.

Nobody spoke about export quality.

Or premium grade.

Or luxury fruit.

Now they sat beneath handwritten boards announcing prices that looked suspiciously similar to monthly electricity bills.

Meenakshi picked one up carefully.

Turned it over.

Admired its colour.

Then asked the vendor,

"How much?"

The vendor smiled proudly.

"Only one thousand six hundred a dozen."

Meenakshi almost dropped the mango.

"Only?"

The vendor nodded confidently.

"Premium Ratnagiri."

She placed the mango back as though it had suddenly become radioactive.

"For this price..."

she murmured,

"...it should peel itself."

She walked home carrying coriander, tomatoes, potatoes... and profound emotional disappointment.

The fruit bag felt unusually light.

Prakash looked up from the newspaper as she entered.

"No mangoes?"

She removed her sandals dramatically.

"I refuse to participate in organised extortion."

"They're expensive this year."

"They're behaving like real estate."

She emptied vegetables onto the kitchen counter with exaggerated sorrow.

"Do you know..."

she announced to nobody in particular,

"...there was a time ordinary people ate Alphonso mangoes."

Prakash wisely remained silent.

She looked toward the familiar photograph of Shiva near the window.

"You've noticed this?"

Silence.

"People are buying imported blueberries."

Silence.

"Meanwhile Your devotees are negotiating with mangoes."

Still silence.

She folded her arms.

"At least the fruit department requires Your attention."

That night she added a new entry to her notebook.

Between several pages of **Om Namah Shivaya**, she wrote:

Mahadev,

Request Number 7,462.

Kindly arrange affordable Alphonso mangoes.

Not asking for fifty crores today.

Just mangoes.

Surely this falls within reasonable limits.

She thought for a moment.

Then added:

If possible, please ensure they are naturally sweet.

Last year's batch tasted emotionally confused.

The next afternoon she stopped at the fruit market again.

Mostly to suffer.

As she approached the stall, another customer was walking away carrying a carton of mangoes.

The vendor called after him,

"Arre, Mahadev ji!"

"You forgot your change!"

The man turned, laughed, collected a few notes, and disappeared into the crowd.

Meenakshi stopped for half a second.

Of all the names...

She smiled to herself.

"Mumbai," she muttered.

"Even customers arrive on cue."

Then she walked toward the stall.

The same vendor waved enthusiastically.

"Aunty!"

"I've come only to look."

"Today special price."

"I've heard this before."

"No, really."

She folded her arms cautiously.

"What happened?"

The young assistant standing behind the stall looked embarrassed.

"Yesterday one customer ordered six boxes."

The vendor sighed.

"He cancelled this morning."

"So?"

"So now I must sell quickly."

He began weighing mangoes.

Premium Alphonsos.

The very ones she had admired yesterday.

"Take them."

"At what price?"

He named a figure.

She blinked.

"That's impossible."

The vendor shrugged.

"What can I do?"

He tapped the wooden crate affectionately.

"Sometimes fruit chooses its own customer."

The assistant rolled his eyes.

"It doesn't."

The vendor grinned.

"I know."

"But it sounds better than saying the order was cancelled."

Meenakshi laughed.

"Good."

"For one dangerous second I thought the mangoes had developed opinions."

Meenakshi frowned.

"That's impossible."

He nodded unhappily.

"My loss."

She looked suspiciously from the mangoes to the vendor.

Then back again.

"You've made a mistake."

"I haven't."

"This is less than half yesterday's price."

"I know."

She narrowed her eyes.

"Are they stolen?"

He looked offended.

"They're mangoes."

"People steal stranger things."

She carried the box home with both hands.

Almost reverently.

The apartment immediately filled with the unmistakable fragrance of ripe Alphonso.

Prakash emerged from the living room.

"You bought them?"

"I may have witnessed divine intervention."

He examined the receipt.

"This can't be right."

"Exactly."

He looked at her.

She looked toward Shiva's photograph.

Neither said anything.

That evening the entire family gathered around the dining table.

Meenakshi washed each mango with astonishing care.

She sliced them the way only experienced mothers do—efficiently,

beautifully,

without wasting even a thread of fruit.

Golden slices filled the steel plates.

The first bite silenced the room.

Riya closed her eyes.

"Oh..."

Aditya reached immediately for another slice.

Prakash smiled.

"Worth every rupee."

Meenakshi chewed thoughtfully.

Then looked upward.

"Good work."

Prakash laughed.

"You're complimenting God?"

"I'm complimenting the procurement department."

Later that evening she visited Mrs. Purohit.

Not because she particularly wanted to.

But because joy, she believed, tasted better when shared.

She carried a small steel bowl covered with another steel plate.

Mrs. Purohit opened the door.

"Mangoes?"

"Premium."

Mrs. Purohit looked surprised.

"I thought they were too expensive."

"They were."

"And now?"

Meenakshi smiled mysteriously.

"I have contacts."

Mrs. Purohit immediately became interested.

"Which market?"

"Higher management."

That night the dream returned.
The tea stall stood exactly where it always did.
The mysterious chai man was peeling a mango.
Very slowly.
Very patiently.
He handed her one slice.
She accepted it.
It was perfect.
Naturally.
"You enjoyed today's purchase."
"I did."
"You thanked Me."
"I thanked whichever department handled the file."
He smiled.
"The fruit department was pleased."
"I knew it existed."
He took another bite.
"You ask for interesting miracles."
"I ask for practical happiness."
"Some people pray for enlightenment."
"They're free to do so."
"And you pray for mangoes."

"I've already explained."

She counted on her fingers.

"Affordable."

"Sweet."

"Not fibrous."

"Properly ripe."

"These are serious matters."

He nodded gravely.

"I stand corrected."

She studied him carefully.

"Did You arrange it?"

Instead of answering, he asked,

"Did you enjoy them?"

"Very much."

"Did everyone eat together?"

She thought about the dinner table.

The laughter.

The sticky fingers.

Prakash asking for one more slice.

Riya stealing from Aditya's plate.

The quiet happiness that had filled the apartment.

"Yes."

"Were you grateful?"

She smiled.

"Very."

He nodded once.

"Then perhaps that's enough."

She frowned.

"You never answer questions directly."

"I've noticed."

"It's irritating."

"I've also noticed."

When she woke the next morning, the kitchen still smelt faintly of mangoes.

Only two remained in the box.

She smiled.

Opened her notebook.

After several pages of Om Namah Shivaya, she wrote:

Mahadev,

Yesterday's mango arrangement was excellent.

Kindly convey appreciation to the concerned department.

If future seasonal discounts become available,

please remember this loyal customer.

Also...

thank You for reminding me that sometimes happiness arrives in kilograms instead of miracles.

She closed the notebook and carried the remaining mangoes into the kitchen.

Outside, Mumbai continued its hurried morning.

Local trains thundered across the city.

Office workers rushed toward another busy day.

Fruit vendors arranged fresh produce beneath colourful umbrellas.

Life, as always, remained noisy and unfinished.

But inside one modest apartment, breakfast ended with mango juice running down everyone's wrists...

and laughter echoing across the dining table.

Sometimes, Meenakshi thought, perhaps the greatest miracles were not the impossible ones.

Perhaps they were simply the ordinary joys that arrived exactly when the heart had almost stopped expecting them.

Still...

as she washed the empty mango bowl, she glanced toward Shiva's photograph and said,

"Very nice."

Her phone buzzed on the kitchen counter.

A promotional notification from the grocery app.

"Alphonso Festival – Prices Slashed!"

She looked at the screen.

Then at the two remaining mangoes.

Then at Shiva's photograph.

"Too late."

A pause.

"But thank You for trying."

She dismissed the notification with a smile.

A thoughtful pause.

"But don't think this affects the pending fifty-crore application."

She rinsed the empty bowl and placed it upside down on the drying rack.

As she turned off the kitchen tap, sunlight slipped through the window and fell across the little framed photograph.

For an instant, the reflection shimmered on the glass.

It almost looked as though Shiva were smiling.

Almost.

She stood there for a second.

Then laughed at herself.

"Nice try."

Whether she was speaking to the morning light...

or to Someone else...

even she wasn't entirely sure.

Chapter Seventeen

The Night Mumbai Went Dark

Mumbai was a city that refused to sleep.

It negotiated.

It yawned.

It complained.

But it never truly surrendered to darkness.

Even at two in the morning there was always something humming—an air conditioner, a taxi, a television behind closed curtains, a train rolling across distant tracks, a neighbour watching cricket with the volume turned just high enough to become everyone's problem.

So when the lights went out across the entire city...

the silence arrived before anyone understood what had happened.

It began with a blink.

The television disappeared.

The ceiling fan slowed reluctantly.

The refrigerator sighed like an old man giving up an argument.

Then everything stopped.

For a heartbeat, the apartment seemed to hold its breath.

From somewhere outside came a collective chorus of surprise.

"Ay!"

"What happened?"

"Current gone?"

Within seconds, balconies filled with people leaning over railings, each convinced the neighbours possessed more information than the electricity department.

Prakash peered out of the window.

"The whole building."

"The whole street," Aditya added, looking at the darkness stretching beyond the society gate.

Riya reached instinctively for her phone.

"No Wi-Fi."

Prakash laughed.

"The country's survived wars. You'll survive without Wi-Fi."

"For how long?"

"No one knows."

She looked horrified.

Meenakshi, meanwhile, had already opened the kitchen drawer where she kept candles with the efficiency of someone who had lived through enough power cuts to know that panic never restored electricity.

Within minutes, small flames flickered around the apartment.

The shadows softened.

The familiar rooms looked strangely unfamiliar.

Older.

Gentler.

Almost as though time itself had slowed.

Without television, without mobile notifications, without the endless background noise of modern life, conversation returned to the apartment.

The family actually sat together.

Prakash told stories about growing up before colour television.

Aditya claimed life without the internet qualified as prehistoric suffering.

Riya insisted she could hear mosquitoes planning strategy meetings.

Even Mrs. Purohit knocked on the door carrying a steel bowl of roasted peanuts.

"I was getting bored."

"Come," Meenakshi said. "Tonight we are all officially citizens of the nineteenth century."

The adults laughed.

The children rolled their eyes.

For an hour, they simply talked.

Not because they had planned to.

Because there was nothing else left to do.

Later, after everyone had gone to bed, the electricity still hadn't returned.

The apartment glowed softly beneath the last surviving candle.

Sleep refused to arrive.

Meenakshi wandered into the living room.

The iron trunk beneath her bed caught her eye.

Without quite knowing why, she pulled it out.

The metal hinges complained softly as she lifted the lid.

Hundreds of notebooks stared back at her.

Forty years of conversations.

Forty years of ink.

Forty years of believing that silence on the other end did not necessarily mean absence.

She picked one at random.

Then another.

Then an older one whose cover had almost fallen away.

The candlelight trembled over faded pages.

The handwriting changed from notebook to notebook.

Sometimes hurried.

Sometimes careful.

Sometimes crooked because she had clearly written while half asleep.

Sometimes smudged by tears she had never mentioned to anyone.

She smiled.

"I really do talk too much."

One diary opened to a page she had completely forgotten.

It was dated nearly twenty years earlier.

The year Prakash had unexpectedly lost his job.

She had written:

Mahadev,

Today I smiled all day so the children wouldn't worry.

Please let Prakash sleep tonight.

He pretends to be brave very loudly.

She closed her eyes.

She remembered that evening perfectly now.

The uncertainty.

The unpaid bills.

The fear that arrived after everyone else had fallen asleep.

Back then she had been convinced life was collapsing.

Yet somehow...

they had survived.

Another notebook.

This one is from the year Aditya had spent a week in hospital with dengue.

The pages were filled almost entirely with mantras.

Between them appeared one sentence.

His fever came down today. Thank You.

Nothing more.

No dramatic celebration.

No theological reflection.

Just one exhausted line written by a mother who had finally breathed properly after days.

She traced the faded ink with her finger.

She hadn't remembered writing it.

But she remembered living it.

Another diary.

The year Riya had moved away for her first job.

Half the page contained complaints.

The house feels too quiet.

Then, squeezed into the margin:

Please don't let loneliness become another family member.

Meenakshi smiled sadly.

She remembered pretending she enjoyed the peace.

She remembered making too much tea for weeks because her hands still expected four cups instead of three.

Life had rearranged itself again.

Quietly.

Without asking permission.

She continued reading.

Notebook after notebook.

Year after year.

Some entries made her laugh aloud.

Mahadev,

**Please explain to my husband that remote controls cannot
disappear by spiritual means.**

Another simply said:

Bought coriander at reasonable price.

Possible miracle.

Then suddenly...

a page stopped her completely.

It contained no requests.

No complaints.

Only three lines.

Today nothing special happened.

And perhaps that itself is something to be grateful for.

She stared at the words.

When had she become wise enough to write that?

And when had she forgotten it?

Outside, Mumbai remained wrapped in unusual darkness.

No neon signs.

No apartment windows glowing blue with television screens.

Only the occasional candle.

The occasional torch.

The occasional star finally visible above a city that rarely allowed itself to look upward.

Meenakshi walked onto the balcony carrying the notebook.

The silence felt different tonight.

Not empty.

Protective.

She looked toward the sky.

"Mahadev..."

The word disappeared into the darkness.

"I've been unfair."

No answer came.

She smiled.

"I know."

She leaned against the railing.

"For years I've been counting unanswered prayers."

She paused.

"But I've never counted unanswered disasters."

The thought settled over her gently.

She had prayed for impossible things.
Sometimes they had happened.
Often they hadn't.
But there were so many things she had feared...
that had never arrived.
So many storms that had somehow passed around them.
So many endings that had quietly become new beginnings
instead.
Perhaps miracles...
were not always additions.
Perhaps sometimes they were absences.
The accident that never happened.
The illness that healed.
The friendship that remained.
The family that somehow stayed together despite all their
imperfections.
The lights returned just after two in the morning.
The refrigerator hummed back to life.
The fan began turning.
The city exhaled collectively.
From neighbouring buildings came scattered applause.
Someone shouted,
"Finally!"

A child cheered.

Life resumed exactly where it had paused.

Yet something inside Meenakshi remained wonderfully still.

She returned the notebooks to the trunk with unusual tenderness.

Before closing the lid, she rested her hand on the top diary.

"So many complaints..."

she whispered.

"So many survivals."

That night, before sleeping, she opened a fresh notebook.

She wrote a page of Om Namah Shivaya.

Then another.

Then she added:

Mahadev,

Tonight Mumbai lost electricity.

In the darkness I found something unexpected.

I found evidence.

Not that You granted every request.

But that somehow, without my noticing, You carried us through far more than I ever thanked You for.

I still think the fifty crores would have made the journey easier.

But perhaps...

endurance was Your first investment.

She stopped.

Read the words again.

Then smiled.

One final sentence appeared beneath them.

Still accepting both endurance and fifty crores, should You wish to diversify Your blessings.

She closed the notebook, laughing softly at herself.

As she switched off the bedside lamp, the apartment settled once again into its ordinary rhythm.

The fan turned overhead.

A local train rumbled somewhere in the distance.

Prakash mumbled something unintelligible in his sleep.

Everything was exactly as it had been.

Except Meenakshi now understood something she hadn't before.

For years she had searched her life for spectacular miracles—lightning from the heavens, impossible fortunes, dramatic answers.

Instead, she had been living inside a quieter miracle all along.

Not one that announced itself.

One that endured.

And sometimes...

endurance was the most divine answer of all.

Chapter Eighteen

The Day She Stopped Talking

Every relationship, no matter how enduring, eventually reaches a day of silence.

Not because love disappears.

Because words grow tired.

For forty years, Meenakshi had spoken to Lord Shiva every single day.

Sometimes formally.

Mostly informally.

She spoke while chopping onions.

While waiting for local trains.

While searching for misplaced spectacles that were usually resting on her own head.

She thanked Him.

Complained to Him.

Negotiated relentlessly.

Occasionally threatened to withdraw emotional cooperation.

If anyone had counted, they would have discovered that Meenakshi had probably spoken more words to Shiva than to every priest she had ever met.

And then...

one Tuesday morning...

she stopped.

No dramatic reason existed.

No tragedy.

No crisis.

No unanswered prayer.

Just an inexplicable weariness.

Perhaps it was age.

Perhaps it was the previous night's restless sleep.

Perhaps every conversation eventually needed a pause.

She woke before sunrise as always.

Made tea.

Watered the stubborn money plant that continued surviving out of pure determination.

Prepared breakfast.

Packed Prakash's tiffin.

Normally, somewhere between washing the rice and finding the missing lid for the pressure cooker, she would have said something.

"Good morning."

"Please ensure tomatoes become affordable."

"Also kindly supervise today's traffic."

Anything.

Today...

nothing.

She noticed the silence immediately.

And deliberately let it remain.

The framed photograph of Shiva watched from its familiar place near the kitchen window.

Every other morning she would have glanced toward it at least ten times.

Today she avoided looking altogether.

It felt strangely childish.

Like refusing to look at someone after an argument that had never actually happened.

On the train to Churchgate, the habit returned automatically.

A man stepped squarely on her foot.

She opened her mouth.

"Mahadev, please..."

Then stopped.

No.

Not today.

She looked out the window instead.

At the buildings rushing past.

At laundry fluttering from balconies.

At a city that seemed permanently late for something.

The silence travelled beside her.

At the vegetable market, the coriander vendor announced a price that Meenakshi considered morally unacceptable.

Normally this would have inspired an immediate prayer.

Or complaint.

Or legal argument addressed directly to the Creator of the Universe.

Instead she simply paid.

The vendor stared.

"No bargaining today?"

"No."

"You okay?"

"I think so."

He looked genuinely worried.

Even Mrs. Purohit noticed.

"You look quiet."

"I am."

"Fever?"

"No."

"Fight with Prakash?"

"No."

"Children?"

"No."

Mrs. Purohit frowned.

"Then why aren't you talking?"

Meenakshi almost laughed.

If only she knew.

By afternoon, the silence had become surprisingly heavy.

Not peaceful.

Empty.

She found herself reaching instinctively toward conversations that no longer happened.

While folding laundry, she picked up one of Prakash's socks.

Usually she would have remarked,

"Mahadev, if You can create galaxies, surely You can teach this man to keep pairs together."

Today...

nothing.

She simply folded the socks.

The task felt incomplete.

That evening, rain arrived unexpectedly.

Mumbai transformed in minutes.

Balconies filled with damp clothes rescued too late.
Children celebrated.
Traffic surrendered.
The smell of wet earth drifted through the apartment.
Meenakshi stood by the window watching the rain.
For years, every first monsoon shower had begun the same way.
"Beautiful work."
A simple sentence offered upward.
Today...
only rain.
She realised she missed speaking.
The admission surprised her.
She had imagined that silence would prove something.
She wasn't entirely sure what.
Instead it had only revealed how deeply conversation had woven itself into her ordinary life.
She wasn't missing miracles.
She was missing companionship.
Dinner passed quietly.
Prakash finally looked up from his plate.
"You've hardly said anything today."
"I'm tired."

"You never become this quiet."

"I know."

He studied her for a moment.

Then smiled gently.

"Whoever you're arguing with..."

He reached for another chapati.

"...you'll forgive them tomorrow."

She looked at him.

Then almost laughed.

"You think so?"

"I've lived with you thirty years."

He shrugged.

"You don't stay angry for very long."

That night, sleep arrived almost immediately.

And with it...

the dream.

Or perhaps...

the meeting.

The familiar tea stall stood beneath a yellow streetlamp.

Rainwater shimmered on the road.

The chai man sat exactly where he always did.

Only tonight...

there was only one glass of tea.

He looked up as she approached.

"You were absent today."

His voice was quiet.

No accusation.

Just gentle curiosity.

Meenakshi stopped walking.

"You noticed?"

"I notice when people disappear."

She sat beside him.

Neither reached for the tea.

After a long silence, she asked,

"Did You miss me?"

He smiled.

"I thought you were proving a point."

"I was trying."

"Did it work?"

She looked down at her hands.

"I don't know."

The chai man nodded thoughtfully.

"I waited."

She looked up sharply.

"You waited?"

"You usually begin talking before breakfast."

"I know."

"Then trains."

She smiled despite herself.

"And vegetables."

"You complain most sincerely at vegetable markets."

She laughed softly.

"I do."

"You skipped every appointment today."

She stared at him.

Appointment.

The word settled somewhere deep inside her.

All these years she had believed she was interrupting God.

Disturbing Him with absurd requests.

Bothering Him with mangoes, Bluetooth speakers, knee pain, and the economic injustice of coriander prices.

She had never imagined...

that perhaps the conversations themselves mattered.

"I thought..."

she began carefully,

"...maybe I was talking too much."

The chai man considered this.

"Have you ever noticed children?"

She nodded.

"They ask endless questions."

"Yes."

"They repeat stories."

"Yes."

"They interrupt constantly."

She smiled.

"Definitely."

"And good parents rarely become tired of hearing the voice of someone they love."

The sentence entered the silence between them and stayed there.

He looked at her kindly.

"You thought prayer was a performance."

She blinked.

"Sometimes."

"It isn't."

"What is it?"

He lifted the untouched glass of chai and handed it to her.

"It's a relationship."

She wrapped her hands around the warm glass.

Steam drifted gently upward.

"You don't need impressive words."

"I know."

"You don't need perfect discipline."

She smiled.

"Clearly."

"You don't even need to stop complaining."

"I was hoping You'd say that."

He laughed.

"I know."

For a while they simply sat together watching rain collect beneath the tea stall roof.

Finally Meenakshi spoke again.

"I missed talking."

"I know."

"I didn't realise how much."

"I know."

"You keep saying that."

"I've had practice."

She shook her head.

"You really are impossible."

"So I've been told."

She woke before dawn.

The apartment was still.

Outside, the rain had washed the city clean.

For a long moment she remained lying in bed.

Listening.

Feeling.

Then, almost instinctively, she smiled toward the ceiling.

"Good morning."

The words escaped before she had consciously decided to speak.

Nothing happened.

No thunder.

No divine music.

Only the quiet comfort of familiarity returning.

She walked into the kitchen.

Filled the kettle.

Looked toward the framed photograph.

"I apologise."

A pause.

"I was conducting an unnecessary experiment."

She waited.

The photograph, as always, smiled without comment.

A spoon slipped mysteriously from drying rack onto counter with sharp metallic sound.

Meenakshi froze.

Then narrowed eyes suspiciously.

“...show-off.”

She laughed.

She opened a fresh notebook.

Wrote one full page of Om Namah Shivaya.

Then added beneath it:

Mahadev,

Yesterday I attempted silence.

The results were disappointing.

Apparently I have become accustomed to discussing everything with You.

This is entirely Your fault for encouraging the habit.

Also...

good morning.

She closed the notebook.

Outside, Mumbai was waking once more.

The first local train thundered across the tracks.

Milk packets landed outside apartment doors.

Someone somewhere began playing devotional songs slightly louder than necessary.

Life resumed its ordinary rhythm.

And so did Meenakshi.

She spoke to Shiva while making tea.

While searching for the sugar container that Prakash had placed in the wrong cupboard.

While watering the money plant.

While watching the city hurry toward another busy day.

The conversations returned exactly where they had left off.

Not because she had found proof.

Not because all her prayers had been answered.

But because somewhere between devotion and habit...

between faith and friendship...

between prayer and conversation...

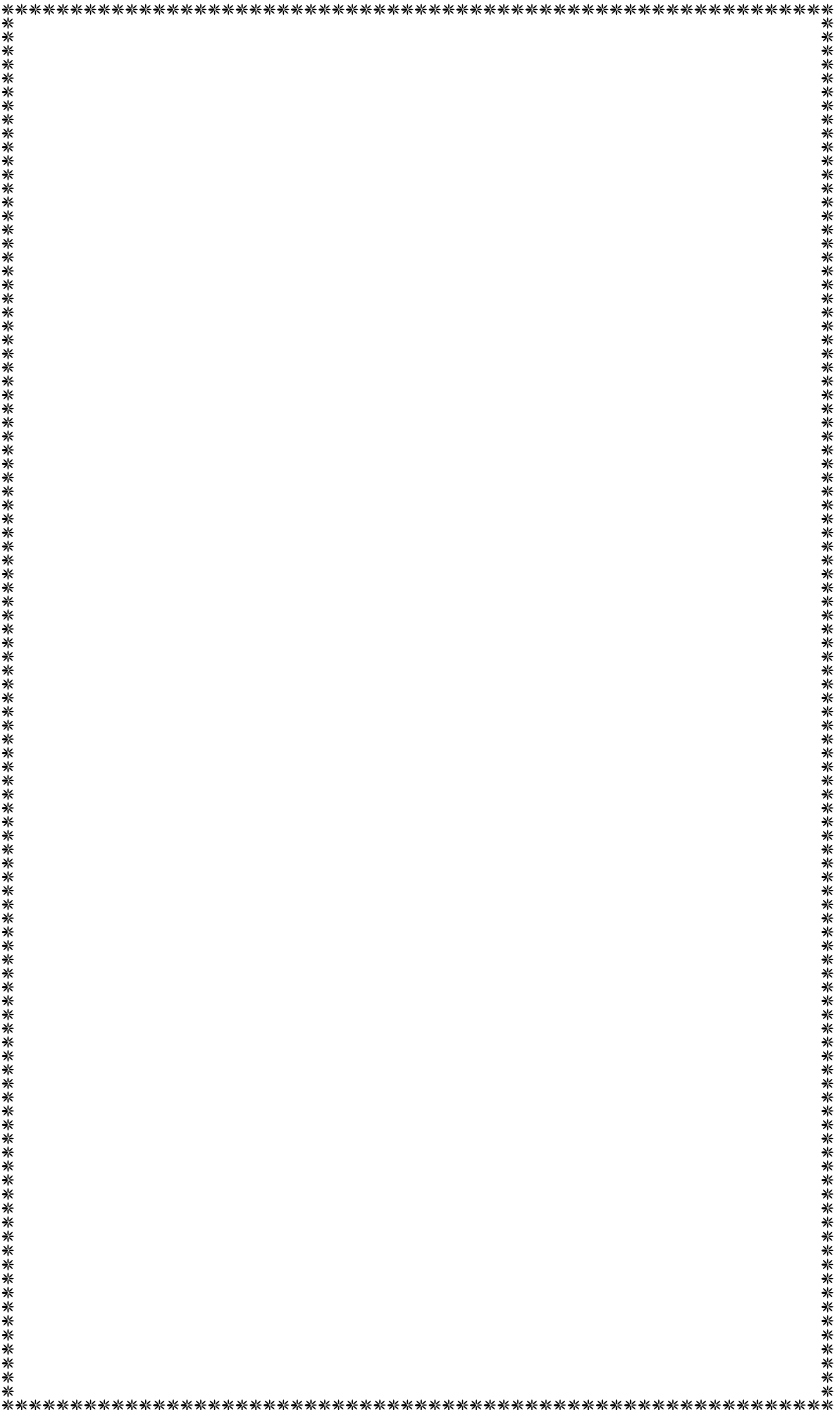
she had discovered something infinitely more precious than certainty.

She had discovered companionship.

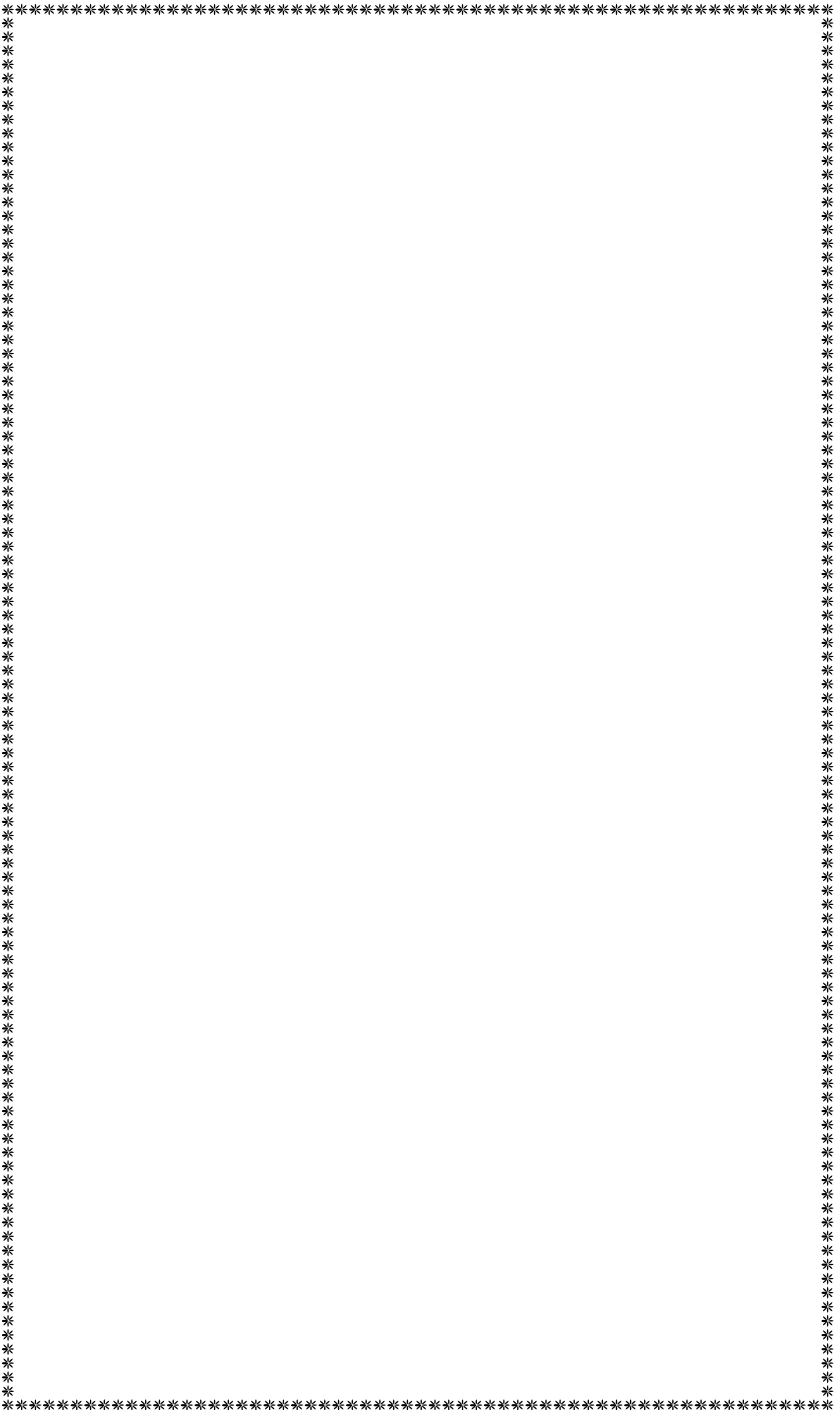
And once the heart has found someone to speak to...

silence no longer feels like peace.

It simply feels like absence.



Part III —
“THE WOMAN WHO REFUSED TO
BE SPIRITUALLY ORDINARY”



Chapter Nineteen

Mildly Serious

There comes a certain age when every unexpected phone call begins with the same sentence.

"Don't panic..."

Which, of course, guarantees that everyone immediately does.

It began with fatigue.

Not the ordinary tiredness that followed housework, crowded markets, or long train journeys.

This was different.

A quiet heaviness.

As though someone had quietly turned gravity up by a few degrees.

For nearly a week, Meenakshi ignored it.

She blamed the weather.

Then age.

Then Mumbai's humidity.

Then the neighbour's loud devotional remixes.

"It is impossible to remain healthy," she announced while making tea one morning, "when someone begins praising God at six o'clock using electronic drums."

Prakash looked over his newspaper.

"You've looked pale for days."

"I've looked middle-class for forty-eight years."

"That's not the same thing."

"It is surprisingly similar."

He lowered the newspaper.

"Let's go to the doctor."

"I'm perfectly fine."

"You just sat down halfway through making tea."

"I was appreciating the chair."

"You forgot to add sugar."

"I was encouraging everyone to reduce diabetes."

"You also forgot the tea leaves."

She frowned.

"I did?"

"You served us hot water."

Meenakshi looked genuinely offended.

"That sounds unlike me."

"It does."

Silence lingered between them.

For the first time...

she looked uncertain.

By afternoon, Prakash had stopped asking.

Instead, he quietly booked a doctor's appointment.

When he returned home with the appointment slip, he placed it beside her cup of tea.

"We're going tomorrow."

She sighed dramatically.

"Doctors always find something."

"They're supposed to."

"They'll ask me to walk."

"You should."

"They'll tell me to reduce salt."

"You should."

"They'll blame stress."

He smiled.

"They'll probably be right."

She glared at him.

"You've become very supportive of modern medicine."

"I've become supportive of my wife staying alive."

The joke landed softly.

Neither laughed.

Hospitals possess a strange equality.

Inside their walls, job titles become irrelevant.

Bank balances grow quieter.

Everyone waits.

Everyone worries.

Everyone hopes for the same sentence.

"Nothing serious."

The waiting room smelt faintly of antiseptic and over-brewed tea.

Television screens played health awareness videos no one watched.

Children cried.

Phones rang.

Doctors hurried past carrying entire worlds inside thin files.

Meenakshi looked around uneasily.

"I don't belong here."

Prakash squeezed her hand.

"Nobody feels they do."

The doctor, a calm woman in her sixties with silver hair and patient eyes, listened carefully.

She asked questions.

Ordered blood tests.

Checked blood pressure.

Recommended a few additional investigations.

Nothing sounded alarming.

Nothing sounded entirely reassuring either.

"We'll know more after the reports."

Those words followed them home.

Waiting for medical reports is unlike any other kind of waiting.

Time stretches strangely.

Every small ache suddenly feels significant.

Every article on the internet predicts catastrophe.

Every phone notification raises the heartbeat.

By evening, the news had already travelled through the extended family.

Relatives began calling with astonishing efficiency.

One aunt recommended turmeric boiled in goat's milk.

Another insisted everything could be cured by eating soaked fenugreek seeds before sunrise.

Someone suggested a homoeopathic doctor.

Someone else blamed air-conditioning.

Mrs. Purohit arrived carrying homemade soup.

"You need strength."

"I don't even know what's wrong."

"Exactly."

She placed the bowl firmly on the table.

"Soup works before diagnosis."

Prakash smiled politely through every phone call.

He reassured everyone.

"It's nothing serious."

"We're just waiting."

"The doctor isn't worried."

He sounded calm.

Measured.

Steady.

Only Meenakshi noticed that he checked his phone every five minutes.

Only she noticed him reading the laboratory receipt repeatedly, as though the paper might reveal tomorrow's results early.

That night she found him standing alone on the balcony.

He thought she was asleep.

He wasn't crying.

Prakash rarely cried.

But his shoulders carried a quiet fear she had never seen before.

She walked beside him.

Neither spoke.

He simply reached for her hand.

Held it.

A little tighter than usual.

The children arrived the next morning without being asked.

Aditya cancelled meetings.

Riya appeared carrying fruit, medicines, and enough anxiety to fill another suitcase.

"You should have told us earlier."

Meenakshi smiled.

"I only had a blood test."

"You never tell us anything."

"I was waiting until I knew something."

Riya sat beside her.

Then, without warning, hugged her tightly.

"I hate hospitals."

"I know."

"I hate waiting."

"I know."

"And I hate when you pretend everything is fine."

Meenakshi kissed her forehead gently.

"I've been pretending for years."

"I know."

They laughed.

Then they quietly cried together for a minute.

Neither admitted who had started first.

Aditya, meanwhile, had transformed into someone almost unrecognisable.

He organised medicines.

Called laboratories.

Made lists.

Checked appointments.

Prakash watched him with quiet surprise.

"When did he become responsible?"

Meenakshi smiled faintly.

"The day we stopped noticing."

Two days later, the reports arrived.

The doctor adjusted her glasses and read them carefully.

Then she smiled.

"I have good news."

The entire family leaned forward simultaneously.

"It's nothing life-threatening."

Prakash closed his eyes.

The breath he released sounded almost like prayer.

The doctor continued.

"You're exhausted."

Meenakshi blinked.

"That's the diagnosis?"

"Among other things."

She pointed gently at the reports.

"A little anaemia."

"Vitamin deficiencies."

"Stress."

"Lack of proper rest."

She looked directly at Meenakshi.

"You've spent many years taking care of everyone else."

Now..."

she smiled kindly,

"...it's your turn."

Recovery was simple.

Medicines.

Better food.

More sleep.

Less worrying.

Which, according to Meenakshi, was the most unrealistic prescription she had ever received.

That evening the apartment felt unusually quiet.

The children had gone home.

Prakash was asleep on the sofa after two sleepless nights.

Rain tapped softly against the windows.

Meenakshi sat alone beside the familiar photograph of Shiva.

For once...

she had no jokes.

No bargaining.

No clever observations.

She simply looked at Him.

Then asked very quietly,

"What if..."

The sentence refused to continue.

She tried again.

"What if You never actually heard me?"

The room remained silent.

Only rain answered.

She lowered her eyes.

"I know."

She smiled sadly.

"It's a foolish question."

"But today..."

Her voice grew softer.

"I was frightened."

She looked toward the iron trunk beneath the bed.

"So many notebooks."

"So many conversations."

"So many years."

"What if..."

She swallowed.

"...I've been writing letters to an address that doesn't exist?"

The words surprised even her.

She had never admitted the doubt aloud.

Not to Prakash.

Not to herself.

Certainly not to God.

She laughed softly through suddenly wet eyes.

"Imagine that."

The laughter disappeared almost immediately.

"I think..."

She whispered,

"...I don't fear dying."

A pause.

"I fear discovering that I was talking to myself."

That night, the dream came again.

The tea stall stood beneath a sky washed clean by rain.

The chai man sat exactly where he always did.

Only this time...

before she spoke...

he quietly pushed a glass of tea toward her.

She accepted it without a word.

For a long while, they simply sat together.

Finally, she asked,

"Can I ask something honestly?"

He nodded.

"I've always preferred that."

She looked into the steaming tea.

"What if..."

Her voice almost disappeared.

"...You never heard any of it?"

The question floated between them.

He did not answer immediately.

Instead, he looked at her with extraordinary gentleness.

The kind of look that made people feel understood before they felt answered.

Then he smiled.

Not triumphantly.

Not mysteriously.

Simply...

warmly.

"You came anyway."

She frowned.

"What?"

"Every day."

He lifted his own glass.

"You kept coming."

She looked at him.

Confused.

"I complained."

"You came."

"I argued."

"You came."

"I doubted."

"You came."

"I asked for impossible things."

"You came."

The words settled slowly into her heart.

He looked toward the quiet street beyond the tea stall.

"Faith isn't measured by never questioning."

His voice was almost as soft as the rain.

"It's measured by returning."

She felt tears gather again.

Not because she fully understood.

Because something inside her recognised the truth before
her mind did.

For forty years...

she had returned.

Not perfectly.

Not consistently wise.

Not always grateful.

But faithfully.

Again.

And again.

And again.

Just like the mantras.

Just like the notebooks.

Just like the conversations.

The chai man looked at her and smiled.

"You worry too much."

She laughed through her tears.

"I've heard that before."

"I know."

She woke before sunrise.

The fear had not vanished completely.

Perhaps it never would.

But it had become smaller.

Manageable.

Like a shadow at dawn.

She opened a fresh notebook.

Wrote one page of Om Namah Shivaya.

Then another.

Finally, beneath the mantras, she wrote:

Mahadev,

The doctor says I need more rest.

I suspect You have been saying the same thing for years.

Thank You for frightening me just enough to remind me
that life is precious.

Also...

if possible, please help me become old slowly.

Prakash worries too much.

The children pretend not to.

And I have not yet finished writing to You.

She closed the notebook gently.

Outside, the first rays of morning spread across Mumbai.

The city stretched awake.

Another ordinary day had begun.

And for perhaps the first time in many years...

being ordinary felt like the greatest blessing she could
imagine.

Chapter Twenty

The Prayers Hidden Between Grocery Lists

Recovery did not arrive all at once.

It came in teaspoons.

One morning she climbed the stairs without stopping halfway.

Another afternoon she realised she had cooked an entire meal without feeling exhausted.

A week later she laughed so loudly at one of Prakash's terrible jokes that the neighbour knocked on the wall.

"You've recovered," Prakash declared.

"From the illness?"

"No."

"From being patient."

She smiled.

"You should be grateful."

"I am."

"You nearly lost your favourite cook."

"I nearly lost my favourite person."

The room became unexpectedly quiet.

Prakash looked embarrassed by his own honesty.

So, naturally, he ruined the moment.

"But yes... the cook also."

She threw a kitchen towel at him.

It landed perfectly on his face.

"Romance," he muttered through the towel, "is alive."

The doctor insisted she avoid unnecessary work.

This instruction collapsed within forty-eight hours.

Because in Meenakshi's dictionary, *unnecessary work* included nothing.

Laundry needed folding.

Groceries needed buying.

Bills needed paying.

Life possessed absolutely no interest in waiting for anyone's recovery.

Still...

she moved more slowly now.

Not because she wanted to.

Because her body had quietly voted against her.

One afternoon, while searching for an old electricity bill that Prakash insisted had been "kept safely," she pulled the iron trunk from beneath the bed once again.

The notebooks stared back at her.

Thousands of handwritten pages.

Forty years compressed into cheap paper and blue ink.

She ran her fingers across their worn covers.

"So," she murmured, "let's see what kind of woman you remember."

She opened one from the early years of marriage.

The handwriting was young.

Energetic.

Impatient.

The pages smelt faintly of old paper and sandalwood.

Every alternate page contained **Om Namah Shivaya** written in neat rows.

Between the mantras appeared an ordinary shopping list.

Rice

Turmeric

Mustard seeds

Soap

Kerosene

Then, squeezed into the margin:

Mahadev, please let this month's salary last till month's end.

She laughed softly.

"I had forgotten that."

But her laughter faded quickly.

She remembered counting coins before entering the market.

Choosing vegetables according to price instead of desire.

Pretending everything was normal.

She turned the page.

"Dreamt of crocodile on Shivling.", "Visited every year."

Another notebook.

A recipe for mango pickle.

Measurements carefully written.

Beside the recipe:

If pickle spoils, please ensure relatives never find out.

Further down:

Also thank You. Prakash smiled properly today.

Nothing more.

No explanation.

No dramatic story.

She tried to remember what had happened.

Then it came back.

That had been the year he'd finally found steady work again.

She had forgotten the struggle.

The notebook had not.

She reached for another.

The cover had nearly detached from its spine.

Inside were pages written during Riya's school years.

Math tuition timings.

Uniform measurements.

A reminder to pay school fees.

And beneath them...

**Please let her always know that home is somewhere she can
return to.**

Meenakshi closed her eyes.

Riya was now a successful professional living across the city.

Confident.

Independent.

Stubborn.

She still called every evening.

Sometimes just to ask,

"What are you cooking?"

Perhaps...

that prayer had been answered.

Not dramatically.

Quietly.

Another diary.

This one from the year Aditya failed his mathematics
examination.

She smiled before opening it.

She remembered his devastated face.

The way he had locked himself inside his room.

The way Prakash had pretended to scold him while secretly worrying all night.

Inside the notebook she found:

Mahadev, please help him understand that marks are not character certificates.

Then another line.

Also... if possible... mathematics itself could become slightly easier.

She laughed aloud.

"You ignored that one."

But as she kept reading, another entry appeared three pages later.

Today he smiled again.

Thank You.

She looked toward the kitchen window.

"You answered differently."

Hour after hour passed unnoticed.

The apartment remained silent except for the turning of pages.

Notebook after notebook unfolded a life she had lived but somehow forgotten.

Not the big events.

Those everyone remembered.

The weddings.

The promotions.

The illnesses.

The festivals.

Instead...

the notebooks remembered the invisible days.

The Tuesdays.

The ordinary Thursdays.

The afternoons when nothing happened except survival.

She found pages filled with tiny victories.

Found coriander cheaper than expected.

Electricity bill lower this month.

Pressure cooker repaired instead of replaced.

Neighbour's dog finally stopped barking at me. Possible miracle.

She smiled through tears.

How faithfully she had documented ordinary life.

As though somewhere deep inside she had known...

these moments mattered too.

Then she found the page.

The one she didn't remember writing at all.

The ink had faded almost to grey.

The handwriting trembled.

It had been written during the most difficult financial year of their marriage.

There were no jokes.

No clever remarks.

No negotiations.

Only this:

Today I almost told the children we cannot afford the school trip.

Then somehow we managed.

I don't know how.

Thank You for protecting their childhood from my worries.

The words blurred.

She realised she was crying.

Not loudly.

Quietly.

The kind of tears that arrive years after pain has ended.

Prakash walked into the room carrying two cups of tea.

He stopped immediately.

"What's wrong?"

She shook her head.

"Nothing."

"You've been crying."

"I've been remembering."

He sat beside her.

She handed him the notebook.

He read the page silently.

His own eyes softened.

"I never knew you wrote this."

"I never knew I did either."

They sat together without speaking.

Sometimes silence carried more understanding than conversation ever could.

As evening settled over Mumbai, golden light drifted through the window and across the scattered notebooks.

The room looked less like storage now.

More like an archive.

Not of miracles.

Of endurance.

Meenakshi suddenly noticed something astonishing.

Across thousands of pages...

there were surprisingly few complaints after all.

Oh, there were plenty about relatives.

About inflation.

About coriander prices.

About Bluetooth speakers.

About knees.

About Prakash leaving wet towels on the bed.

But beneath all of that...

every notebook contained something else.

Gratitude.

Not loud.

Not polished.

Not written in beautiful spiritual language.

Just small acknowledgements hidden between grocery lists.

Thank You that the fever reduced.

Thank You that the interview went well.

Thank You that today was peaceful.

Thank You that everyone came home safely.

She had always believed the notebooks were records of unanswered prayers.

Now she realised...

they were records of answered ones too.

She had simply never counted them.

That night, she did not dream immediately.

Instead, she sat beside the open window.

The city breathed below.

Somewhere, a train crossed the bridge.

Someone laughed on the street.

A pressure cooker whistled in a neighbouring apartment.

Life.

Ordinary.

Persistent.

She looked toward the framed photograph of Shiva.

For once, she didn't begin with a request.

She simply spoke.

"You know..."

she said softly,

"I've been accusing You of selective hearing for years."

The smile on the photograph remained unchanged.

She continued.

"I kept searching for the prayers You didn't answer."

A breeze stirred the curtains.

"I never thought to look for the ones You answered so gently
that they became part of normal life."

She paused.

"And perhaps..."

Her voice grew quieter.

"...that's why I missed them."

That night, the dream returned.

The tea stall stood beneath a clear sky.

The chai man was already there.

He seemed to have expected her.

She sat beside him without speaking.

After a while, she said,

"I've been reading my old diaries."

"I know."

"I found something."

"I know."

She rolled her eyes.

"You could at least pretend to be surprised."

He smiled.

"I've already read them."

She laughed.

"I walked into that one."

"You did."

She became thoughtful again.

"I thought they were full of complaints."

"And?"

"They're full of gratitude."

He looked at her over the rim of his tea glass.

"Were they?"

She frowned.

"I suppose..."

She searched for the right words.

"...they were full of life."

He nodded.

"Exactly."

A comfortable silence settled between them.

Finally, she asked,

"Why didn't You answer everything I asked?"

He looked toward the sleeping city.

"If I had..."

he said gently,

"...which version of you would be sitting here today?"

She didn't answer.

Because she already knew.

The woman who had survived.

The woman who had learnt patience.

The woman who had discovered laughter in scarcity.

The woman who still believed enough to keep writing.

She had become all of them because life had not unfolded according to her plans.

He looked back at her.

"You asked Me for outcomes."

He smiled.

"I was quietly shaping a heart."

Before dawn, Meenakshi opened another fresh notebook.

She wrote page after page of Om Namah Shivaya.

Then, beneath the final line, she added:

Mahadev,

Today I discovered that gratitude hides in very ordinary places.

Between shopping lists.

Beside pickle recipes.

Under school fee calculations.

Inside worries that never became disasters.

Perhaps miracles do not always arrive wearing bright clothes.

Sometimes they come disguised as ordinary Tuesdays that end peacefully.

Thank You for all the blessings I forgot to notice while asking for bigger ones.

The request for fifty crores, however, remains active until further notice.

Respectfully,

Meenakshi

She smiled as she closed the notebook.

Some habits, she decided, deserved to last a lifetime.

Outside, the first rays of sunlight touched the buildings of Mumbai.

Another ordinary day had arrived.

And Meenakshi now knew something she wished she had understood years earlier.

God had not only been listening to the grand prayers whispered in temples.

He had also been listening to the tired prayers scribbled between grocery lists, recipes, school fees, and household budgets.

Because heaven, she finally understood, had never required beautiful words.

Only an honest heart willing to keep the conversation alive.

Chapter Twenty One

The Weight of Enough

The sea breathed in long, patient waves.

For a while neither of them spoke.

The city carried on behind them—horns, laughter, the distant whistle of a train, someone selling roasted corn as though the night itself had become hungry.

Meenakshi sat on the low stone wall near the promenade, her glass of chai warming both hands. The paper cup had softened slightly at the rim from the steam, and the smell of ginger, cardamom, and over-boiled milk drifted upward in a way that felt almost medicinal. The kind of smell that did not solve problems, but made them easier to carry.

The chai man stood beside her, one foot resting against the curb, his own glass balanced loosely in his hand. He had the air of someone who had seen enough evenings by the sea to know that silence was often more useful than advice.

The waves rolled in and withdrew.

Rolled in and withdrew.

As though the sea itself understood the discipline of persistence.

Finally Meenakshi broke the silence.

She shrugged.

"I know my priorities."

The laughter slowly faded.

The silence that followed was different now.

Gentler.

More honest.

Meenakshi watched the lights shimmering across the Arabian Sea. The city behind them had become a blur of movement and sound, but the water remained steady, dark, and unbothered by human urgency. A fishing boat moved somewhere in the distance, its tiny lamp bobbing like a thought that refused to disappear.

When she finally spoke again, her voice had lost its usual theatrical confidence.

"No..."

she said softly.

"I am joking."

She looked out toward the dark water.

"Forget fifty crores."

This time there was no punchline waiting behind the sentence.

Only truth.

"It was never really about the money."

The chai man remained silent.

She continued, almost as though she were discovering the words while speaking them.

"I think..."

"I just became tired."

"Tired of calculating every purchase."

"Tired of wondering whether there would be enough."

"Tired of stretching every month until it somehow reached the next one."

She smiled sadly.

"I thought if I had enough money..."

"...everyone I love could stop worrying."

The wind drifted between them, carrying the smell of salt and frying peanuts from a nearby stall. Somewhere behind them, a child laughed too loudly. Somewhere farther away, a scooter revved and disappeared into traffic. Life continued with its usual indifference to private revelations.

For a long moment the chai man simply watched her with the same ancient patience she had come to know.

Then he said quietly,

"You underestimate the weight of what you already carried."

The words settled gently inside her.

For years she had measured her life by everything she had not received.

Now, for the first time, she saw it differently.

She had carried a family through uncertainty.

She had stretched impossible budgets without letting her children feel poor.

She had hidden fear behind jokes.

She had turned prayer into conversation because conversation was how she survived.

Perhaps the greatest miracle had never been that life became easy.

Perhaps it was that she had never stopped loving despite how difficult life often became.

The chai man looked toward the sea.

"You always believed you were spiritually insignificant."

Meenakshi laughed quietly.

"I complained far more than I prayed."

"You spoke to Me every day."

The simplicity of the sentence undid her.

Not because it sounded miraculous.

Because it sounded true.

She had spoken through anger.

Through gratitude.

Through irritation.

Through loneliness.

Through laughter.

Through exhaustion.

Not once had she stopped the conversation.

And perhaps...

that had been devotion all along.

She stared at him, then at the sea, then down at the nearly empty glass in her hand.

The chai had gone lukewarm.

The night had not.

A breeze lifted the loose end of her dupatta and pressed it lightly against her shoulder, as though the air itself were trying to comfort her without making a fuss about it.

She gave a small, embarrassed laugh.

"So all these years..."

she said, "I was doing bhakti and didn't know it?"

The chai man smiled.

"Most people are."

She looked at him suspiciously.

"That sounds like something a divine being would say to avoid paperwork."

He chuckled.

"Divine beings dislike paperwork."

"That is the first sensible thing you've said all evening."

He bowed his head slightly, as if accepting a compliment from a difficult customer.

The sea breathed again.

A wave broke against the rocks below them with a sound like a long exhale.

Meenakshi folded her hands around the glass and leaned forward a little, her elbows resting on her knees. The posture was not elegant, but it was honest. She had spent enough years trying to appear composed. Tonight, she was tired of appearances.

"I used to think," she said slowly, "that prayer was for people who were better at life than I was."

The chai man did not interrupt.

"I thought the truly spiritual people were the ones who woke up before dawn, sat cross-legged, and never lost their temper."

She glanced at him.

"I have never once qualified."

He smiled.

"And yet?"

"And yet..." she repeated, looking back at the sea, "I kept talking anyway."

Her voice softened.

"When the bills came, I talked."

"When the children were sick, I talked."

"When I was angry with Prakash, I talked."

"When I was grateful, I talked."

"When I was scared, I talked."

She gave a tiny shrug.

"I suppose I was too busy complaining to notice I was praying."

The chai man looked at her with a tenderness that made her suddenly want to look away.

"You were never insignificant," he said.

The words were simple.

That was what made them dangerous.

Meenakshi swallowed.

For a moment she could not speak.

The city lights trembled on the water like scattered coins.
Somewhere a vendor called out the price of roasted corn.
Somewhere a couple argued softly and then laughed.
Somewhere a bus sighed to a stop and opened its doors.

The world was full of ordinary sounds.

And yet something inside her had gone very still.

She thought of all the years she had spent believing that her life was made of smallness—small savings, small hopes, small prayers, small victories. She had mistaken endurance for insignificance. She had mistaken survival for failure.

But perhaps endurance was its own kind of greatness.

Perhaps love, repeated daily in the face of uncertainty, was not small at all.

Perhaps it was the largest thing a person could do.

The chai man took a sip from his glass and then said, almost casually, "You know, most people ask for miracles because they want life to become easier."

Meenakshi gave a faint smile.

"And I asked for fifty crores because I wanted to stop counting vegetables."

"That too."

She laughed.

"But underneath," he continued, "what you wanted was rest."

She looked at him.

He nodded once.

"Not luxury. Not status. Not even wealth, really."

"Rest."

The word landed with surprising force.

Rest.

She had not thought of it that way.

She had thought of security.

Of dignity.

Of freedom from worry.

But rest was truer.

She had wanted to stop carrying the invisible arithmetic of every month.

To stop measuring joy against expense.

To stop feeling guilty for wanting something beautiful.

To stop being afraid that one unexpected bill could tilt the whole household into panic.

She had wanted, in the deepest part of herself, to breathe without calculation.

The realisation made her eyes sting.

She blinked hard and looked away toward the sea so he would not see.

The chai man, mercifully, pretended not to notice.

After a while he said, "You know what is interesting?"

"What?"

"You never once asked for a life without love."

Meenakshi turned back to him.

He continued, "You asked for enough money so the people you love would not suffer."

She was quiet.

He smiled faintly.

"That is not greed."

The words entered her like warm light.

She had spent so many years apologising for wanting more that she had forgotten the shape of her own goodness. She had not wanted riches for herself. She had wanted relief for others. She had wanted her children to sleep without fear. She had wanted Prakash to stop carrying the burden alone. She had wanted her home to feel less like a battlefield

against scarcity and more like a place where people could simply live.

The sea rolled on.

The night deepened.

And Meenakshi, who had spent a lifetime making jokes out of her own longing, suddenly felt the full tenderness of it.

She smiled through the ache in her throat.

"So what you're saying is..."

she said carefully, "I am not spiritually shallow."

The chai man considered this.

"I am saying you are spiritually very expensive."

She burst out laughing.

"That is not a compliment."

"It is in my tradition."

She shook her head, still laughing, and wiped at the corner of one eye with the edge of her dupatta.

The laughter eased something in her chest.

It did not erase the sadness.

It simply made room for it.

After a while she grew quiet again.

The sea had become darker now, the horizon nearly invisible. Only the line of lights along the promenade and the occasional reflection on the water marked the boundary between land and night.

Meenakshi stared ahead and spoke in a voice so soft it almost disappeared into the wind.

"I think I was waiting for someone to tell me that wanting peace was not selfish."

The chai man looked at her for a long moment.

Then he said, "Peace is not selfish."

She nodded slowly.

"I know that now."

He tilted his head.

"Do you?"

She smiled faintly.

"Not entirely."

He laughed under his breath.

"Good. Certainty is overrated."

She looked at him, then at the sea, and finally let out a long breath she had not realised she was holding.

The night air felt cooler now.

Lighter.

As though something had shifted, not outside her, but within.

The chai man set his empty glass down on the stone ledge and folded his arms loosely.

"You know," he said, "there is a reason people keep returning to the sea."

Meenakshi raised an eyebrow.

"Because it is dramatic?"

"Because it remembers how to receive everything and still remain itself."

She considered that.

The sea accepted rain, rivers, garbage, prayers, oil, moonlight, and the feet of tired people walking its edge. It took everything and remained vast.

She looked at the water again.

Perhaps that was what she had been learning all along.

To receive life without becoming smaller than it.

To carry sorrow without letting it define her.

To want more without being ashamed of wanting.

To love without keeping score.

The thought made her chest ache in a way that was almost beautiful.

At last she said, "I think I understand now."

The chai man waited.

She smiled, not with her usual mischief, but with something quieter and older.

"It was never only about the money."

He nodded.

"It rarely is."

She looked down at her hands.

"I wanted to stop being afraid."

The words came out plainly, without ornament.

"I wanted to stop feeling like one bad month could ruin everything."

She lifted her gaze.

"I wanted to know that the people I love would be safe."

The chai man said nothing.

She continued, "And maybe I wanted to believe that if I asked God loudly enough, He would finally understand how tired I was."

The wind moved between them.

Then he said, "He understood long before you asked."

Meenakshi closed her eyes for a moment.

Not because she was trying to be dramatic.

Because the sentence was too gentle to stand up against.

When she opened them again, the sea was still there.

The city was still there.

The chai man was still there.

And somehow, that was enough.

She gave a small, watery laugh.

"So what happens now?"

He glanced at her.

"Now?"

"Yes. Now that I have confessed my emotional bankruptcy."

He smiled.

"Now you go home."

She made a face.

"That is disappointingly practical."

"It is also divine."

She stood slowly, brushing invisible dust from her saree. The movement felt ceremonial in a way she could not explain. As though she were rising from a conversation that had rearranged something inside her.

The chai man picked up the empty glasses.

She looked at him, suddenly shy.

"Thank you."

He nodded once.

"For the chai?"

"For listening."

He gave her a look that was almost amused.

"I did very little."

She shook her head.

"No."

Then, after a pause, she added with a faint smile, "You did enough."

He held her gaze for a moment, and something in his expression softened.

"That," he said quietly, "is all anyone ever does."

Meenakshi stood there for a second longer, the sea wind lifting the edge of her dupatta, the city humming behind her, the night stretching wide and patient in front of her.

Then she smiled.

Not the bright, theatrical smile she used when she wanted to deflect.

Not the sharp smile she used when she wanted to win an argument.

This one was smaller.

More honest.

It belonged to the woman who had finally understood that her life had never been too small for God to notice.

She adjusted the end of her dupatta and reached for the empty paper cup she had been holding.

A gust of sea wind lifted it from her fingers.

The cup tumbled once across the promenade, rolled in a small circle, and came to rest beside an overflowing public dustbin.

Printed along its side, in fading blue letters, were the words:

SHIVA TEA STALL

She frowned.

She was almost certain the cup she had been drinking from had been plain white.

Perhaps she had simply never noticed the printing.

Chapter Twenty Two

The Last Notebook Store

Old age did not arrive with a grand announcement.

It arrived disguised as ordinary inconveniences.

One morning, Meenakshi stood before the bathroom mirror and realised she was holding her reading glasses while searching the house for them.

Another afternoon, she climbed halfway up the stairs, stopped, frowned thoughtfully, and said aloud,

"I don't remember whether I came up to fetch something... or to remember something."

Prakash, who was now officially retired and had developed the dangerous habit of commenting on everything, looked over the rim of his newspaper.

"If you're lucky, it's both."

She gave him a look reserved for husbands who had survived marriage through sheer optimism.

"You've become very brave after retirement."

"I've become financially dependent."

"Worse."

"It encourages honesty."

"No," she said, walking away. "It encourages sleeping on the sofa."

Retirement had changed Prakash in ways neither of them had anticipated.

He had imagined endless relaxation.

Instead, he had discovered WhatsApp university.

Every morning, his phone filled with motivational quotes, miracle health remedies, patriotic videos, and grainy images claiming that eating boiled raisins at precisely 5:47 a.m. could reverse ageing.

He forwarded them all to Meenakshi.

She ignored every single one.

One morning he entered the kitchen carrying his phone triumphantly.

"Listen to this."

"I'd rather not."

"If you drink warm water with cinnamon, turmeric, lemon, basil leaves, ginger, black pepper and honey every morning—"

She looked up from rolling chapatis.

"That's not a health drink."

"What is it?"

"Soup."

Life had become gentler.

The children visited often.

Riya still entered the apartment complaining about traffic before hugging her mother.

Aditya still insisted on repairing things nobody had asked him to repair.

The grandchildren filled every room with impossible energy, unanswered questions, and biscuit crumbs.

The apartment was louder now.

And somehow...

less lonely.

Yet one habit remained untouched by time.

Every month, without fail, Meenakshi bought notebooks.

Not expensive journals.

Not leather-bound diaries.

Cheap notebooks.

Thin paper.

Soft covers.

The kind schoolchildren often complained about.

Because, she insisted, God appreciated sincerity more than stationery.

The stationery shop stood at the corner of the market, squeezed between a tailoring store and a shop that had sold steel utensils for as long as anyone could remember.

The original owner, Joshi Uncle, had retired years ago.

Now his son, Sameer, managed the shop.

He had grown up watching Meenakshi buy notebooks with astonishing consistency.

As a child, he had assumed she was a schoolteacher.

As a teenager, he decided she must be an accountant.

By the time he inherited the shop, he had accepted that some mysteries were beyond human understanding.

The little brass bell above the door chimed as Meenakshi entered.

Sameer looked up and smiled.

"Aunty! The new notebooks arrived yesterday."

"I hope they're better than the last batch."

He sighed dramatically.

"They were perfectly good notebooks."

"They shed paper dust."

"Paper is supposed to shed paper."

"They looked emotionally fragile."

He laughed.

"I'll show you the emotionally stronger ones."

He placed three stacks on the counter.

Blue covers.

Green covers.

Brown covers.

Meenakshi picked each one up with the seriousness of a jeweller examining diamonds.

She flipped through pages.

Pressed the binding.

Even smelt one.

Sameer watched patiently.

"You know..."

he said after a while,

"I've seen people inspect mangoes with less concentration."

"Mangoes don't last forty years."

He couldn't argue with that.

She finally selected twenty notebooks.

"These."

"Only twenty?"

"I already have enough to prove long-term commitment."

He packed them carefully into a paper bag.

As he totalled the bill, curiosity finally defeated politeness.

"Aunty..."

"Hm?"

"I've wanted to ask you something for years."

She adjusted her glasses.

"Dangerous beginning."

"What do you actually write in all these notebooks?"

She looked at him.

For a long moment she said nothing.

Then a slow smile spread across her face.

Not mischievous.

Not theatrical.

Just deeply affectionate.

"Forty years of ongoing negotiations with God."

Sameer blinked.

"I'm sorry?"

"I maintain written correspondence."

He laughed.

"No, seriously."

"I am serious."

She leaned closer across the counter.

"Some people meditate."

"Some chant."

"I file paperwork."

Sameer laughed so loudly that customers turned to look.

"Aunty, you're joking."

"I wish I were."

He stared at her with genuine fascination.

"So all these years..."

She nodded.

"Every notebook."

"You've been writing prayers?"

"And grocery lists."

"And complaints."

"And recipes."

"And reminders."

"And occasionally very firm letters regarding inflation."

He shook his head in disbelief.

"My mother keeps recipe books."

"My father keeps account books."

"You keep..."

She helped him.

"Evidence."

"Evidence of what?"

"That I kept showing up."

The answer landed differently.

The laughter faded.

Sameer looked at her for a moment.

"You never missed?"

She smiled.

"I've missed many things."

"Train timings."

"School meetings."

"Anniversaries."

"Temple closing hours."

"But somehow..."

She touched the notebooks gently.

"...I never stopped writing."

As she prepared to leave, Sameer called after her.

"Aunty?"

"Yes?"

"If you don't mind me asking..."

She turned.

"After all these years..."

"...did God answer?"

The question lingered between them.

Once upon a time, she would have answered immediately.

She would have listed the prayers that remained pending.

The miracles still delayed.

The famous fifty crores.

The Bluetooth speaker.

The knees.

The coriander prices.

But now...

she found herself smiling differently.

"Not exactly the way I expected."

Sameer frowned.

"What does that mean?"

"It means..."

She searched for the right words.

"...I kept asking Him to change my life."

"And?"

She looked out through the shop window.

People hurried past carrying vegetables, school bags, office files, umbrellas, worries.

Ordinary people.

Living ordinary lives.

"It turned out..."

she said quietly,

"...He was changing me."

She walked home more slowly than usual.

The bag of notebooks rested lightly against her side.

The late afternoon sun painted long shadows across the pavement.

A little girl skipped beside her grandfather, explaining something with great seriousness.

A flower seller arranged fresh jasmine into perfect circles.

An old couple argued cheerfully over which bus to take.

Life unfolded in hundreds of ordinary scenes.

She smiled at each one.

Years ago she might have hurried past them.

Now...

she collected them.

Like blessings.

Back home, she placed the new notebooks beside the old trunk.

The fresh paper carried that familiar scent of possibility.

She opened the first notebook.

Its pages were wonderfully blank.

Waiting.

Patient.

She uncapped her favourite blue pen.

The nib hesitated above the paper.

Then began moving with the confidence of long habit.

Om Namah Shivaya.

Again.

Again.

Again.

She filled an entire page before stopping.

Below the final mantra, she wrote:

Mahadev,

Today the notebook shop boy asked me what I write in all these diaries.

I told him they are negotiations.

That is technically true.

But perhaps they are something else now.

Perhaps they are simply proof that You never had to wonder whether I would come tomorrow.

I always did.

Even when I was angry.

Even when I doubted.

Even when I laughed at You.

Relationships survive because someone keeps showing up.

Thank You...

for always being there when I arrived.

She read the words once.

Then smiled.

One final thought appeared beneath them.

P.S.

My knees continue to reject ageing with dignity.

Also, the fifty-crore proposal remains open until officially withdrawn.

I believe in keeping long-term investments active.

She closed the notebook gently.

Outside, the evening azaan floated through the neighbourhood.

Somewhere farther away, temple bells answered.

A train thundered across the tracks.

Children laughed in the society courtyard.

The world continued its endless conversations with heaven, each in its own language.

Meenakshi rested her hand on the growing stack of notebooks.

There would not be infinitely many more.

Age had taught her that.

But there would be enough.

Enough pages for gratitude.

Enough pages for complaints.

Enough pages for laughter.

Enough pages for love.

Because she had finally understood something no temple sermon had ever explained.

Prayer was not measured by how beautifully one spoke.

It was measured by returning.

Again.

And again.

And again.

Just like opening another cheap notebook,
writing the first line,
and trusting that Someone would read the rest.

Chapter Twenty Three

Documentation for the Afterlife

There are only two kinds of grandchildren in the world.

Those who politely ask permission before opening cupboards.

And those who firmly believe every closed cupboard exists solely to hide treasure.

Meenakshi's grandchildren belonged very confidently to the second category.

It happened on a lazy Sunday afternoon.

The entire Joshi family had gathered for lunch.

The apartment felt exactly the way Meenakshi loved it—too small for the number of people inside and too noisy for anyone to think properly.

Pressure cookers hissed.

Someone argued about cricket.

Someone else argued about politics.

The grandchildren argued simply because arguing appeared to be an important family tradition.

Prakash sat in his favourite chair pretending to read the newspaper while secretly listening to every conversation.

Riya supervised dessert with military precision.

Aditya insisted he would wash the dishes.

Nobody believed him.

The dining table overflowed with food.

Simple food.

Comfort food.

The kind that carried memory as one of its ingredients.

As lunch ended, little Aarav discovered that his cricket ball had rolled beneath Meenakshi's bed.

He dropped to the floor.

Reached under.

His fingers touched something cold.

Metal.

"Aaji!" he shouted.

"There's a treasure box under your bed!"

Meenakshi looked up from folding napkins.

"Oh."

Prakash laughed.

"He's found the archives."

Within minutes, the grandchildren had dragged one of the old iron trunks into the middle of the living room.

Dust rose into the sunlight.

The lock resisted briefly before giving way with a familiar click.

The lid creaked open.

Silence fell.

Inside lay hundreds of notebooks.

Blue.

Brown.

Green.

Tiny pocket diaries.

Thick registers.

Thin school notebooks.

Some tied together with old ribbons.

Others were wrapped carefully in faded cotton cloth.

Years slept inside that trunk.

Entire decades bound with ordinary paper.

Aarav looked from the notebooks to his grandmother.

"Aaji..."

"Did you write all these?"

Meenakshi nodded.

"Yes."

"Why?"

She answered without hesitation.

"Administrative purposes."

The adults burst into laughter.

The children looked more confused than amused.

"What administration?"

"Heaven."

Curiosity spread through the room.

Riya picked up one notebook.

Aditya opened another.

Prakash smiled quietly.

He had seen these before.

But never like this.

Never all together.

Never through the eyes of their children.

The first diary Riya opened began with page after page of neat mantras.

Om Namah Shivaya.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Then suddenly...

Buy detergent.

Pay electricity bill.

Mahadev, please remind Prakash that towels belong on hooks, not chairs.

Riya laughed so hard she nearly dropped the notebook.

"Mummy!"

Prakash nodded solemnly.

"That accusation has no legal basis."

Meenakshi looked entirely unapologetic.

"The evidence says otherwise."

Aditya opened another notebook.

This one contained a prayer written years earlier.

Mahadev,

Please improve my son's confidence.

He thinks he is weaker than he really is.

Also, if possible, reduce his dependence on instant noodles.

Aditya stopped laughing.

He looked at the date.

It had been written when he was fifteen.

He remembered that year.

The pressure of board exams.

The fear of disappointing everyone.

He had never known his mother carried those worries too.

Quietly.

Without saying a word.

Little Anya found a notebook with colourful sticky notes attached to different pages.

"What are these?"

Meenakshi smiled proudly.

"Priority requests."

"What does that mean?"

"It means some matters required faster attention."

Anya opened one marked page.

Her eyes widened.

She read aloud.

Mahadev,

Neighbour's Bluetooth speaker has entered active warfare against my patience.

Request immediate intervention.

The room exploded with laughter.

Mrs. Purohit, now an honorary member of every family gathering, happened to walk in carrying a bowl of homemade shrikhand.

She heard only the last sentence.

"Oh, you're still telling that story?"

Meenakshi grinned.

"You started the battle."

Mrs. Purohit rolled her eyes.

"And you won."

"I had better legal representation."

She pointed discreetly toward the framed photograph of Shiva.

Even Mrs. Purohit laughed.

Notebook after notebook travelled through eager hands.

The family discovered recipes beside prayers.

Shopping lists beside philosophy.

Complaints about inflation immediately followed by gratitude for surviving another month.

One diary contained nothing but pages of *Om Namah Shivaya*.

Except for a single line squeezed into the margin.

Please don't let the children notice how worried we are.

Prakash quietly looked away.

He remembered that year.

He remembered pretending everything was fine.

He hadn't realised Meenakshi had been pretending too.

Riya found another diary.

She stopped reading halfway.

Her eyes filled slowly.

She looked toward her mother.

"Mummy..."

Meenakshi looked up.

"What happened?"

Riya handed her the notebook.

A page had been written the night before Riya left home for her first job.

Mahadev,

Tomorrow she begins a life where I cannot solve every problem for her.

Please stand wherever I cannot.

And if she ever forgets that she is loved...

Kindly remind her before I find out.

Riya closed the notebook carefully.

Without a word, she crossed the room and hugged her mother.

A long hug.

The kind adults rarely allow themselves.

"I didn't know."

Meenakshi smiled gently.

"You weren't supposed to."

The room grew quieter.

The laughter softened.

The notebooks were no longer amusing curiosities.

They had become windows.

Each diary preserved a version of Meenakshi no one else had fully known.

The young bride.

The anxious mother.

The exhausted homemaker.

The woman who laughed loudly so nobody noticed when she was frightened.

Every page held pieces of her life that had never been spoken aloud.

Prakash picked up one of the oldest notebooks.

Its cover had almost disappeared.

The pages had turned the colour of old letters.

He read silently for several minutes.

Then smiled.

"What?"

Meenakshi asked.

He turned the notebook around.

The page read:

Mahadev,

If You are reading this...

Please help my husband understand that 'I'll fix it tomorrow' is not a recognised repair schedule.

Prakash laughed.

"I deserved that."

"You did."

"I still do."

"You absolutely do."

Just when the room had settled into comfortable warmth, Aarav shouted from the corner.

"Aaji!"

Everyone turned.

"I found something!"

He held up another notebook triumphantly.

"I think this is important."

"What is it?"

He cleared his throat dramatically and read aloud.

Mahadev,

Before I die, kindly arrange income of fifty crores per annum.

Respectfully,

Meenakshi.

Silence.

Then absolute chaos.

Aditya nearly fell off the sofa laughing.

Riya covered her face.

Mrs. Purohit laughed so loudly that someone upstairs banged on the ceiling.

Prakash wiped tears from his eyes.

"You never withdrew the application?"

Meenakshi folded her arms with dignity.

"It remains under consideration."

Aditya looked at another notebook.

"Wait!"

He laughed harder.

"This older one asks for ten crores!"

Riya grabbed another.

"This one says twenty!"

Everyone turned toward Meenakshi.

She sighed dramatically.

"Inflation."

Prakash looked at her.

"You increased the amount?"

"Obviously."

"Why?"

She answered as though explaining basic mathematics.

"If He had approved ten crores immediately, I would never have needed twenty."

She shrugged.

"Delay increases cost."

The room erupted again.

Aditya could barely breathe.

"So fifty crores became the final figure?"

"Yes."

"Why stop there?"

"Because more money means more problems."

She nodded wisely.

"Fifty crores is enough."

"Hundred crores requires management."

"I don't have the energy."

Even the grandchildren laughed, despite having only the vaguest idea how much fifty crores actually was.

As evening settled outside, the family carefully returned the notebooks to the trunk.

No one joked now.

Not because the humour had disappeared.

Because something deeper had quietly entered the room.

Prakash closed the final notebook.

Then looked at his wife.

"I've spent forty-five years with you."

She smiled.

"I know."

"I thought I knew everything."

"You never asked the right questions."

"I suppose I didn't."

He rested his hand on the trunk.

"This isn't a collection of notebooks."

"No?"

"It's your life."

She looked at the faded covers.

Then nodded.

"Yes."

"It is."

After the children left and the apartment grew quiet again,
Prakash helped her slide the trunk back beneath the bed.

He sat beside her on the edge of the mattress.

"So..."

he said.

"What if Shiva still refuses you entry?"

Meenakshi looked genuinely puzzled.

"After reading all this?"

She smiled with absolute confidence.

"Impossible."

Prakash laughed.

"You sound very sure."

"I am."

"Why?"

She looked toward the framed photograph near the window.

"Because relationships are not built on perfect prayers."

She paused.

"They're built on showing up."

She looked down at the trunk.

"I showed up every day."

That night, long after everyone had gone to sleep,
Meenakshi opened one final notebook.

Not to write many pages.

Just one.

She slowly wrote:

Om Namah Shivaya.

Then beneath it:

Mahadev,

Today the children discovered the archives.

They laughed exactly where I hoped they would.

They cried exactly where I feared they might.

Perhaps that means I documented my life honestly.

If these notebooks have taught them anything...

I hope it is this:

Talk to You.

Not because You always answer immediately...

But because no relationship survives without conversation.

Also...

Please remember that the fifty-crore request remains active until either fulfilled or officially rejected in writing.

She smiled.

Closed the notebook.

Switched off the light.

Outside, Mumbai settled into another ordinary night.

Inside the apartment, beneath one modest bed, rested hundreds of notebooks.

To anyone else, they were stacks of inexpensive paper.

To Meenakshi...

they were forty years of proof that faith did not always sound like hymns.

Sometimes...

it sounded like one woman refusing to let a conversation end.

Chapter Twenty Four

The Woman Who Was Never Ignored

Nobody remembers the exact day an ordinary life becomes extraordinary.

There is no music.

No divine announcement.

No sudden understanding.

There are simply enough ordinary days, lived with enough love, until one day they become a lifetime.

Meenakshi Joshi's last morning began exactly as hundreds of other mornings had begun.

Before sunrise, she woke without an alarm.

The apartment was quiet.

Prakash was still asleep beside her, one arm flung dramatically across the blanket as though he had personally wrestled with dreams all night.

She smiled.

Forty-seven years of marriage, and he still slept like an exhausted schoolboy after annual sports day.

Her knees protested as she stood.

"Good morning," she whispered toward the ceiling.

"I'm awake."

No thunder answered.

No celestial bells rang.

Only the familiar ceiling fan continued its lazy rotation.

She walked into the kitchen, boiled water for tea, and stood by the window watching Mumbai wake.

Milk vans.

Newspapers striking apartment doors.

Temple bells in the distance.

Someone downstairs had already begun arguing with the watchman.

Civilization, she thought, remained healthy.

She carried two cups of tea to the bedroom.

Prakash accepted his without opening his eyes.

"Thank you."

"You didn't even look."

"I married correctly."

She laughed.

"Flattery at this age?"

"Experience."

They drank quietly.

No urgency remained between them anymore.

Age had replaced excitement with companionship.

And somehow...

companionship felt holier.

Later that morning, after breakfast, Meenakshi opened her newest notebook.

The pages were almost finished.

Only three remained.

She uncapped her familiar blue pen.

Her handwriting had become slower over the years.

Softer.

More patient.

She wrote:

Om Namah Shivaya.

Again.

Again.

Again.

After the final mantra, she paused.

Then added one last note.

Mahadev,

I think these notebooks are finally catching up with me.

If this happens to be my last entry...

thank You.

Not for giving me everything I asked for.

You clearly ignored many excellent suggestions.

But for never allowing me to walk alone, even when I thought You had.

P.S.

The fifty-crore proposal remains technically unresolved.

Please update the file whenever convenient.

She smiled to herself.

Closed the notebook.

Placed it gently atop the others.

Then leaned back in her chair.

The afternoon sunlight slipped across the room.

It rested on the old iron trunks beneath the bed.

Hundreds of notebooks.

Thousands of conversations.

An ordinary woman's entire heart, written in inexpensive ink.

She closed her eyes.

Only for a moment.

When Prakash came looking for her a little while later, she was still sitting in the chair.

Peaceful.

One hand resting lightly upon the final notebook.

None of those imaginings had prepared him.

Before the final rituals began, he turned toward the old iron trunks.

The family looked at him.

He smiled through wet eyes.

"She made me promise."

No one asked what promise.

They already knew.

One by one, the notebooks were carried forward.

Hundreds of them.

Each one was placed gently beside her.

Not possessions.

Companions.

Every diary carried a season of her life.

Every page carried her voice.

Someone watching from a distance whispered,

"Why so many?"

Prakash answered softly,

"She never believed in sending short messages."

A gentle ripple of laughter moved through the gathering.

Even grief smiled.

The flames rose slowly.

Paper curled.

Ink disappeared.

Smoke climbed into the evening sky.

And for one impossible moment...

the air carried the unmistakable fragrance of freshly made cutting chai.

Prakash looked upward.

Then smiled.

"You finally came."

When Meenakshi opened her eyes again, she was standing somewhere impossible.

There was no blazing light.

No frightening judgment.

No endless staircase disappearing into clouds.

Instead...

there was a broad stone pathway stretching toward an enormous gateway carved with mountains, rivers, crescent moons, dancing flames, and endless skies.

It felt less like entering another world...

and more like arriving somewhere she had always somehow remembered.

Around her stood souls of every age.

Some nervous.

Some joyful.

Some bewildered.

One elderly gentleman complained about the queue.

Even the afterlife, Meenakshi noted approvingly, contained familiar personalities.

She looked down.

Her heart nearly stopped.

Or perhaps, having already stopped once, simply paused out of habit.

Beside her stood mountains of notebooks.

Every diary.

Every register.

Every tiny temple notebook wrapped long ago in ₹500 notes.

Every page.

Perfectly intact.

"Oh good," she said with relief.

"They received the documents."

Several celestial attendants looked at the mountain in stunned silence.

One finally approached.

He wore simple white robes and carried an enormous register.

He looked at Meenakshi.

Then at the notebooks.

Then back at Meenakshi.

"Madam..."

"Yes?"

"...what exactly is all this?"

She smiled proudly.

"Documentation."

He blinked.

"For what?"

"My case."

"What case?"

"My entire life."

The attendant looked horrified.

"You brought... evidence?"

"Of course."

"There was no instruction requiring evidence."

"There was also no instruction forbidding it."

The attendant quietly closed his register.

He looked toward another guard.

"I think this one requires senior approval."

Soon three more celestial attendants arrived.

They circled the notebooks cautiously.

One picked up a diary.

Another found a bundle tied with old ribbon.

A third discovered hundreds of pages containing nothing except:

Om Namah Shivaya.

Again.

Again.

Again.

One attendant whispered,

"Has anyone ever submitted this much?"

Another slowly shook his head.

"I don't believe anyone has ever documented devotion with grocery lists."

A third opened a random page.

He read silently.

Then smiled.

It said:

Mahadev,

Today's dal burnt because I was complaining about You.

Technically this is Your fault.

The attendants struggled not to laugh.

Just then, one of them cleared his throat politely.

"Before entry, do you have any final queries?"

Meenakshi thought for a moment.

"Yes."

The attendants prepared themselves.

She folded her hands politely.

"I would like an update regarding my pending request for fifty crores annually."

Silence.

Absolute celestial silence.

One attendant slowly lowered the notebook in his hands.

Another stared at her.

A third looked upward as though silently requesting reassignment.

Then...

from somewhere beyond the great gate...

came laughter.

Not loud.

Not overwhelming.

Warm.

Ancient.

Deep enough to make mountains seem young.

The laughter rolled gently across the heavens like distant thunder softened by affection.

Every attendant immediately smiled.

Because they knew that laugh.

The great gates opened.

No dramatic explosion.

Only the quiet certainty of a door opening for someone expected.

And then the familiar voice said,

"My dear Meenakshi..."

She smiled before she even saw Him.

"You are still negotiating?"

She folded her arms.

"The request remains pending."

"You carried it even here?"

"I believe in proper follow-up."

The laughter returned.

Gentler this time.

"So many years..."

the voice said.

"...and you have not changed."

She looked toward the light beyond the gate.

"Neither have You."

A pause.

Then she added,

"You still take far too long to answer."

Another laugh.

This one sounded suspiciously like love.

Finally the voice spoke again.

"Come."

"You have been arguing with Me for forty years."

Another pause.

"And I have listened to every single word."

Something inside Meenakshi became wonderfully still.

Not because every prayer had been answered.

Not because every mystery had been explained.

But because the oldest fear she had ever carried...

had quietly disappeared.

She had never been ignored.

Not once.

The notebooks rose gently into the air.

Their pages fluttered in an invisible breeze.

Not one word was lost.

Not one tear forgotten.

Not one laugh overlooked.

The conversations had never been one-sided.

She simply had not recognised the replies.

Meenakshi smiled.

Adjusted the end of her sari.

Picked up the smallest notebook out of habit.

And walked through the gates as though she were entering
the home of an old friend who had finally stopped
pretending not to hear the doorbell.

Far below, in a tiny apartment in Mumbai, the evening
breeze drifted through an open window.

It lifted the last blank page of her final notebook.

For a heartbeat, the page turned on its own.

Then settled.

As if someone had finished reading.

Some people worship God through silence.

Some through rituals.

Some through perfect discipline.

Meenakshi Joshi worshipped Him through conversation.

And perhaps...

that had been enough all along.

Final Chapter

The Conversation Never Ends

Years after Meenakshi Joshi's apartment had been emptied...
after the steel containers had found new kitchens,
after the faded curtains had been replaced,
after the grandchildren had grown into adults with hurried
lives and overflowing calendars,
people still spoke about her.
Not because she had been famous.
She had never appeared on television.
She had never written bestselling books.
She had never founded an ashram, built a temple, or
delivered profound spiritual discourses to thousands of
people.
Most of Mumbai never knew her name.
To the world, she had been an ordinary middle-class woman.
A wife.
A mother.
A neighbour.

A woman who stretched every rupee, worried about everyone else's health more than her own, and somehow believed that coriander should always be free.

And yet...

those who had known her carried something of her with them.

Riya found herself talking to God while driving to work.

Not formal prayers.

Conversations.

Sometimes about impossible meetings.

Sometimes about her children.

Sometimes about nothing at all.

One afternoon she caught herself saying aloud,

"Please let this presentation go well... and if possible, remind Papa to take his medicines."

She stopped at a traffic signal.

Smiled.

And whispered,

"Mummy... this is your fault."

Aditya discovered that whenever life frightened him, he instinctively looked upward before making difficult decisions.

He no longer asked for success.

He asked for courage.

Somewhere along the way, he had realised that his mother had rarely prayed for easy lives.

She had prayed for strength to survive difficult ones.

There was a difference.

He wished he had understood it sooner.

Even Prakash changed.

After Meenakshi's passing, the apartment became unbearably quiet.

For months, he found himself speaking aloud without thinking.

"I've kept your spectacles in the drawer."

"The plumber came."

"The mangoes are expensive again."

At first he thought he was talking to his late wife.

Then one evening he caught himself looking at the little photograph of Shiva hanging beside the kitchen window.

He smiled awkwardly.

"I suppose..."

he said,

"...she has introduced us properly now."

That became his evening routine.

One cup of tea.

One quiet conversation.

No grand prayers.

No elaborate rituals.

Just honest words.

He never admitted it to anyone.

But he no longer felt alone.

The grandchildren inherited many things from their grandmother.

Not jewellery.

Not wealth.

Not property.

Something far more durable.

Permission.

Permission to speak honestly with God.

Permission to laugh during prayer.

Permission to ask foolish questions.

Permission to complain without losing faith.

Permission to believe that the Divine was not offended by human honesty.

Years later, Aarav—now a young man living in another city—walked into a stationery shop.

He only needed a notebook for work.

Instead, he bought two.

That night he opened one.

He stared at the first blank page for several minutes.

Then slowly wrote:

Dear Shiva,

I've never really done this before.

But Aaji seemed convinced You don't mind conversations.

So... hello.

He smiled.

It felt strangely familiar.

Perhaps that is how faith has always travelled.

Not through arguments.

Not through fear.

Not through perfect rituals.

But quietly...

from one heart to another.

A mother teaches her daughter.

A husband learns from his wife.

A child watches without understanding.

Then one difficult day, years later, remembers.

And begins speaking.

We often imagine that spirituality belongs to extraordinary people.

To saints who meditate in the Himalayas.

To sages who have renounced the world.

To mystics who understand scriptures far beyond ordinary minds.

But perhaps heaven has always paid closer attention to kitchens than we realised.

To women stirring dal while whispering prayers between recipes.

To fathers travelling home in crowded trains, silently asking for one more month of strength.

To students praying before examinations.

To doctors washing tired hands.

To workers opening shops before sunrise.

To old people who thank God for another morning because they know mornings are never guaranteed.

Perhaps holiness has never depended on where we stand.

Only on whether our hearts remain open.

The great scriptures tell us that the Divine lives in every heart.

But hearts are curious places.

They do not speak in Sanskrit alone.

Sometimes they speak through tears.

Sometimes through laughter.

Sometimes through exhausted silence.

And sometimes...

through ridiculous requests for fifty crores a year.

God, after all, already knows what we need.

Prayer was never His way of collecting information.

Prayer is His way of inviting relationship.

Not because He is far away.

But because love grows through conversation.

Every meaningful relationship does.

Some readers may wonder...

Did Meenakshi really meet Shiva?

Was the mysterious man merely a dream?

A lonely imagination?

A grieving mind creating comfort?

Or was He truly the Lord of Kailash, sitting beside an ordinary woman with a glass of cutting chai because she had spoken to Him every single day for forty years?

The truth is...

the novel never asks you to decide.

Because faith has never lived inside certainty.

It lives inside recognition.

In those quiet moments when life suddenly feels gently held.

When impossible strength appears exactly when we have none left.

When help arrives through unexpected people.

When a burden becomes lighter without us understanding how.

When we survive days we were certain we would break.

Perhaps miracles are not interruptions of life.

Perhaps they are the invisible hands that carry us through it.

If there is one thing Meenakshi discovered before the end of her journey, it was this:

God does not measure the elegance of our prayers.

He listens for the honesty within them.

He is not impressed by complicated words.

He is moved by truthful ones.

You do not have to become extraordinary before speaking to Him.

You do not have to solve your life before approaching Him.

You do not have to stop doubting.

Or stop laughing.

Or stop being gloriously, imperfectly human.

You only have to begin.

Tonight, perhaps before you sleep, you may find yourself reaching for a notebook.

Or perhaps not.

Perhaps all you will do is look toward the quiet corner of your room and say,

"Are You listening?"

If you do...

do not be surprised if life does not answer with thunder.

It rarely does.

It may answer with unexpected courage.

A little peace.

A chance meeting.

A difficult day survived.

A burden shared.

Or simply the comforting feeling that you are no longer carrying everything alone.

And if, someday, you happen to smell cutting chai for no reason at all...

smile.

Someone has always enjoyed conversations more than speeches.

After all...

the greatest prayer is not the one spoken perfectly.

It is the one that never stops returning.

Om Namah Shivaya.

Epilogue

For All of Us Who Think God Is Not Listening

Every family has someone like Meenakshi.

Perhaps not someone who writes thousands of mantras in cheap notebooks.

Perhaps not someone who secretly wraps those notebooks inside five-hundred-rupee notes before dropping them into temple donation boxes.

Perhaps not someone who negotiates with Lord Shiva for fifty crores a year with the confidence of a seasoned chartered accountant.

But someone who carries the family quietly.

Someone whose prayers rarely sound poetic.

Someone whose faith survives in the middle of ordinary life.

Because that is where most of us live.

Not on mountaintops.

Not inside ancient temples.

Not in perfect silence.

We live between alarm clocks and electricity bills.

Between crowded trains and unfinished conversations.

Between medical reports waiting to be opened and monthly budgets waiting to be stretched.

Our prayers are interrupted by ringing phones.

By pressure cookers.

By children calling from the next room.

By doorbells.

By life.

And perhaps that has never bothered God as much as we imagine.

For years, Meenakshi believed Lord Shiva had forgotten her.

She measured His silence against the lives of people who appeared happier, richer, healthier, luckier.

She watched others receive promotions, new homes, foreign holidays and success, while she found herself praying for stable Wi-Fi, affordable mangoes and a pressure cooker whistle that refused to disappear.

She mistook dramatic blessings for greater love.

Many of us do.

We look at another person's life and quietly wonder,

"Why them?"

"Why not me?"

Yet, by the end of her journey, Meenakshi discovered something she had never thought to ask.

Not,

"Why weren't my prayers answered?"

But,

"Who carried me through all the years I survived?"

She opened her old notebooks searching for miracles.

Instead, she found endurance.

She found courage she did not remember possessing.

She found laughter written on days that should have defeated her.

She found gratitude squeezed between grocery lists.

Hope hidden beside household expenses.

Love tucked quietly into the margins of ordinary life.

Perhaps that was the answer all along.

Perhaps miracles are not always events.

Perhaps they are companions.

The strength that arrives before we know we need it.

The stranger who appears at exactly the right moment.

The unexpected kindness that changes an ordinary afternoon.

The courage to begin again after believing we cannot.

Or simply the quiet grace of surviving one more difficult day.

The great mistake many of us make is believing that prayer is a performance.

That we must find perfect words.

Perfect rituals.

Perfect concentration.

Meenakshi never managed any of those.

She forgot fasting rules.

She argued with priests.

She lost focus during aarti.

She occasionally scolded Lord Shiva for what she considered poor customer service.

And still...

she kept talking.

Day after day.

Year after year.

Not because she always believed.

But because she always returned.

Maybe that is what faith truly looks like.

Not certainty.

Returning.

Again.

And again.

Like writing the same mantra across another page.

Like beginning another conversation after yesterday's silence.

Like believing that even unanswered prayers are worth speaking aloud.

Somewhere, perhaps, there is a woman reading these pages after everyone in her house has fallen asleep.

Somewhere there is a father pretending to be stronger than he feels.

A student afraid of tomorrow's examination.

A son is waiting outside an operation theatre.

A daughter wondering whether everything will somehow be all right.

Perhaps they have stopped praying because they think they are not spiritual enough.

Not disciplined enough.

Not worthy enough.

If this story leaves you with only one thought, let it be this:

God has never waited for perfect people before listening.

He has always listened to honest ones.

Speak to Him in the language you know.

With the words you have.

Even if they are clumsy.

Even if they are interrupted.

Even if they begin with complaint and end with gratitude.

Conversation has never required perfection.

Only sincerity.

And if you still wonder whether anyone is listening...

think of an ordinary woman in a small Mumbai apartment,
filling cheap notebooks with blue ink.

A woman who believed she had been ignored.

Until she realised that every page she had written had
already been read.

So tonight, before you sleep, you need not write eleven lakh
mantras.

You need not travel to a sacred mountain.

You need not wait until your faith becomes stronger.

Simply speak.

Tell Him about your day.

Tell Him what frightened you.

Tell Him what made you laugh.

Tell Him what you cannot tell anyone else.

Who knows?

Perhaps, somewhere beyond what the eyes can see and the
mind can explain, a patient Listener is smiling over a glass of
cutting chai...

waiting for you to continue the conversation.

Om Namah Shivaya.