

EPHEMERALS

Soulful Short Stories

Jaikishan Kalawapudi



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DEDICATION

To my wife, Komal, for her insightful critiques that drive me to refine my craft.

To my daughter, Anvika, for bringing fresh perspectives to my writing.

To my friends AD and Raj, for being invaluable sounding boards for my story ideas and being the first reviewers.

To Gaurang Pancholi, a friend, philosopher, and guide, for the numerous conversations and tales that have made me intellectually richer.

To the diverse readers of my debut book "Dauntless Maverick" for their invested efforts and feedback.

To the numerous individuals who have shared their experiences with me. Their narratives have inspired and shaped the stories in this collection.

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PREFACE

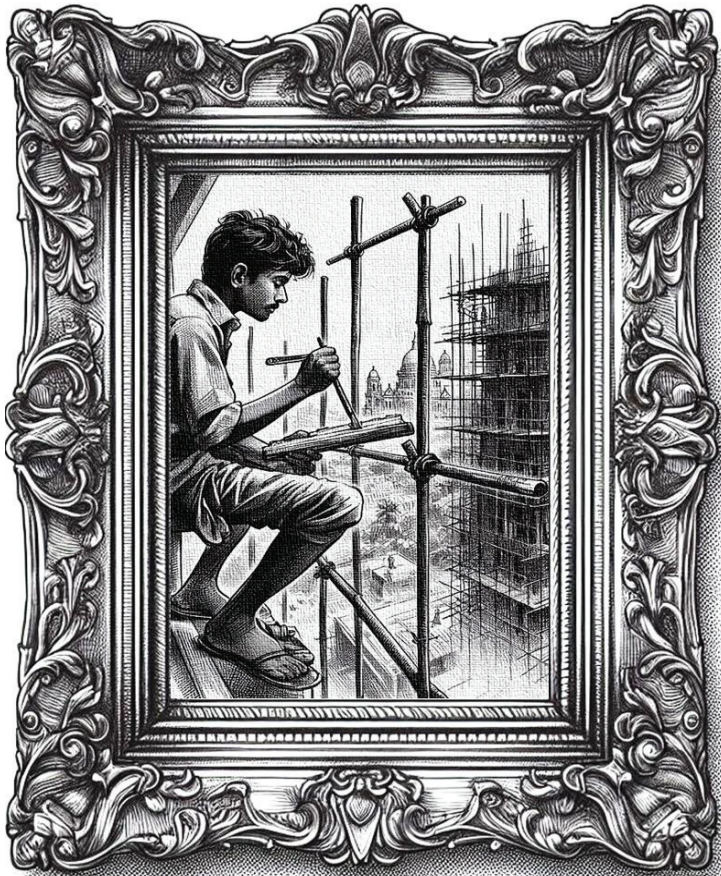
Ephemerals are brief yet precious moments in one's life that leave a lasting impact. They capture the essence of fleeting encounters, people, or emotions, shaping who we become and imparting wisdom. In the ever-changing canvas of life, some moments shine like stars, while others bring uncertainty. Despite their brevity, these moments contribute intense feelings to the overall picture of our lives.

Welcome to a world of short stories that explores various facets of being human. Each narrative offers a glimpse into the lives of ordinary people facing unusual situations. These narratives are snapshots of life from different angles, traversing the spectrum of human emotions – love, joy, sorrow, fear, hope, and despair.

Share the laughter, offer a shoulder, and find solace in a bouquet of human experience. I look forward to hearing your thoughts on these stories. Reach out through the provided channels and share your impressions.

I hope the stories are reminiscent of people you've seen, met or known, for it is in the collective narrative that we find meaning. May these tales help you discover your own 'Ephemeral'. Happy Reading!

Jaikishan Kalawapudi



RESONANCE OF DESIRES

My name is Rajesh. I am a mason on a construction site in the suburbs of Mumbai. At the end of my day's work, I'm standing in a queue to receive the daily wages of my laborious job. Barring a couple of tea breaks and a brief lunch intermission during the day, I've remained engaged in my work, under the blaze of a scorching summer sun.

I stand alongside my colleagues, only to relish their gossip, but harbour slim expectations of getting my full wage. Why so? Because, earlier in the day, an unfortunate mishap unfolded. A careless labourer passed his load of tiles, and my slippery hands sent the stack to the ground, shattering them into fragments. Each of those tiles carried a price tag of twenty rupees, and the stack contained ten of them. The loss was equivalent to half of my day's wages.

In the grand scheme of things, considering the thousands of tile stacks to be laid at the site, this minor incident would have gone unnoticed.

It was the prying eyes of a young man who wouldn't let this slip by. He was the supervisor's mole. My accident was his perfect opportunity to score a few brownie points.

By now, this individual would have reported the incident to our supervisor. I am well-acquainted with the latter's cold-heartedness. He will hold me accountable for the damage. As my turn draws near, I stand in the queue, clinging to a glimmer of hope. I wish this minor incident had escaped the supervisor's attention.

"Greetings, Saheb," I said to the supervisor. Seated at the table, he had a bag of cash. Could I pick up that bag and run away? I wish that was as easy. Two guards, armed with clubs, enclosed him. Their personalities discouraged any unwise actions.

"Rajesh! It appears you've had quite an eventful day. Is there something you wish to confess?" He spoke in an authoritative voice, dripping with his usual sarcasm.

My throat tightened. Concealing the truth seemed futile. "Saheb, I broke a stack of tiles while it was being passed to me. It slipped from

my grasp and fell,” I pleaded, attempting to convey an air of desolation and desperation.

“Very well. Since you’ve owned up to your mistake, it is only fitting that I exhibit some mercy. People label me as heartless, but let them learn that I, too, possess a heart,” he announced. Hope surged within me, expecting him to disregard the loss and grant me my full wages. However, the man crushed my hopes.

“These days, the basic materials cost a lot. We value each tile at 40 rupees, and the entire stack is worth 400 rupees. I won’t pay you for today’s work because it matches the cost of the damages. Instead, I’ll give you 200 rupees as a reward for your honesty. Here you go!”

I received four crumpled 50-rupee notes pushed into my hand. The bodyguard’s eyes gestured at me to keep moving and concede any further argument. My hope for full compensation resembled the broken tiles.

The temptation to exact vengeance coursed through my veins. It compelled my hand to reach for the small knife nestled in my waist pocket. Yet, in a moment of clarity, I restrained

myself. The supervisor had a wife and three children relying on him. Considering their well-being, I bowed and left the scene, muttering a flurry of curses that exhausted my vocabulary of innovative expletives. I reached the construction site's exit gate. Now, my thoughts raced, consumed with the urgent need to recalibrate my spending.

I sat on a stone bench near the gate and calculated my expenses for the day. Fifty rupees for "beedi", the affordable cigarettes I relied on. Fifty rupees for a rented hut near the site. Sixty rupees for two meagre meals. Fifty rupees for the agent - his commission to ensure my continued employment. Forty rupees for tea and snacks. Fifty rupees for hopeful gambling. The last hundred rupees for a small indulgence - country liquor and fried fish. A cherished routine to ease fatigue before the next day's demands of intense labour.

I gave my accommodation away to a fellow-labourer. He agreed to watch over my belongings in the shanty until I returned. I abandoned the evening meal and gambling bouts without hesitation. I halved my

expenditure on “beedi” and instead of the usual fried fish, I opted for the more affordable indulgence of fried onion fritters. As for lodging, I devised a plan to stay at the construction site. Ten rupees to the vigilant guard on duty would smooth my passage. The arrangement would grant me access to one of the vacant apartment shells, where I could find shelter for the night. However, I couldn’t imagine giving up my daily liquor. It was my source of strength. Without it, my tired body would struggle to recharge. This would affect how ready I’d be for the next day’s work.

With the remaining expenses left unchanged, I had aligned my necessities to my day’s reduced earnings. A newfound realisation dawned upon me. I could survive within half of my current wages. If I act with such prudence from now on, I could save enough money to buy new clothes! Someone once told me that adversity is the best teacher. The teacher had imparted to me a powerful lesson today. I could see the silver lining. A sense of positivity and pride welled up within me. After purchasing the calculated provisions, I returned to the

construction site.

As I neared the gate, a wave of disappointment washed over me. Ramcharan, the familiar face of the guard booth, was nowhere to be seen. Instead, a burly, intimidating figure had taken his place, exuding an aura of sternness. Undeterred by the change, I mustered up some courage to approach the additional guard.

“Excuse me, Saheb,” I greeted him with utmost politeness. I had learnt this trick long ago. When you address someone with more respect than they deserve, you score a favour point. I had full intentions of redeeming this point. The guard’s gaze met mine. “Yes? How can I help you?” he asked in a polite tone, relaxing his stance.

I came to the point and broached the subject. “Is Ramcharan-Ji around?” I asked, hoping for a glimmer of familiarity. “He has returned to his native town. I am his replacement.” My heart sank. Summoning courage, I pitched my proposal.

“Oh. We had an arrangement. I work here

during the day, and when I cannot secure accommodation, Ramcharan-Ji permits me to stay overnight within the confines of the construction site for a small token. If you are open to the idea, you can inherit this arrangement from your predecessor. I assure you; I will keep to myself and stay out of your way.”

With a mixture of anxiety and hope, I extended a twenty rupee note towards him. The guard’s eyes lit up as he snatched the offering and opened the gate, permitting me to enter.

“Very well,” he grumbled. “Stay out of trouble. If I catch you wandering, I will expel you without hesitation. I expect you to leave by 7 am. Do you understand?” I exhaled a sigh of relief, my gratitude palpable. “Yes, Saheb. No trouble,” I assured him.

Making my way through the site, I sought refuge within one of the unfinished towers. Ascending the stairs to the highest floor. I selected a vantage point, hopeful of the gentle breeze at that height. Summoning the last ounces of strength within my weary legs, I persevered in ascending the staircase. Each step

proved arduous, my muscles protesting with every movement. The promise of solace spurred me forward, soothing my fatigued spirit.

Along my climb, a stray dog crossed my path. Its presence mirrored my quest for a refuge. I amused myself at how that burly security guard might have permitted the dog's presence. The whimsical thought of the dog offering a bone to the guard as his entry fee made me laugh. The dog and I shared a silent understanding of our parallel existences. We continued on our separate trajectories.

Upon reaching the summit of the building, I noticed a large numeral painted on the adjacent wall, an indicator of the floor's number. Guided by this marker, I entered one of the vacant shell flats at the end of the floor.

Moonlight illuminated the flat, entering through the naked windows. As I entered, the sheer magnitude of the space overwhelmed me. The living room alone boasted dimensions at least ten times that of my humble shanty. I couldn't fathom what people did with such a large house. How much space did one need to live?

I ventured into the kitchen and fortune smiled at me. I discovered a few empty cement bags and a plastic bucket. Gathering these items, I made my way onto the balcony adjoining the living room. Arranging the bags, I made myself a makeshift carpet, providing some respite from the harsh cemented floor. The overturned bucket became a functional side table, accommodating my bottle of liquor and the snack that accompanied it. Seated on my carpet amidst a cool evening breeze flowing through the grills, I prepared to engage in my customary ritual.

Memories of my humble beginnings flooded my mind, transporting me back to the hardships of my childhood. I was born in Jabalpur. My parents toiled as labourers, leaving little room for fond recollections. The scenes that resurfaced in my mind were of my drunken father stumbling into our shanty. His stupor fuelling fits of verbal and physical abuse directed at my mother and me. Despite the environment, my heart clung to the hope of a bright future. A nearby school beckoned, but our economic circumstances did not allow me

the luxury of education.

At six, I found myself thrust into the world of labour, assisting my mother in sorting pebbles and shells from sand at construction sites. It was through this work that a passion for masonry took root within me. By the time I reached the age of twelve, I had honed my skills in tile laying and wall levelling. As the years passed by, I delved deeper into the craft, adding rudimentary knowledge of plumbing and carpentry to my repertoire. By fifteen, I had gained a reputation as a skilled mason.

My father succumbed to an infected liver, leaving a void in our lives. A year later, my mother met her untimely demise in a freak accident at the construction site. She was riding in a cable elevator that was overloaded with cement bags. The metal string broke, and the car came crashing down from a dizzying height of twenty floors, snuffing out her life in an instant.

Consumed by grief and anger, I fought for justice and contemplated seeking retribution against the builder. It was his staff's negligence that had led to my mother's death. The builder's goons swiftly silenced my pleas, removing me

from the site after slipping a wad of money into my pocket. After careful consideration, I took a practical approach and decided not to contest them any further. I devoted most of that money to giving my mother a dignified funeral.

With no other anchor to tether me, I found myself adrift, searching for a purpose in life. A relative suggested moving to Mumbai - a city brimming with greater opportunities. The idea captivated my imagination. Boarding a train bound for the bustling metropolis, I arrived in this city a decade ago. Now, at twenty-five, I am a resilient individual. Blessed with a slender yet sturdy physique and a determination marked by the lessons that life has imparted in these years.

Hopping from one site to another, I left behind a trail of commendable workmanship and goodwill. Along the way, I cultivated a network of connections with agents who ensured a steady stream of employment. However, amid the bustle and commotion, there was one person who captured my heart. Her name was Kamala, an alluring presence on the construction site in Wadala, where I had

worked three years ago.

Kamala's innocence made her unique. Her charm compensated for any shortcomings. I sought opportunities to engage. Her brother became a good friend of mine. My conversations with her revolved around work-related inquiries, paving the way for a closer connection. She seemed impressed by my knowledge and observed my expertise on the job. They assigned me to train her on flooring and tiling. In a rare moment of solitude, I summed up the courage to confess my affection for her. I expressed my desire to marry her. She blushed and admitted that she had no objections to the idea.

That was the first time I felt a rush of emotions. There was a profound sense of exhilaration and joy. It felt as if the confession had lifted an enormous weight from my shoulders. The world around me seemed to take on a brighter, more vibrant hue. Every sound, from the rustling of leaves to the distant hymn of traffic, seemed to blend into a harmonious symphony. It resonated with the beating of my heart. At that moment, life took on a newfound

purpose and meaning, as if every experience, both past and future, had led to this blissful realisation. Validation of being seen and accepted for who I was. I had a profound sense of gratitude for the opportunity to share my life with a woman that I cared for.

One day, when I arrived at the construction site, Kamala and her entire family were gone. Immersing myself in a two-month hunt to locate her, I scoured every construction site across the city. From the bustling streets of Churchgate to the distant reaches of Virar, the iconic CST to the developments in Panvel and Kalyan. I searched, but my efforts proved fruitless. Kamala was gone. Overwhelmed by grief, it took me a long time to emerge from the trauma of my loss and return to my job.

By then, I had lost six precious months of productivity. It was in that episode of suffering that I had resolved to shield myself from matters of the heart. I prioritised practicality over sentimental entanglements. Choosing a path of isolation, I made a conscious decision to sever all emotional ties with everyone.

Now, sitting on the balcony and sipping my

drink, my mind is questioning the very nature of my work. Amidst the colossal machinery of construction, they churned thousands of new homes each year. In the past, I've observed how potential buyers came to inspect the construction site and the well-dressed sales executives who accompanied them. It was as if their appearances were a mere facade, a disguise that concealed their true identities. Yet, despite their misplaced attire, both the sales executives and the potential buyers exuded confidence and exuberance befitting millionaires.

I've seen how the sales team decorate sample flats. They shower them with a display of opulence and luxury, enticing potential buyers to envision a life of grandeur within the walls they have constructed. People from all walks of life flock to the construction site. Their hopes and aspirations intertwined with the prospect of owning a piece of this fabricated paradise. Though their dreams vary in scale, depending on their means and affordability, the underlying sentiment remains the same—a desire for a place to call their own.

Amidst my work on one of the floors, I was witness to a conversation between a salesperson and a young couple. The couple was eager to invest in the project. I couldn't help but notice the cunning tactics employed by the salesperson, expanding their initial desire for a two-bedroom flat into the temptations of a luxurious three-bedroom dwelling that they did not need.

The sales associates paint a vivid picture of the development's future value, and the breathtaking views that awaited buyers, and even drop a subtle threat. If the buyers didn't act fast, they would miss out on a once-in-a-lifetime investment opportunity. The sales associates speak of selling homes as if they were selling hotcakes. As per them, demand always exceeded supply. According to them, only the quick decision-makers could secure their place in paradise.

Rage embroiled in me. Were we to be used in a grand game orchestrated by these executives and builders? Were we just cogs in the machine, working to fulfil their grand visions while they reaped the rewards of our craftsmanship,

doling out peanuts to us?

It saddens me to think of the differential treatment meted out to prospective buyers. The associates treated those who arrived in a rented cab or an auto-rickshaw with indifference, while those who stepped out of self-driven cars were showered with attention and courtesy.

A growing disillusionment brewed within me. The realisation that I was a mere puppet, manipulated by those in power, ignited a thirst for change. This was not the case with one builder. It was an industry-wide practice. I wished that the industry operated with transparency, fairness, and genuine concern for the aspirations of those in search of a place to call their own.

We, the artisans, devote ourselves to the noble task of crafting homes. With unyielding dedication, we pour our passion and expertise into every facet of the construction process. From laying the foundation to adding the last details, we work to create a masterpiece that embodies a cherished dwelling. This is more than a job for me; it's my calling. My purpose and mission. I understand the value of a home

and the sanctuary it offers. My craftsmanship will establish a sanctuary for someone's aspirations to blossom.

I can't help but feel compassion for those who invest their hard-earned savings, trusting the polished faces behind the air-conditioned sales office desks.

On one of the projects I was working on last year, the builder was forced to stop the project mid-way, due to environmental violations. The site still stands unfinished. A skeleton of the opulent haven promised, but not delivered. I've overheard the sales office team boasting of how cunningly they deceived buyers into acquiring this property, sharing underhanded tactics to pressure and manipulate them. Investors in such projects find themselves trapped in a state of anticipation. Many borrow from banks, subjecting themselves to years of instalment payments. They hope the builder will fulfil their dream of home ownership, trusting the sales team's promises. They live in hope, wagering their wealth on a better tomorrow.

I wonder about the purpose of it all. Reflecting on my experience today, when my

income decreased, I adjusted my needs to match. So, why do people walk into these traps, burdening themselves with loans?

A profound realisation dawned. People's willingness to embrace debt and materialism stems from a desperate need for validation. The perceptions of society, friends, and community shapes lives. People yearn to fit into predefined moulds of acceptability. This triggers a need for upgrades and recognition. Maybe, if I were in their shoes, I'd also feel compelled to elevate my status. Owning a car symbolises higher standing and demands respect. I began understanding why people indulged in purchases that burdened them. They enslave themselves for others' admiration.

In a world obsessed with accumulation, I've chosen a path less cluttered. Wealth, property, and relationships seemed to me like anchors, tethering one to a life of unnecessary complexity. I yearn for a life unburdened by material possessions and social obligations. My pursuit is not one of lack, but rather of abundance in experiences, freedom, and peace of mind.

I've had one last sip of my drink and am now soaking in the captivating cityscape before me. The simplicity of my humble meal, the modest surroundings, and the freedom I have found in my unburdened existence brings me a profound sense of fulfilment.

In the not-so-distant future, someone else may sit in this very spot, contemplating their own life and purpose, just as I have done tonight. They may indulge in more extravagant pleasures, surrounded by opulence and luxury, sipping a better brand of alcohol, yet burdened by the weight of ownership and the demands it entails.

A cool breeze lulled me into a state of tranquillity. However, a soft rustling sound alerted me. My gaze snapped towards the main door, where a shadowy figure emerged into the dim moonlight. My heart skipped a beat, and I strained my eyes, struggling to identify the silhouette. In a fleeting moment, I felt a paranormal presence in my vicinity. It was as if someone was watching me and was trying to reach out to me. I turned around and tried to peer through the darkness.

“Who's there?” I called out, my voice a delicate sound in the quiet of the night. Someone appeared - a shadowy figure that seemed to be made by the darkness. As this mysterious person took shape, it felt like I was watching a dream.

At that moment, I felt a mix of confusion and amazement in my mind. I wondered if this was just a trick of the shadows, or if reality had somehow turned into a dream. The air was heavy with uncertainty, and each breath seemed surreal as I saw Kamala in front of me, like a vision from the depths of the night.

I began to doubt my senses, questioning if the drinks I had earlier teamed up with the night to create a stronger experience than usual. Maybe the alcohol had opened a door to a place where reality and fantasy mixed, and now I had to navigate through my feelings.

“Kamala?” I stammered, a mixed emotion of disbelief and elation coursing through me. Her response was a sheepish smile, her eyes reflecting a myriad of emotions. “Rajesh!” she replied in a voice that felt like a blend of relief and regret. She took a moment, wiped a tear

that broke the barrier of her eyes, and asked,
“Will you marry me?”



2

UNOPENED UMBRELLA

In Dadar, within the comforting walls of her cosy apartment, 90-year-old Mrs Aruna Deshpande sat alone in her drawing room. A rhythmic pattering of raindrops echoed on the balcony floor. She gazed through the misted glass. The overcast sky mirrored her sombreness.

Closing the balcony door and windows, Aruna attempted to shield her living space from the persistent intrusion of raindrops. Displeasure etched on her face, as she wished for the downpour to stop. The news of her maidservant, Sheela's death, lingered in her thoughts. Sheela, a faithful presence for four decades, had served Aruna with absolute loyalty. The un-swept floor and a thin layer of dust bore witness to the neglect, as Aruna tried to restore order, succumbing to futility. A craving for a simple cup of tea intensified; a simple comfort Sheela used to provide, with no request needed.

Aruna's son, Madhav, called from the USA. He told her that Govardhan, her caretaker, had arranged for a new maid to handle household tasks. Aruna was unsure about trusting a stranger at first, but she agreed because it made practical sense.

As she waited for Govardhan and the new maid to arrive, Aruna found herself drawn to the photographs adorning her drawing-room wall. One frame captured a candid moment with Sheela, both immersed in the simple pleasure of sipping tea. Another showcased a family portrait—Madhav, his wife Chitra, and their daughter Pallavi.

The largest frame held the stoic portrait of her late husband, Mr. Shishir Deshpande. Each photograph whispered stories of the past, weaving a tapestry of memories that now mingled with the rain-soaked melancholy of the present.

Aruna took a glance at her home, a flat that had been hers for over six decades. Back in the 1960s, they bought it for 16,000 rupees when Shishir worked as a tax collector with the Central Excise Department.

She got up from her chair, making her way to the bedroom. On the journey, she stopped by a second bedroom which was locked. A deep sigh escaped her, and she continued to her destination. Grabbing a book from near her bed, she walked back to the drawing room.

Thinking back to 1953, Aruna remembered her marriage to Shishir. It was a match arranged by a family friend. Shishir, a year older, hailed from Jalgaon, while Aruna's family was from Nashik. Two years into their marriage, Madhav was born.

Shishir's work brought them to Bombay in 1957, and after a few years of saving, they bought the flat she now called home. The following years were spent living a typical middle-class life, with Shishir busy at the office, Aruna managing the house, and Madhav progressing through school, proving to be a bright student.

Madhav completed his commerce degree and, at 20, won a scholarship to Yale University in 1976. He relocated to Connecticut, USA. Aruna missed Madhav but consoled herself, accepting her son's aspirations.

On a rainy day in 1978, Shishir Deshpande found himself at the crowded Churchgate station. Two out of the five train lines to Borivali were out-of-order due to a cable fault, concentrating the rush on the remaining three tracks. In the chaos, Shishir waited on the platform's edge as a train approached. The crowd, eager to board, pushed and shoved. A fatal push sent Shishir off balance, causing him to fall onto the tracks. The oncoming train brought a swift and tragic end to his life.

Aruna sat on the balcony, waiting for her husband to come home. They had evening plans for a walk and dinner at Dadar Chowpatty. She was greeted with a loud knock on her door. Two police officers brought the news of the accident. Aruna was heartbroken and couldn't believe it. With her neighbours as an aide, she went to the railway hospital in Dhobi Talao. She identified Shishir's belongings next to his lifeless body.

Aruna's mind drifted back to Sheela, who entered her life after Shishir's passing. Madhav arranged employment for Sheela as a house help. At 19, an orphan striving to make a living, Sheela accepted the offer to become Aruna's

full-time maidservant. She became more than that—a source of solace, a friend to fill the void left by family and a companion in Aruna’s loneliness. Aruna discovered a constant companion for a conversation with her. A balm for her wounded heart.

After Sheela took charge of her duties, Aruna did not venture out of her home. Sheela took charge of all household chores—grocery shopping, getting provisions and medicines, and even handling banking transactions. Occasionally, relatives would visit her, while Madhav came from the USA every other year. During his visits, he attended to house repairs and updated gadgets before returning to his life abroad. A few years later, Madhav shared the news with Aruna that he was in love with his colleague, Chitra, and they planned to marry in the USA.

Aruna would have loved to see her son getting married. However, it had been over eight years since she had stepped out of her house. Her physical limitations had grown during this time, causing her to doubt her mobility, balance and ability to navigate

through unfamiliar terrain. The mere thought of a change in routine and loss of control deepened her insecurity. The fear of vulnerability enveloped her since the passing away of her husband.

She declined the offer to go, despite Madhav's willingness to visit India and escort her. She insisted that he should go ahead with the marriage without her presence. Unable to reason with his mother, Madhav got married and later sent her a photo album of the ceremonies.

Years passed. Aruna got used to being alone. Madhav, with his family, visited Bombay every two years. With more responsibilities and a newborn daughter, Madhav chose Govardhan, Shishir's ex-office assistant, as Aruna's caretaker. It meant that Madhav's trips would be less frequent as Govardhan would take care of the home repairs and maintenance. The latter happily accepted the role for a decent post-retirement income.

The doorbell rang, interrupting Aruna's thoughts. She opened the door to find Govardhan and a young girl named Deepa. He

introduced Deepa as Sheela's niece, who had just arrived from Kolhapur. Aruna held her apprehensions but relaxed upon hearing about the family connection. After quizzing Deepa about her skills, Aruna agreed to hire her for 10,000 rupees a month, including lodging and food. Govardhan left, allowing the two women to start their routine.

In a month, Deepa settled into her role, impressing Aruna with her efficiency reminiscent of Sheela's younger days. Govardhan's monthly visits continued, assisting Aruna with bank transactions, while Deepa took care of daily purchases. One afternoon, as Aruna read in her armchair, Deepa brought tea and sat beside her. Aruna sensed a trace of sadness and asked, "What's wrong, Deepa? Aren't you happy here?"

"I love going outdoors, walking in the streets, observing the world," Deepa confessed. Aruna, surprised, asked what was holding her back. Govardhan had instructed her not to leave Aruna alone unless permitted by Aruna for essential tasks.

Aruna's smile widened. "Take a stroll and

grab some boiled peanuts. We'll make a salad for dinner," she suggested to Deepa. Her face lit up, and Deepa went to freshen up, returning a couple of hours later. Seated with Aruna, she shared the details of her walk, her excitement clear in her voice.

As Deepa recounted the details of her walk, Aruna found herself caught between the vivid descriptions of the bustling streets, the changing cityscape, and the rhythmic sounds of the rain. The enthusiasm in Deepa's voice seemed to awaken dormant memories within Aruna, transporting her back to the lively streets of Bombay she once knew. Deepa's sheer delight in experiencing the world outside echoed the long-lost yearning that Aruna had buried deep within herself. Deepa's narrative stirred a wave of nostalgia and longing in Aruna, reminding her of the vibrant life she used to know. It was as if Deepa's words had reignited a spark, convincing Aruna to embrace the proposal of a taxi tour with a sense of longing, realizing that perhaps it was time to rediscover the world beyond her home and make fresh memories.

Enchanted by Deepa's account, Aruna found herself lost in memories of her past. She recalled the long walks with Shishir when they first arrived in Bombay—the busy streets, vibrant markets, and the monsoon. The sound of rain and the feel of droplets on her face brought a nostalgic smile. She realized she hadn't experienced those moments since the weekend before Shishir's accident 45 years ago.

Deepa, expressing her joy, suggested, "Next time, I'll take you with me. We can ride through the streets in a taxi!" Aruna glanced at the clock and said, "Why wait? Let's go now." Deepa, surprised by the sudden change, agreed in bewilderment.

Aruna, making her way to the bedroom, faced a wardrobe dilemma for the first time in years. She had home clothes and had given away most of her sarees. Then she remembered a key and unlocked a room. The space carried an acrid smell but was clean. It housed Shishir's belongings, books, and a study table. Opening a drawer, Aruna retrieved a plastic bag containing a saree that Shishir had bought for her. It was to be worn by her on the evening he

had passed away. Alongside it was a matching umbrella.

Aruna took a deep sigh and showed Deepa the saree, impressing her with its elegance. Within the hour, Aruna changed into the dress, its lustre maintained from the day she first saw it. The duo was ready to leave their home.

Deepa, the first to venture outside, headed to the nearby taxi stand to secure a cab. As the taxi waited in the building compound, Aruna locked her home and descended the staircase for the first time in over four decades. Observing the building's exterior, she noted the changed colours, a mix of brown and cream. She remembered the walls were white, the last time she saw them.

An unfamiliar taxi awaited her. Seated in the rear, Aruna admired the modern interior, and everything feeling surreal. Deepa joined her, instructing the taxi driver to begin their journey. Over the next two hours, Aruna tried to recall the names of places from her memory as the taxi zipped past the roads. They stopped at Shivaji Park, now modernized with concrete walk areas. The art déco bungalows that she

remembered had given way to multi-storied apartments, and the streets seemed narrower with heavy traffic.

Their route continued through Bandra, where they rode the Bandra-Worli sea link to reach Worli. Driving along the sea face road, they passed through Lower Parel and Mahalakshmi. Aruna reminisced about her first visit to Haji Ali in the 1960s. Turning towards Pedder Road, they reached Marine Drive, driving to Nariman Point. Aruna interrupted, “Wait. Park the car to the side,” as they reached the promenade’s dead end. Aruna was gazing at the sea and opened the door, wanting to step out. Deepa rushed to help her alight.

Standing on the footpath, Aruna observed the overcast sky and the sea, looking at the celebrated marine skyline of the Queen’s Necklace. As a drizzle began, she closed her eyes to feel the gentle raindrops on her face. Tears mingled with the rain, unnoticed. Aruna reached for the umbrella, opening it as the drizzle persisted. Deepa urged her to return to the taxi.

Returning via a different route, they

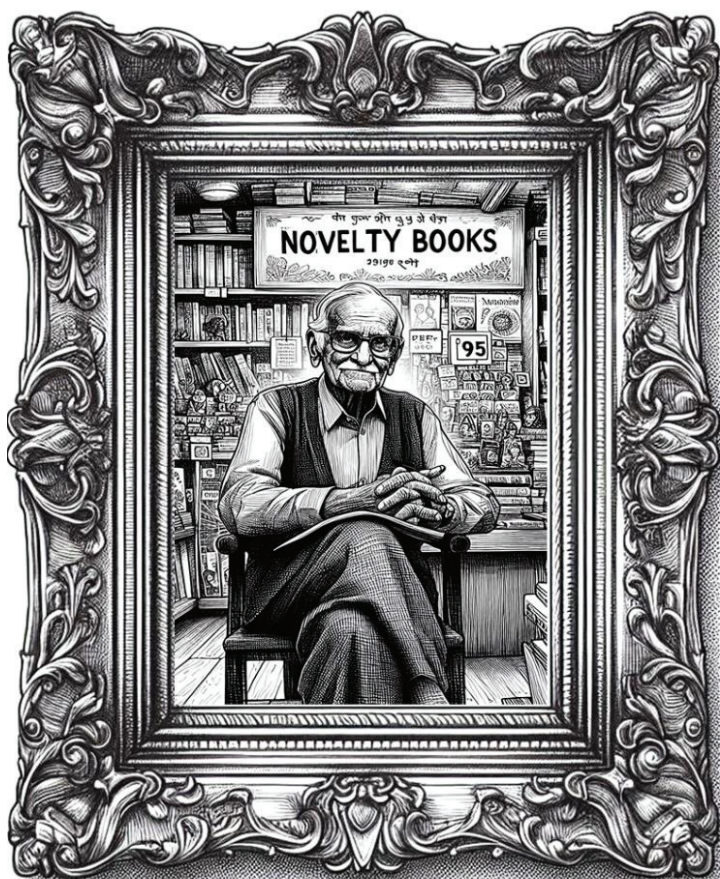
navigated to Victoria Terminus, which is now known as Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus. The rain had intensified into a downpour. Aruna, against Deepa's worried advice, lowered the window to feel the raindrops on her hand. Taking the JJ Flyover, they passed Byculla, Parel, and crossed the Elphinstone Bridge, reaching their home in Dadar.

In the familiar building compound, Aruna got down of the taxi and paid the driver one thousand rupees. The amount was much more than the fare displayed on the meter. Smiling at her with folded hands, the taxi driver acknowledged her gesture. As the taxi left, Aruna stood in the rain with her umbrella. Deepa, growing restless, reminded her that it was time to return home.

Aruna took a slow walk to the second floor, back to the familiar shelter. "Make tea for both of us and join me on the balcony. I'll sit there," she instructed. As Deepa prepared tea, Aruna settled into a chair on the balcony. The rain reappeared. She opened her umbrella when the downpour gathered strength. Closing her eyes,

she heard the soft noise of the rain. She visualised Sishir's face as she had last seen him. Moments later she could hear his voice, asking her to get ready for a taxi ride to Dadar Chowpatty. She could feel his excitement and visualised the beach. The aroma of boiled peanuts lingered in her mind. However, a strange force kept her from opening her eyes. The sounds slowly faded, and the feeling of a relaxed sleep took over. Deepa brought the tray laden with tea and cookies to the balcony. She shrieked when she saw Aruna slumped in the chair with her eyes closed. She quickly shook her and checked her pulse. There was none.

The open umbrella lay on the balcony floor, fluttering amidst a strong breeze. It told the story of her life. The culmination of bustling streets, joy, and sorrow converged at that single moment. Her companionship with Shishir, the sadness of his death, the comfort found in Sheela, and the unexpected adventure with Deepa had completed the circle of her life. In her final moments, she released the past that had haunted her for four decades by opening an umbrella.



3

WHISPERING PAGES

In the southern Mumbai area of Fort, Novelty Books stood as a custodian of literature. Picture it like an old friend that has been around for ages, seeing time go by. The exterior of the store was like a vintage painting, with its worn-out wooden front and letters in faded gold. It stood for a grand past that many had forgotten.

The store was a reader's paradise. People from everywhere gathered, excited to grab the latest novels. The store was a time capsule filled with stories. It was a cosy haven for book lovers. Creaking wooden floors, a large reading table and ornate shelves held tales from generations past.

Countless number of books were stacked side by side. Their spines shone, luring readers into new worlds and untold stories. Patrons ran their fingers along the rows, eyes filled with excitement. Eager souls queued up to search for the next adventure or the comfort of familiar voices captured in ink.

Over time, e-books and digital media became more popular, overshadowing printed books. Now a small outpost, the bookstore faded with the march of progress. It seemed like the world had abandoned the practice of patient reading. The enchanting dance of words and imagination has faded, lost amidst immediate satisfaction and scattered focus. However, a devoted few still cherished the written word. They sought refuge within the store's time-worn walls, finding solace in the sanctuary it provided.

Maganlal, an ageing soul of 89 years, presided over the day-to-day operations of the store. The weight of tradition hung heavy upon his weary shoulders. It was his father, Jyotilal, who had established this literary haven during the days of the British Raj. In the times when the sun never set on the empire, British high-ranking officers graced the store with their presence. Their polished demeanour was a stark contrast to the humble shelves that lined the walls.

As he sat at his worn desk, savouring the warmth of the tea against his lips and the

comfort of a well-loved book in his hands, his mind traversed the depths of time. Memories danced before his eyes like phantoms, ethereal and bittersweet. He peered through the dusty windowpanes, and his heart sank with the weight of his dwindling business. The passage of time had dealt a cruel blow, robbing him of both his beloved wife, who passed away a decade ago, and the once-thriving spirit of Novelty Books. The footfalls of loyal customers had grown scarce, and the symphony of bustling conversations had faded to a mere echo.

Within the depths of his recollections, his thoughts turned to his only son, Harish, a passionate storyteller who had pursued his dreams of writing for both literature and the silver screen. Harish had spent countless hours within the sanctuary of Novelty Books. There, he delved into the labyrinth of narratives, seeking inspiration for his creative endeavours.

His passion for storytelling burned within. Harish made a conscious choice to forego the entanglements of domestic obligations and the distractions of marriage. He set his sights on the

horizon of his creative pursuit. His resolute solitude enabled him to weave the threads of his imagination, undeterred by the constraints that society imposed. Storytelling had become his one true devotion, his solace, and his greatest love.

However, fate did not grant success to Harish. As the sales of books dwindled, so too did his creative activities. His scripts and story ideas for movies found fewer takers, as the industry favoured the voices of the youth.

The new generation, fuelled by the pace and trend of the times, carved fast-paced narratives, and action-packed spectacles that people could devour and discard. Younger writers, fuelled by the pace and trend of the times, captured audiences who were eager for instant stimulation.

Harish, undeterred by setbacks, clung to his craft, treating his stories like timeless delicacies. In adversity, he persisted, embracing the belief that his unique storytelling had a lasting place, even amid short-lived trends. For him, artistry wasn't just for success; it was a sacred dedication to soulful stories. He remained

unwavering, committed to preserving the beauty of slow-burning tales that delved into the depths of the human experience.

As the evening sun began its descent, the old man closed his eyes, enveloped in a sea of emotions. The legacy of the store passed down through generations, seemed to hang in the balance, as fragile as the flickering flame of a dying candle.

With each passing day, the weight of financial strain grew heavier, leaving Maganlal with no choice but to bid farewell to the only assistant he had relied upon for years. Dwindling sales could no longer sustain the salary, and the harsh winds of economic hardship swept away the support that had once eased the burdens of running the store. As the assistant departed, a void settled within the walls of the bookstore. Amid adversity, Harish became the store assistant.

With a shared sigh of resignation, they set about the familiar routine of winding up the day's work. Harish arranged the scattered books on the table, their well-worn spines finding their rightful places on the shelves. They

removed the once-prominent “Up to 70% off” placard, now faded and weathered, from its spot on the footpath and tucked it away beneath the table. It stood as a silent testament to the desperate measures taken to entice dwindling customers.

Meanwhile, Maganlal, his hands weathered but still nimble, counted the meagre sum of 800 rupees on the cash register. It was a disheartening tally, the product of a day that had seen only two books find new homes. He pocketed the paltry amount in a solemn gesture of disappointment and closed the drawer. Supporting himself with a walking stick, he made his way toward the door, his frail form finding solace upon the weathered stool stationed just outside.

He stood outside, watching his son complete the ritual of the shop’s closure for the day. Harish’s hands moved with a sense of purpose, arranging everything in its rightful place and drawing the shutters down with a soft creak.

The streets grew noisier as the day surrendered to the embrace of twilight, and the world outside continued to return home at its

relentless pace. The duo hailed a taxi from the streets of Fort. Their steps were heavy with the toll of the day.

The brief journey of a mere two kilometres would transport them from the marketplace to their two-bedroom apartment located in Colaba. As the taxi came to a halt, the watchman greeted them, his weathered face etched with warmth and concern. With a gentle touch, he offered his helping hand, supporting the old man's frail form as they embarked on the arduous climb up the teak wood staircase that seemed to resonate with the echoes of the bygone era. Harish settled the taxi fare and followed his father along the stairs.

Inside their home, Maganlal eased into his beloved easy chair by the window, a perch that offered respite. From a nearby table, he reached out to retrieve his treasured smoke pipe. With practised grace, he filled the pipe with fragrant tobacco. The flicker of a match brought the pipe to life, wisps of smoke curling upward as he savoured the first few puffs, finding solace in the rhythmic release of his exhalations.

Outside the window, the world continued its

relentless dance. Noise of the outside world pierced the solemn silence of their abode, as the symphony of traffic and blaring horns invaded the sanctity of their haven. Bustling streets below echoed with the hurried passage of cars, their tires rolling over the rough asphalt, their engines roaring with impatience. The hectic melody of urban life infiltrated the room, shattering its fragile tranquillity.

Yet within the apartment, time seemed to slow down, embracing them in a moment of respite. The soft glow of evening light filtered through the curtains and cast a gentle glow upon the weathered books that lined their shelves, their stories whispering through the quiet air. The interiors of their apartment echoed of a time well lived. Antiques and mementoes from across the world adorned a showcase.

“Papa, would you like a cup of tea?” Harish inquired, breaking the stillness of the room. The old man nodded; his gaze fixed upon the ever-changing tableau beyond the windowpane. Harish returned, cradling the cup of tea with care, its warmth seeping through the porcelain

vessel.

Setting the cup on the table beside the easy chair, where his father was seated, Harish made a retreat, respecting the privacy of his contemplation. However, an unexpected glance from the old man halted his departure. His eyes met Harish's gaze, drawing him back into the sphere of their shared existence. "Son," he said, his voice filled with a gentle strength. "Bring your tea and join me."

Harish, surprised yet heartened by the invitation, retrieved his cup of tea and settled into the space beside his father. The worn fabric of the easy chairs cradled them both, offering a sense of connection. As they sat side by side, the clinking of teacups with their saucers echoed with the harmony of their shared bond. A silent affirmation of their enduring connection in a world that was moving too fast.

"Son," said Maganlal, his hands cradling the cup of tea on the armrest. "The time for Novelty Books has ended. It is a bitter truth we must face, however heart-wrenching it may be. Let's face the fact. Our store languishes in the shadow of its former glory. We have clung to a fragile

hope, but the truth is undeniable. It is time to let go. We have sustained it like a patient surviving on life support. But this prolonged existence is no longer viable. We must pull the plug and bid farewell to the haven that has sheltered our passions and dreams.”

Maganlal’s words carried a glimmer of acceptance and a flicker of determination. He wanted to relinquish the fading embers of his bookstore and honour its legacy by granting it a dignified farewell.

Harish’s hand reached out, seeking solace and support as he placed his palm upon his father’s weathered hand. “Please, Papa, do not despair. I refuse to let the legacy fade away. I have ideas, and plans to rejuvenate the store”, he said, with a glimmer of hope.

With a sudden jerk, Maganlal withdrew his hand from Harish’s grasp, his eyes filled with a mix of resignation. “No,” he responded, his voice filled with a heaviness that mirrored his weary soul. “I cannot burden you with the weight of continuing this fading legacy. It is futile. How long can you keep pouring your creativity into stories for others while

neglecting to write your own? Have you not realized that life beckons you to craft your narrative? I am nearing the twilight of my existence, but you still have a few years ahead of you. Is this the life you desire? To toil, bound by worries and seeking hope where there may be none?"

Maganlal continued his resolve firm. "Do not hold on to a fading dream. Reach out to that estate agent, Mathur, and inform him that the property is available for sale. It is time for both of us to find our own stories, to live whatever time we have left in this life, free of burden and commitment."

Harish, caught between his love for his father and his dreams, gazed into the depths of Maganlal's eyes, searching for answers. He nodded and placed a call to Mathur.

"Good decision, sir!", said Mathur, when he heard the news from Harish. "I know quite a few people who would be interested. Yes, it will be a quick sale. No trouble at all. What is your quote for the selling price?"

Harish looked at his father and received a

hand gesture with three fingers expanded. “Three Crore rupees. Your commission would be 1% of the sale value,” he replied. “Oh good, that seems a fair price. Let me get the wheels in motion. I should find you a buyer within the next fortnight,” said Mathur.

True to his word, over the next two weeks, Mathur flurried in several people who came and inspected the store. After finalizing a buyer, he orchestrated the sale of the premises, concluding the transaction within the promised fortnight. The property garnered even more than the expected sum, for it had attracted a multinational coffee cafe chain. Eager to seize the prime location that a bookstore had called home for generations, the chain outbid all competitors, their generous offer exceeding the initial quote.

As the ink dried on the final paperwork, Mathur earned his commission. The remaining funds secured a well-deserved financial respite for the ageing bookseller and his son.

What would become of the books that had lined the shelves of Novelty Books? With a heartfelt understanding of their enduring value,

Maganlal donated them to the venerable Asiatic Library.

Two months had passed since the sale of the store. With the newfound financial stability, the father and son duo indulged in a long-desired luxury – a new car. Alongside the car came the services of a dedicated driver, allowing them to traverse the ever-changing city with ease. As they cruised through the streets, Maganlal couldn't help but marvel at the city's relentless transformation. The once-familiar landmarks of his youth were fading, making way for grander structures, wider roads, and towering bridges, flyovers, and highways.

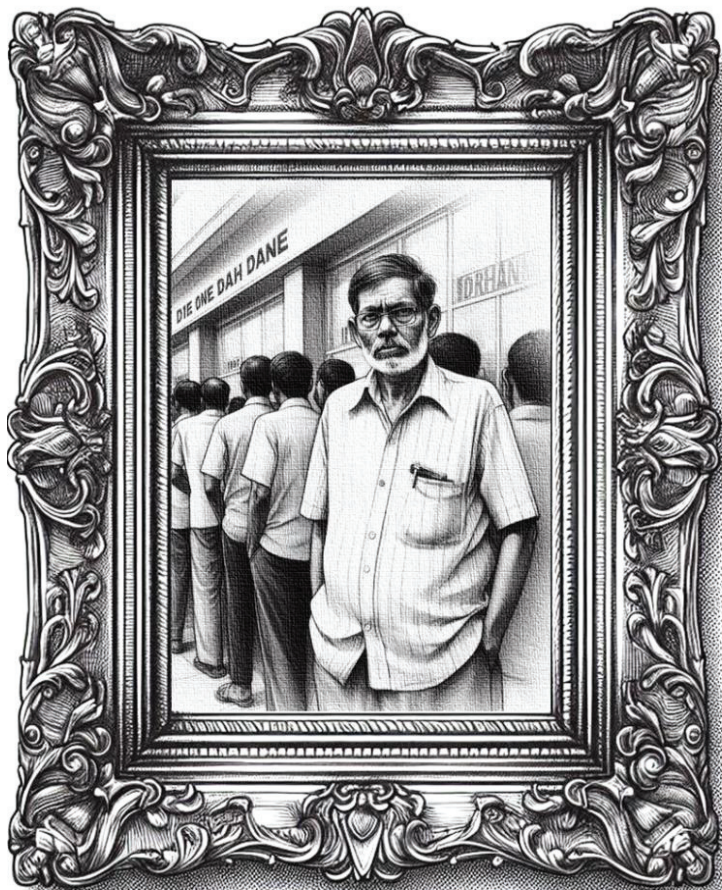
On their way back home, their route passed through Fort, the very neighbourhood where their store had once thrived. A surge of nostalgia overwhelmed him, forcing him to ask the driver to stop the car. They found themselves in front of a remarkable sight. They had transformed the premises that had once sheltered their cherished bookstore into a stylish cafe. Maganlal and Harish exchanged a knowing glance, and they made a mutual decision to step inside and partake in the new

era that had replaced their beloved establishment.

Entering the cafe, they chose a table next to the window, the very spot where Maganlal had manned his cash counter for countless hours over 65 years. Harish signalled a server, ordering two cups of coffee. As they waited for their order, Maganlal's gaze remained fixed on a small bookshelf positioned near the window, which housed a modest collection of books. His heart swelled with emotion as he witnessed a young man approach the bookshelf, handpicking a book and reading it while sipping his coffee. "Well, Harish," Maganlal murmured, a sense of profound peace resonating in his voice, "I believe I can now depart from this world in peace." A gentle smile graced Harish's face.

Their coffees arrived with an aroma wafting through the air, intertwining with a sense of closure that surrounded them. With every sip, they savoured the bittersweet essence of the moment. Once they emptied their cups, they rose from their seats, feeling a shared understanding that was unspoken yet felt.

Maganlal left the cafe, carrying with him a renewed sense of fulfilment.



4

CASH CRUNCH

On November 8, 2016, at Nashik Security Press, machines were humming, and the air smelled of ink. Satish Waghle, a determined employee at the press, worked on a printing machine for revenue stamps. The small red-coloured stamps were used as proof of payment for transactions and agreements. They were an essential requirement in the landscape of Indian commerce. The establishment printed each revenue stamp used in the country in a large unit. It operated this unit with a staff of over seventy skilled employees. Satish was one of them.

At 6 pm, when the workday ended, Satish took a break at a tea stall near the main gate. Girdhar Mhatre, Satish's colleague and longtime friend, joined him at the stall. With a steaming cup of tea in hand, he inquired about the recent developments in Satish's life. "What is the status of Prajakta's college admission?"

Satish smiled as he spoke. Even though his daughter's grades were low, Satish faced the challenges and got her into a top management college in Pune. "Rajan, my boss, came through for me. He knew the college's principal. One phone call from him helped me secure the admission."

"However, there is a catch," Satish admitted, taking a thoughtful sip of his tea. "The admission fees. It's a hefty sum of 2 lakh rupees, and it needs to be paid upfront by next week. The course will start in February 2017." Girdhar's eyes widened. "How will you arrange for that money?"

Satish leaned back, a glimmer of pride in his tired eyes. "My late mother's jewellery. I sold it," he confessed. "It's the only valuable thing she left me, and I thought it was time to put it to good use. I've got the cash ready for Prajakta's admission."

Their conversation paused as Ramesh Dhule, a friend from the currency press division, stepped out. Satish, always hospitable, asked the tea vendor for another round of tea. Ramesh looked drained. "You need a break. Looks like

you've been busy, minting a lot of money!" remarked Satish in a quirky tone.

The tea arrived, and amidst sips, they probed Ramesh about rumours of a new currency note. Ramesh described the intricacies of the design, explaining the features that set the new 2000 rupee note apart. "That's not all," he shared with a mischievous glint in his eye. "A significant batch of the new 500 rupees notes is also in the works. The press is working round the clock."

Girish, always upfront with his thoughts, started talking about the government's choice to change the design of currency notes. "I mean, why mess with something that's not broken?" he exclaimed, waving his teacup at the press building. "The old notes were fine!"

"It's a routine change, Girish," Ramesh explained in a calm demeanour contrasting with Girish's fervour. "We've seen it happen before. New designs replace the old ones. Keeps things interesting for us at the press, doesn't it? Well, these notes are ready for dispatch. You should start seeing them in circulation soon."

Satish mentioned a fascinating twist of timing. “You know,” he remarked, “if I had known about the new design, I might have waited a week before liquidating gold for Prajakta’s admission. I am going to Pune next week to deposit the fees. The new design would’ve added some weight to my persona, you know. We’re lucky here in Nashik; our local banks are amongst the first to receive fresh cash.”

Laughter erupted among the friends as they shared a moment of light-hearted irony. With the bill for the tea settled, they bid each other farewell, each heading to their respective homes.

As the clock struck 7:30 pm, Satish, weary from the day’s work, arrived home. A quick shower refreshed him, and he joined his daughter Prajakta and wife at the dinner table, the comforting glow of television. They shared a family meal, laughter, and the simple joy of watching a movie together.

At 8:15 pm, Satish’s phone vibrated. It announced Girish’s incoming call. He answered, anticipating either a casual chat or

some exciting news from the press. Girish's voice on the other end, jovial and light, now carried a sense of urgency. "Are you watching the news?" he blurted out without a preamble. "No. Anything serious?" asked Satish.

"Prime Minister Modi has just announced demonetization!" Satish wondered why his friend was sounding so desperate and helpless. The Prime Minister comes now and then on television. It wasn't a big deal for him to make routine announcements and speeches. "What does that mean?" he asked.

Girish, in a panicked tone, continued to describe the situation. "Effective midnight, the government has invalidated all 500 and 1000 rupee notes. You can no longer use them as money. It doesn't matter in which year they printed the notes. Even the 500 and 1000 rupees notes that were printed and issued last month will become invalid. The new design of 2000 and 500 rupees notes Ramesh was talking about earlier will replace them as valid tender."

Silence enveloped Satish as he absorbed the shocking revelation. His mind raced, contemplating the four bundles of 500 rupees'

notes in his wardrobe that now seemed like a ticking time bomb.

“I need to check something,” Satish muttered, excusing himself from the call. He washed his hands and made his way to the wardrobe, pulling out the bundles of cash and inspecting them. Returning to the call, Satish’s voice wavered as he shared his discovery. “Girish, I’ve got four bundles of 500 rupees’ notes. What do I do now?”

Girish, empathetic yet helpless, responded, “Satish, I don’t know. This is unprecedented. I’ll keep you posted as I get to know more. Meanwhile, watch the news and try to figure out a plan to convert your cash.” He looked at his phone. The line got disconnected.

Satish grabbed the television remote and switched to a random news channel. The screen projected a stern image of Prime Minister Modi unveiling the new design of notes. Satish, with a heavy heart, absorbed the words that followed. The aim was to curb black money and eliminate terror funding. The Prime Minister appealed to the nation-to bear with the hardships and support this move. This step

seemed vital in the interest of national progress.

“Prabha!” Satish called out, the urgency in his voice drawing her response from the kitchen. As he entered the kitchen, Satish witnessed Prabha counting a wad of crumpled 1000 rupees notes from a small box.

“What’s this? Where did this money come from?” Satish inquired, his eyes mirroring the concern etched on his face. Prabha, with a heavy sigh, confessed, “It’s my savings. I’ve been putting away money over the years for emergencies and festive purchases. It adds up to forty thousand rupees.” Satish sank to the kitchen floor, his hands cradling his head, overwhelmed by the sudden turn of events. The very savings intended for a rainy day now held a different weight in the wake of the recent news. Desperation led Satish to dial Ramesh’s number, hoping for guidance. However, he couldn’t reach his friend, adding another layer of anxiety.

For the next hour, Satish navigated through various news channels. They echoed their perspective on the government’s bold move. Some applauded it as a necessary step for the

greater good. Others criticized its suddenness. Instructions scrolled across the screen, providing details on the restrictions imposed. Exchange limits of up to four thousand rupees at a time, ATM withdrawals capped at two thousand rupees per day, and bank withdrawals limited to twenty thousand rupees a week.

With panic seizing him, Satish dialled a number. Girish's voice reassured him, "Head to the nearest jewellery store and buy as much as you can. You can sell the jewellery later to reclaim your cash."

Gathering his resolve, Satish collected the bundles of notes, including the wad of cash Prabha had stashed away. A long queue of anxious individuals, all hoping to salvage their cash, was waiting outside the jeweller's shop. The tension in the air was palpable, and Satish overheard snippets of conversations around him. "I've heard that the price of gold has shot up by 25%, since the evening's announcement!" a man exclaimed, causing a ripple of concern among the waiting crowd.

As Satish stood in the line, the jeweller's shop

closed its doors. The owners of the store announced that they had sold out all their stock of gold. Dejected, Satish left the queue, realizing that his attempt to convert his cash into a more stable asset had been in vain.

Returning home with a heavy heart, Satish spent a sleepless night grappling with reality. The next morning, Prabha, noticing the distress etched on his face, asked him, “What are you planning to do with our cash?” Satish looked at her in dismay. “What cash, Prabha? It is just a pile of garbage! Not even worth the cost of the paper we print them on!”

He dialled Ramesh’s number in search of solace and guidance. Ramesh, weary from a night shift at the press, answered with a hint of fatigue in his voice. “Satish, I had no clue something like this was going to happen. I’ve been on duty all night, called in for an extra shift,” he explained, sounding just as bewildered by the situation as Satish.

Ramesh had himself been holding a significant sum of money in cash. “I’ve got around twenty-five thousand rupees,” he admitted. Concern etched in his voice, Satish

probed further, “How do you plan to exchange it?”

Ramesh shared his family’s strategy. “My wife has taken a day off today from work to stand in those bank exchange queues. She is taking our domestic help along and they plan to queue up at different banks, exchanging four thousand rupees at a time. It’s the only way we can manage our exchange, with the limits imposed.”

Satish, considering this as a viable option, nodded to himself. Determined, he took immediate action and explored this option. As a trial, he took four thousand rupees from Prabha’s stash and ventured to the nearby State Bank of India branch. However, what awaited him outside the bank was a scene of absolute chaos. People stood in endless queues, each person hoping to secure a share of the limited exchange.

After enduring three hours of the ordeal, Satish emerged from the bank with two new 2000 rupees’ notes. He realized this process would be far from easy. Exhausted and disheartened, he returned home to Prabha, who

observed the toll this endeavour had taken on him. “Satish, at this rate, it will take us months to exchange our entire cash. Prajakta’s fees are due next week; we can’t afford to wait so long,” Prabha reasoned, her concern mirroring his worries.

Satish explored various avenues, from petrol pumps to medical shops, to find a quicker solution. His contacts at banks expressed their helplessness in exchanging a large amount of cash for him. They accounted for every note and monitored every transaction at the bank. He felt trapped and cursed the announcement by the government.

In a moment of vulnerability, Satish almost fell prey to a conman running a scam under the guise of exchanging notes in bulk from banks. This encounter served as a stark reminder of the lengths that scammers would go to exploit the vulnerable amidst the chaos.

Monday arrived, bringing with it a sense of foreboding as Satish entered his office. There was an uneasy buzz all around. The press management ordered a temporary reshuffling of some of his colleagues to support the

currency press division. The uncertainty of the aftermath had now invaded his workplace.

Disheartened and preoccupied with his conundrum, Satish went about completing his shift for the day. The hymn of the machines and the clatter of keyboards provided a stark backdrop to his internal struggle. As the day drew to a close, he found himself at the familiar tea stall where Girish awaited him. "Any luck?"

Unable to contain his emotions, Satish broke down. Tears welled up in his eyes as he confessed to Girish, "I don't know what to do. If I can't arrange for the exchange, my daughter's future would be in jeopardy."

In a moment of shared despair, Girish pulled out his phone and showed a WhatsApp forward. Satish's eyes lit up as he grabbed the phone to read. The forwarded message mentioned that educational institutions across the country allowed old notes as payment for student fees. Excitement and relief flooded Satish's face as he considered the possibility. "You should try your luck at Prajakta's college in Pune. It's worth a shot," advised Girish.

The next morning, Satish arrived at the college in Pune, armed with his daughter's admission documents and his four bundles of cash. Upon his turn at the cashier's window, Satish handed over the form and his cash. However, the cashier's stern gaze and a disappointed shake of the head deflated Satish's optimism. Nearby, a makeshift board declared, "We do not accept old 500 and 1000 rupees' notes."

"What do you mean by 'do not accept'?" Satish queried; confusion etched on his face. The cashier sighed and pointed to the board. "These old notes. We can't accept them." Perplexed, Satish argued, "But I got a WhatsApp forward saying educational institutions are accepting them. Look!" He brandished his phone, displaying the forwarded message.

The cashier, unimpressed, dismissed it as a rumour. "We've received no such notification from the government. You'll need to either get a bank draft or exchange these notes into new currency," he explained, his tone firm.

Desperation seeped into Satish's voice as he

pleaded, "Is there no other way? My daughter's admission is at stake." The cashier, unfazed, shook his head, "Rules are rules, sir. We can't make exceptions."

Satish retreated to a park bench within the college premises. As he sat there, nursing his frustration, a sophisticated-looking man approached him. With a warm smile, he introduced himself as Prajwal Deshmukh, a senior professor of fine arts at the college. Observing Satish's troubled expression, he inquired, "What seems to be the problem, sir?" In a fit of frustration, Satish flashed the four bundles of notes, dismissing them as nothing more than garbage. "These notes are useless and my daughter's education is at stake!" he exclaimed, his voice tinged with despair.

Professor Deshmukh, undeterred by the negative sentiment, looked at the bundles with curiosity. "May I see one of these bundles?" he asked, his eyes reflecting a glimmer of interest. Perplexed but willing, Satish handed over one bundle. Professor Deshmukh examined it, his eyes scanning the notes. As he did, a subtle change occurred in his expression. The

professor, wearing a thoughtful expression, responded, “I might know someone who could assist us. Are you willing to take a drive with me?”

Satish, eager for any glimmer of hope, agreed. The old man guided him to his car, and they embarked on a drive to the bustling camp area. Arriving at their destination, Professor Deshmukh led Satish into an office block. As they entered, a distinguished figure rose from his seat with a warm smile.

The professor introduced Satish to Narendra Jain, a numismatic dealer. As he took his seat, he couldn't help but feel a sense of awe and curiosity. This wasn't like any other office; it was a haven for the tales of ancient money, and every corner whispered the history of currencies. Upon a prompt from the professor, Satish presented the bundles of cash. Narendra, an experienced professional, examined the notes, handling each bundle with meticulous care.

The numismatist pulled out a reference book from his desk. He verified the serial numbers on the notes, flipping the bundles back and forth.

With a widening smile, Professor Deshmukh couldn't resist asking, "Is it what I believe it is?" The dealer, still engrossed in his examination, looked up with a triumphant grin. "Of course! 2008 'E' inset. Signed by Reddy. Indeed, a mule issue. Serial numbers are within the threshold. These four bundles are from the same rim!"

"What is a mule issue?" Satish whispered. The dealer heard it and was quick to respond. "A mule is when a mistake occurs during printing a batch of notes, and they end up having a mix of features from two original designs or series. For instance, imagine a printing press uses the front design of one set of currency notes and the back design of another set. The notes that come out with this mix-up are called mule issues. These errors don't happen often, and currency collectors find them valuable."

"Could you explain the error in these particular bundles?" Satish was now eager to learn more about the unexpected treasure he had in his possession.

"The year 2008 is printed on the bottom rear footer of these notes, and the signature of

Governor Y V Reddy appears on the front. The inset 'E' appeared for the first time in November 2008. Reddy had ended his term in August 2008, and Duvvuri Subbarao was his replacement. The press did not replace the signature for the first batch of notes printed in November 2008, and after realizing their error, they replaced the signature on their design. The quantity was insignificant, a mere 10,000 notes, or 10 rims. Since Diwali was round the corner, and the demand for new currency was high, the press continued with the notes. They issued them to the banks, and these bundles found their way into circulation."

Satish, struck with awe, turned to the numismatist, unable to contain his curiosity, and asked, "How much would these bundles be worth?" Narendra looked at him with a thoughtful smile. "Considering the rarity and significance of these notes, I can offer you 800,000 rupees for the entire lot. Would you like to sell these bundles to me?"

Satish froze, disbelief widening his eyes. The weight of the unexpected offer had settled on his shoulders like a sudden downpour. The

surrounding air seemed to thicken, trapping words in his throat as if they were elusive butterflies. His mind, quick-witted and nimble, now struggled to catch up with the enormity of the moment. He nodded in agreement, bearing a grin reflective of the relief he felt.

Narendra opened his drawer, pulled out four bundles of 2000 rupees' notes and handed them to Satish. The latter couldn't help but express his amazement. "How did you get these bundles when others were struggling in queues for hours to get a single note from the banks?"

"Well sir, I have my sources," said Narendra, with a twinkle in his eyes and a wry smile. Accepting the cash, Satish rose from his seat, shook hands with the dealer and followed the professor to his car. Once inside the confines of the car, Satish couldn't help but ask the old professor, "Sir, how did you know my notes were valuable, just by a mere glance?"

Deshmukh chuckled, "Well, I'm not just a professor of fine arts. I'm also a notaphilist. I've been collecting rare currency notes for the last 40 years. Narendra has been my trusted partner for many years. He helps me maintain my

collection with all recent issues of notes.”

Touched and tear-eyed, Satish expressed his gratitude by touching Deshmukh’s feet, “Thank you, sir. You’ve been a saviour.” He then offered Deshmukh half of the profit, a gesture of appreciation for his invaluable help. Deshmukh declined. “I was more than happy to help a man in need. I shall extract my share of the service charge from Narendra. He will have to part with one note from the bundles for my collection!”

They reached the college and Deshmukh dropped him at the gate. Satish, with newfound relief, went to the fees counter. The cashier, seeing Satish approaching the counter, frowned. In an irritant manner, he announced, “Sir, I told you earlier that we cannot accept your cash. You need to get it exchanged at the bank. Please don’t ask me to make an exception.”

Satish, beaming with pride, pulled out the new bundles and showed it to the cashier. “Will you not accept these?” The cashier’s demeanour shifted from scepticism to agreement, “Ah, these are the fresh notes! Of course, we will

accept them. No problem at all!" The cashier, giving a satisfied nod, took care of the payment formalities for Prajakta's admission. Satish got his fee receipt and finished the paperwork.

Armed with his daughter's admission card, he couldn't help but savour the moment of triumph. He then remembered the remark he had made to Ramesh a few days ago. "Had you told me earlier that fresh notes would be available for circulation, I would have paid my daughter's fees using them. Would've added weight to my persona, you know!" Well, though the circumstances had not been as smooth as he had imagined, he had achieved what he had desired.

5

SERENDIPITY

After enduring a challenging journey, our bus came to a halt at a bus stop in Joshimath. The twelve-hour ride from Haridwar treated us to breathtaking views of mountains and glacier streams along a sacred pilgrimage route. Passengers, like me, sighed in relief after enduring the journey's twists. Joshimath marked our bus journey's end and a gateway to various destinations. The place attracted pilgrims, explorers, and locals in their routines.

I made my way to a modest tea stall nestled in the vicinity. Anticipation mingled with the smell of freshly brewed tea. I approached a few locals for insights that would help me navigate the path to my destination. Alas, my heart sank as they informed me that the rope cars at Auli operated between 10 am and 5 pm. My wristwatch displayed the time as 5:15 pm. Had it not been for an unfortunate breakdown of the bus earlier in the day, I would have arrived in time to catch the last cable car to Auli.

Realization struck me. Fate compelled me to wait until the first car at 10 a.m. on the following day. It gave me a night to spend in Joshimath.

With no other recourse, I stood amidst the populated main street, gazing out at the landscape that stretched before me. At that moment, I recognized that even amidst delays and shattered plans, there was a silver lining. An opportunity to immerse myself in yet another experience.

A slight drizzle forced my attention, and I took refuge at a nearby guest house. I checked the tariff card, and my heart sank. The cheapest accommodation they offered cost 1,100 rupees. My wallet revealed that I only had 900 rupees.

I had estimated that the amount would suffice for a one-way ticket on the rope car and didn't bother to withdraw additional cash at Haridwar. After reaching there, I wouldn't have needed cash since my stay and meals at Auli had been paid in advance.

In a desperate attempt, I asked the guest house if they accepted card or digital payments. The attendant shook his head in regret. His

preference for a cash payment was clear. I left the guesthouse and walked back to the street in search of options. A solitary ATM shack caught my eye, bearing the emblem of the State Bank of India. However, the joy was short-lived, as I entered the booth, only to discover that the machine stood silent and was out of order.

Scouring the streets, I began searching for cheaper accommodation. Several lodges and hotels caught my eye, but their tariffs mocked my limited means. I wandered along, with the belief that if all else failed, perhaps Joshimath's old monastery could be my resting place for the night.

The sun began its descent, casting a golden glow upon the landscape, a gentle reminder that the day was slipping away. I approached locals, seeking directions. With their guidance, I walked on a broad road that narrowed, dividing into tributaries leading towards the outskirts of the town.

Just when my hopes wavered, a neat building caught my eye, its unassuming entrance adorned with a small sign that read "Athithi Lodge." A spark of hope ignited within

me as I crossed the threshold. Behind the reception desk sat a slim, middle-aged man, his attention captivated by a movie playing on a small television.

I inquired about room availability and their tariff. He informed me about the unavailability of rooms in the lodge. However, there was a room available as one of their guests had made a last-minute cancellation. It was a single room on the terrace. His quote of 450 rupees for the room was music to my ears. However, given the tight finances, I took a chance and bargained. We settled for 300 rupees for the room.

The man behind the desk handed me a key. He then summoned a helper to guide me to my accommodation for the night. The bell boy was a young man of medium height, dressed in a weathered t-shirt and tattered pants. Baburam, as he introduced himself, had an infectious spark in his eyes and bore a warm smile. He offered to shoulder the weight of my backpack and led the way as we ascended the staircase.

I reached the terrace on the lodge's third floor. A vast expanse of space stretched before me. Placed near the edge of a cliff, this building

had an uninterrupted view of a snow-capped mountain and a valley beneath. At the foothills of the mountain, a lush forest sprawled. On one side of the terrace stood the single room that would become my sanctuary for the night. On the other side was a storeroom. The air had a sense of calm, and a gentle breeze caressed my face.

The room was in pristine order. In a corner was a single bed, positioned beside a window that allowed the soft glow of natural light to filter through. An attached bathroom had a geyser for hot water. In the opposite corner of the room, a table bore the weight of a television. A small cupboard next to it was available for me to store my belongings.

Yet, it was the alternate door near the window that piqued my curiosity. A gateway to the mid-sized balcony. Stepping through, I found myself immersed in a panorama. The sight that unfolded before me was nothing short of breathtaking. They had placed a chair and side table, inviting me to immerse myself in the splendour.

Baburam, having placed my bag beside the

cupboard, stood at the doorway, his gaze filled with earnest inquiry. “Like the room, Saheb?” A smile graced my lips as I nodded in appreciation. “Yes. Thank you,” I replied. “Is there any arrangement for food?” He suggested a local restaurant located nearby, where I could have my dinner, but the prospect of descending three flights of stairs held little appeal to my fatigued legs.

Hoping for an alternative solution, I posed another question. “Do they offer delivery to the room?” Baburam shook his head. “No, Saheb. However, if you wish, I can get your food for you. I visit the place in the evening for my cup of tea,” he offered.

He handed me a folded menu from his pocket. The modest menu had limited options of dishes to choose from. “Alright, please get me one serving of chicken fried rice and a plate of chilli chicken,” I instructed, calculating the bill based on the prices listed. The total came to 240 rupees. I handed Baburam 300 rupees, signifying that the remaining amount was his tip. Accepting the cash with a gleeful expression, he assured me he would return

within an hour.

As Baburam prepared to depart, a sudden thought came to mind. My gaze fell upon the remaining 300 rupees in my wallet. An audacious question escaped my lips with a hint of hesitation. “Wait,” I called out. “Is there a liquor store nearby?” The allure of the balcony and the inviting chair intensified the desire to spend an evening with a drink.

Baburam shook his head in response. “No, Saheb. This area is a dry zone,” he informed, dashing my hopes of acquiring the desired spirits. I revised my request. “Okay. Bring me a bottle of cola,” I said, handing him an additional 50 rupees. With a nod of understanding, the bell boy departed.

A warm shower made me feel better. Putting on comfortable clothes helped me relax and escape the evening chill. Standing on the balcony, I lit a cigarette, enjoying the smoke blending with the fresh mountain air as I relaxed in the chair, immersed in the surroundings.

Baburam brought back food, cola, utensils,

and water. I enjoyed the treats. Each bite had a replenishing effect on my energy. A few minutes later, he reappeared at my door, presenting an unexpected gift. A box of miniature bottles of various spirits. With a gentle demeanour, he said, “Saheb, these are for you. Please choose whichever ones you like.” Intrigued, I peered into the box and asked, “Where did you get these?”

“These are leftover bottles from past guests. I don’t drink, but I like the design of these bottles, so I’ve kept them. You may use the contents and return the empty bottles.” I appreciated his resourceful gesture. “Where do you stay?”, I asked. He gestured towards the storeroom at the far end of the terrace. “Until what time is your duty?” He smiled. “8 pm, Saheb.” In appreciation, I handed him a 100 rupee note, and his eyes lit up in silent acknowledgement of the exchanged generosity. “Meet after your shift.”

Back on the balcony, I made myself a drink. Baburam kept his promise and arrived at 8:15 pm. Seeking one more favour, I handed Baburam some more money, asking him to

bring me another bottle of cola and a pack of cigarettes. He agreed, heading towards the staircase. I pondered what motivated such people and kept them purposeful through life's challenges. Grateful for his swift return, I invited him to join me on the balcony.

“Tell me about yourself, Baburam,” I asked, my gaze locked with his, brimming with anticipation. With a nod, he sensed my curiosity and empathy. “Don't worry, I won't judge you. I want to hear your story, my friend,” I assured him, sincere in my request. A silent understanding passed between us, and in Baburam's eyes, I sensed trust, as if he recognized my desire to understand him beyond his appearances.

“I come from a small village, far from the busy streets of Joshimath. My early life was uncertain; I never knew the embrace of my parents. I grew up in the home of an old man, who, amid the chaos, offered kindness and solace by taking in an abandoned child.”

“Under the old man's care, I enrolled in the village school, and his servants embraced me, becoming my foster parents. I thrived as a

student, excelling in my studies and completing my basic schooling. However, after the old man's death, my foster parent's love for me vanished, revealing that it was a facade for his money. Without him, my worth to my foster parents was nothing."

"For a year, I endured mistreatment, doing odd jobs while they snatched away my earnings. At fifteen, fate forced a harrowing spectacle upon me. My foster father's violent act was in a drunken stupor when he murdered my foster mother. The darkness of that moment prompted me to flee from the village, fearing that I might end up with the same fate."

"My will to survive brought me to Joshimath. With limited money, I had to seek shelter at the monastery. Within the monastery's walls, soothing chants and a pious atmosphere offered solace for my wounded spirit. It scared me that my foster father might have followed me to Joshimath. Days turned into weeks. In my refuge, I stumbled upon a newspaper at a tea stall. An article chronicled the arrest of my foster father for the murder of his wife. I was free from the looming threat that had haunted

my every step.” Silence filled the balcony, the weight of Baburam’s tale lingering on me.

“After leaving the monastery, I found a job at a modest lunch home near the bus stop. By chance, I discovered my talent for cooking mutton, while assisting the main chef. My flavorful preparation became the restaurant’s speciality. Soon, my mutton curry drew crowds of tourists and locals.”

“Restlessness stirred within my monotonous restaurant life. Fate took an unexpected turn when a local official offered me a job at the state guest house in Nandaprayag, bringing a mix of excitement and anticipation. Embracing a government job that offered me lifelong employment, accommodation, and security, I immersed myself in my work at the guest house. Contrasting to the bustling restaurant, my new workplace provided moments of respite and introspection.”

“While on duty, I watched distinguished guests and high-ranking officials. Their authoritative conversations sparked aspirations within me. I began to dream of a life filled with dignity, respect, and a loving family, just like

the officials I observed.”

“Under my mentor, Satish, the head chef at the guest house, my skills flourished. Our routine started at dawn with a visit to the market for fresh ingredients. Together, we crafted delightful dishes for our guests, each day featuring a purposeful and diverse menu. On Sundays, I would cook my signature mutton curry. Generous tips enriched my finances and my salary soon witnessed a modest increment. With each dish prepared and every compliment earned, I inched closer to my aspiration.”

Baburam gazed at the mountain, which was now illuminated by the moon. He collected his thoughts as I lit another cigarette and waited for him to continue.

“Everything went smoothly until Jayant Kumar arrived. He looked more like a sweet-maker than a government official. My boss, Satish, highlighted his prominence in the region. Whenever he visited, anticipation and activity buzzed in the atmosphere. Local traders and business owners formed a queue, eager to express concerns and seek his favour, recognizing his influence on their well-being.”

“I noticed a pattern during his visits. People who visited him brought a box or two of apricots as gifts. Whenever he departed, he would give out generous tips to the guest house staff in appreciation for our services. Deepening curiosity led to a desire in me to understand the intricacies of this man and his lifestyle.”

“The last time Jayant Kumar arrived at the guest house, his presence attracted an unprecedented number of visitors, flooding the drawing room with apricot boxes. The day was exhausting for us, as we attended to guests who came to meet him.”

“After they departed, Jayant summoned us. The stench of alcohol overpowered the room. Slouched on the couch, he could barely maintain his composure. Satish, sensing the urgency, supported Jayant, ensuring his stability while I fetched a water bottle and poured a glass of water for the man. Jayant drank half the glass and flung it away to the far corner of the room, shattering it to pieces. Cleaning up the broken shards of glass, I threw them in the kitchen dustbin. My inquisitiveness drew me to the apricot boxes placed near the

kitchen door. Unable to contain myself, I lifted the lid of one box.”

“To my astonishment, beneath the layers of apricots were bundles of cash, arranged within transparent covers. I gathered all the apricot boxes and transported them into the kitchen. Time seemed to stand still as I awaited Satish’s return. Minutes stretched into eternity until a haunting shriek pierced the silence and jolted me.”

“I raced to the drawing room. Jayant had collapsed, his powerful form now reduced to a heap on the floor. Panic coursed through my veins. Satish was trying to call for medical help. Moments later, an ambulance arrived, and the medical staff lifted Jayant’s frame on a stretcher and the ambulance rushed out with its siren glowing in the dark.”

“Satish and I followed the ambulance on his scooter. Upon reaching the hospital, the doctors declared Jayant had died of a heart attack. They informed the local authorities of Jayant’s passing. As the police arrived, we found ourselves subject to their scrutiny, our statements dissected in search of truth. After a

few hours of questioning and the doctor's post-mortem report, they concluded Jayant died of natural causes. They did not suspect any foul play."

"In the hushed hours of the early morning, we returned to the guest house. Within the familiarity of the kitchen, I sought a bottle of water and remembered the apricot boxes. I summoned Satish. His eyes went wide with astonishment, acknowledging the magnitude of my discovery."

"Satish, in a decisive moment, pledged to safeguard our newfound fortune in secrecy. We removed the cash, counted and found that the stacks totalled a staggering One Crore rupees. Satish brought in two large gunny sacks, and we split the cash into equal halves. We rode on his scooter and hid the cash in Satish's empty home a few kilometres away."

"Over the next few days, fears of handcuffs and legal troubles raced through my mind, and I was restless with paranoia. The days passed without incident. Officials were unaware of the hidden wealth. After the incident, the manager closed the guest house to visitors. We were told

to expect a call back to work in a few weeks. However, uncertainty stayed with us. We vacated the servant's accommodation at the guest house and returned to Satish's house. I picked up my bag of cash and parted ways with him."

"Settling into a modest single-room accommodation near a river stream, I was paranoid and cautious of every movement. During a casual stroll through the local market, I chanced upon a Chartered Accountant's office. I remembered that a few high-ranking officials at the guest house spoke about these financial experts. I understood that they managed the wealth of affluent people. I entered the office. The receptionist led me to a room. Mr Kapoor, a confident and experienced professional, joined me. As I narrated my story, he listened intently."

"After careful thought, Mr Kapoor outlined a strategy for me. With his help, I expanded and diversified my portfolio. Though his fee of 25% on the initial investment was steep, the returns he generated with the remaining funds justified my cost. He educated me on the investment

avenues and allocated funds to real estate, gold, and secure deposits, ensuring that every move helped me to secure my wealth. I trusted him and his words became my gospel.”

“As advised by him, I adopted a restrained approach, abstaining myself from an opulent lifestyle that I could now afford. This lodge, Athithi, is owned by me, unknown to the rest of the staff who work here. As far as they know, this lodge is owned by ‘Ghansodidas Jhumel’, a wealthy entrepreneur who conducts his affairs through Mr Kapoor. The employees report their day-to-day activities to Mr Kapoor and consider him their boss.”

As this intriguing revelation unfolded before my eyes, I couldn’t help but feel a surge of curiosity. “Why do you continue to toil away in the role of a porter when you are the real boss?”

A warm smile spread across Baburam’s face. “No, Saheb. Being in a prominent position would be counter-productive. Drawing attention to myself is not in my best interest. By assuming the role of a porter, I can oversee the finer workings of this lodge. I learned about the challenges of day-to-day operations. Being

hands-on helps me monitor things. This job suits my simple life as it has advised me to keep a low profile for a few years, and build a background for my wealth.”

I poured the last of Baburam’s miniature bottle, preparing to be fortified for the rest of his captivating tale. Leaning in closer, I posed a question that lingered on my mind. “What became of Satish?”

Baburam’s eyes dimmed. “He gave in to alcohol and gambling. It led to his downfall. He wasted his wealth on indulgences instead of securing his future. Hoping to profit, he lent money, but they did not repay it. His habits left him broke. He has returned to his old job at the guest house.”

A thought raced through my mind. “The story you’ve revealed to me exposes your identity. Why did you choose to share it with me? You could’ve avoided it.”

“Saheb, people who visited this lodge treat me as a servant. Some are generous enough to leave tips, while others barely notice my presence. You’ve not only treated me with

respect but were also kind to engage in a conversation with me. I don't know why I felt I could talk to you, but I'm glad I did."

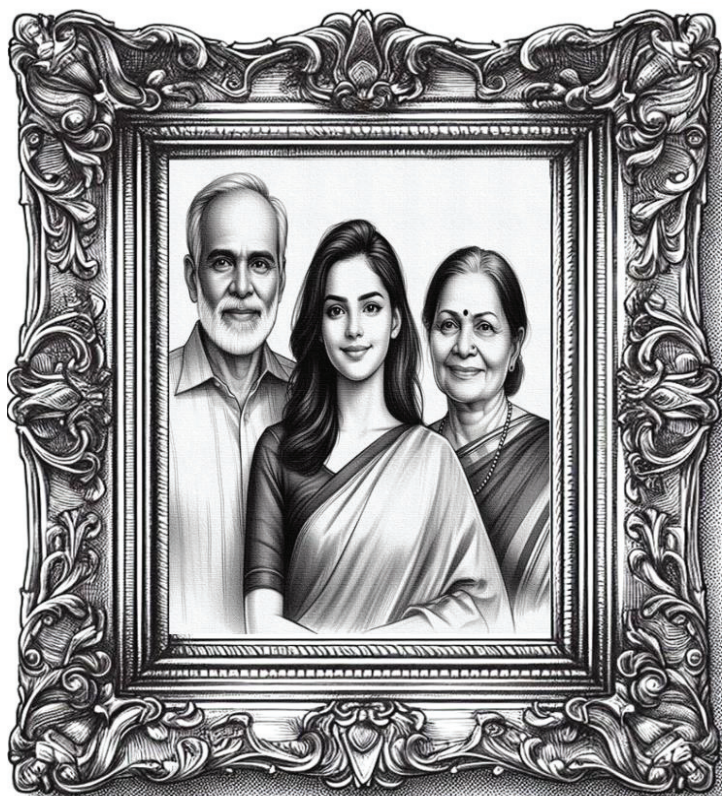
I glanced at the wall clock in my room. It was 12:30 a.m. and our conversation drew to a close. I patted him on the shoulder and wished him a good night. With a nod and a smile, he left for his quarters. I retired to my bed thinking about Baburam's story. The guy was a freak who was fortuitously there at the right place and the right time or was a master storyteller who had conjured a thoroughly convincing plot. Either way, I had a good time listening to him. As I closed my eyes, fatigue took over and lulled me to a blissful sleep.

The next morning, I walked to the nearby ATM, hoping for a smooth transaction to get enough cash for my journey. Thankfully, the machine worked, and I could withdraw the cash I needed. Checking out of the lodge, I looked for a last glimpse of Baburam. The receptionist said he was at the market getting groceries. With time ticking for my cable car ride, I left for my destination.

While walking on the narrow road towards

the cable car station, a sudden scream caught my attention. “Saheb!” I turned to see Baburam in the crowd, holding bags of vegetables. I smiled and took out a 100 rupee note from my wallet, placing it in his shirt pocket. “Not because you need it, but as a token of appreciation for your spirit,” I whispered.

Tears filled Baburam’s eyes. “Thank you, Saheb,” he whispered. “May God bless and guide you on your journey.” With a bow, he walked away. I watched him for a moment, feeling the weight of our connection, and then headed to the cable car station.



PERFECT MATCH

The morning sun peeked through a heavy veil of grey clouds, casting a subdued light upon Sheetalpur, a small village in Madhya Pradesh. Maniram waited for his bus. With anticipation in his eyes, he boarded a bus bound for Jabalpur, about forty kilometres away. Within minutes, the bus was full. Fortunately, Maniram secured a window seat, being among the first few passengers in the queue. Sitting beside him was another man of a similar age, and they exchanged a warm smile.

A few minutes into the bus ride, an unsettling restlessness gnawed at Maniram. He reached into his plastic bag and extracted a file, opening it with a sense of urgency. "Just one more recap," he whispered to himself, his mind racing to summarize the important talking points.

As the papers rustled in his hands, threatening to escape his grasp, he half-closed

the bus window, trying to quell the fluttering chaos. With a swift motion, he caught the folder, preventing it from slipping to the ground. The man seated beside him, sensing his struggle, offered a kind gesture of help, peering at the contents of the file.

“Your daughter, I presume?” he asked, his tone carrying a hint of assumption, his eyes fixed on a photograph of a young woman. “Yes, her name is Smruti,” he responded, his voice tinged with caution.

“Have you found a groom?” the man inquired; his words laced with an unwarranted curiosity. “Not yet, but I remain hopeful,” he replied, his irritation palpable in his tone.

The fellow traveller breathed a long sigh. “I have two daughters of my own and I got them married a few years ago.” Maniram, feeling a touch curious, queried, “Your daughters, are they well-educated?” As soon as the question slipped from his lips, he wished he could take it back. The man’s face took on a hint of discomfort as he replied, “My eldest has a degree, and the youngest is on the verge of getting hers.”

Maniram recoiled in surprise. “You mean you got your younger girl married before she could complete her education?” The man, in his defence, explained, “We found an excellent match for her. We didn’t want to let the prospect slip away. The groom’s family is wealthy and she’ll never have to bother about earning a living. They even agreed to let her carry on with her studies. I believe that a woman should not work unless her husband doesn't earn enough.”

Maniram stared at the man, incredulous. Could he exist in this day and age with views that belonged to a bygone era? Before Maniram could voice his thoughts, the man interrupted him, “So, what did your daughter study?”

“She’s a chartered accountant,” Maniram responded, with a trace of pride in his voice.

“Impressive! That’s quite a feat. Does she work for a big corporation somewhere?” The man asked, a smirk playing on his lips.

Maniram shook his head, “No. She has set up a financial advisory firm in Ranchi with a fellow chartered accountant.”

“Ah, so a couple of ladies running their

accounting firm, that's quite a tale. It's like a poster child for this whole 'women liberation' trend that's a rage these days," the man said, his words dripping with sarcasm.

Maniram chose to ignore the barb. "Her business partner is a man, a contemporary of hers," he corrected.

"Excellent! Problem solved! She should marry him. Partners in business and life. You couldn't dream of a more fitting match! They would have something substantial to chat about over dinner, unlike some of us who have to endure tales of domestic woes and spousal grievances," the man suggested a twinkle in his eye.

"No, the man is already married. He's just a friend and a professional associate," Maniram retorted, his patience wearing thin with the unwelcome proposal. "Well - are you sure? -" the man began, but a glare from Maniram made him retreat from his prying commentary. "Apologies, I may have overstepped my boundaries," he muttered, diverting his interested to his mobile phone.

“I’ll take a break from our conversation. It’s going to be a long day for me,” announced Maniram, in an authoritative voice as he shut his eyes. The cool breeze wafting in through the window lulled him into a well-deserved slumber, leaving his nosy companion to his own devices.

Stepping off the bus at Indira Point, he engaged in a fierce negotiation on tariffs with an auto-rickshaw driver. After settling for a reasonable price, he boarded the vehicle.

His ride concluded at a bungalow bedecked with vibrant blooms and adorned with a poster featuring a man donned in a saffron dhoti, sitting next to an elaborate idol. The inscription beneath read, “Pandit Sri Sri Janakeshwar. Astrologer and Counsellor.” Intrigued, Maniram noticed another banner adorning the main gate, urging visitors to ‘take control of their destiny’ by stepping inside.

Among the waiting crowd, a young lady captivated everyone’s attention, juggling her phone and managing eager enquiries. Maniram made his way towards her. “State your business,” she said, her tone cutting through the

air like a sharp blade. "I would like to meet 'Pandit-Ji'."

The weight of another unannounced visitor on a bustling day seemed to annoy her. "Did you book a meeting slot?" With a hint of embarrassment, Maniram confessed, "No, I haven't."

"Then you'll have to wait. Take a seat over there and bide your time," she pointed to a three-seater sofa that had one spot unoccupied. "While you wait, familiarize yourself with the rate chart on the wall and decide on the services you would like to avail. Premium packages get priority and you'll have a shorter waiting time. Payment in cash only."

A big board on the wall displayed fees for different services. Horoscope making cost 200 rupees, general consultation was 300 rupees, and a detailed session with one follow-up was 1000 rupees. There were premium services too, with higher fees for more serious issues. A poster claimed a 99% success rate, praising the astrologer's track record and how many lives he transformed.

“Have you made your decision?” the receptionist inquired, her tone brisk and businesslike. Maniram nodded, firm in his choice. “I’d like to opt for the ‘Marriage Counselling + Detailed Consultation’ package.”

Observing the polythene bag he carried, the receptionist asked, “Was your horoscope prepared by us?” Maniram looked at her with a puzzled expression and shrugged. “No, I had it made by our village astrologer.”

The lady retorted, “I’m afraid that won’t work. If you wish to consult, you must get a computerized horoscope from us. We cannot vouch for the accuracy of the one you have. It would be a waste of everyone’s time. I’ll have to include charges for horoscope making in your bill.” Maniram sighed in disappointment. “Very well. If that’s the requirement, go ahead.”

The lady took his file and scanned the details. Within moments, a computer-generated horoscope was ready. She printed three pages, then took the photograph from Maniram’s folder and affixed it to the papers using a paper clip. Maniram opened his wallet and handed over the money.

The receptionist placed the set in a vibrant red folder and handed a receipt of the fees paid and a numbered token. Maniram settled into his seat on the sofa, awaiting his turn. He observed the diverse group of people surrounding him. Their faces bore traces of sadness as if seeking a miracle to liberate them from their mundane and trouble-ridden lives. Some appeared eager, yearning to unveil the mysteries of their future and seeking ways to prepare for it.

Astrology had always been a subject of contention for Maniram. Throughout his life, he had despised fortune-tellers, labelling them as con-men. His wife, Shailaja, however, held a different view. "They tell you what you want to hear about yourself. Manipulating situations to reveal information you might already know. It won't affect your future. It's up to us to shape our destiny," he recalled telling her just a few nights ago. Despite his reservations, she insisted. In a show of protest, she threatened a hunger strike if he didn't comply.

"Token number 23!" called out the receptionist, an hour later. Maniram stood up and made his way to the far end of the room,

where the door led to the astrologer's cabin. With a soft knock, he entered.

Pandit Jankeshwar sat at his desk, reviewing the file sent by the receptionist. He smiled. "Please, have a seat. Can I get you something? Tea or coffee, perhaps?"

"Coffee would be nice, thank you," replied Maniram.

"One cup of coffee and a glass of water," Jankeshwar said on his intercom. "Now, tell me, sir, what brings you here today?"

"I'm on the lookout for a suitable groom for my daughter, Smruti."

"That's wonderful to hear. Let me delve into the specifics. Your daughter looks charming and possesses a decent horoscope. However, there are a few obstacles. Saturn's position in her horoscope is unfavourable, creating a conflict with Jupiter's orbit. On the bright side, Neptune and Uranus are well-aligned, providing a good balance amidst the opposing forces. Mars, Venus, and Mercury are in a satisfactory state, expected to remain on a positive course for the next 3-4 years. But you

see, Saturn, also known as 'Shani,' is causing concerns. Something needs to be done about it."

Maniram leaned forward in his chair. "What about Earth? And Pluto? Although no longer classified as a planet, it's still there. Are we planning to get my daughter married on another celestial body? Why should I care about the positions of planets in their orbits? This is utter nonsense! My daughter's well-being is not determined by some supposed clash between Saturn and Jupiter." He wanted to scream his protest, challenging the astrologer's ridiculous argument, but he controlled himself and remained silent. Deep within, his logical mind was ringing countless alarm bells at the baseless theory being propagated by the man seated before him.

"To fix this situation, she should wear a 6-carat topaz stone, set in a silver ring on her left middle finger. This will restore much-needed balance to her current position. She must observe a fast on 26 Thursdays, visit a temple of her choice on Saturdays, and offer a glass of milk and coconut to the Gods. By doing so, she can ward off any ill effects caused by the

unfavourable planetary alignment.”

“You believe the stone will address these cosmic obstacles?” Maniram inquired.

“Oh yes! I believe so. As you are amongst the first twenty visitors today, I’d like to extend a special offer to you. We also specialize in gemstones, each selected and curated by me. Every stone comes with a guaranteed outcome, attracting the right suitor. My offer to you is this: let us handle the process, saving you the trouble of dealing with a jeweller who might not give you a genuine stone. With us, you can avoid the risk of obtaining a substandard product that could do more harm than good.”

“Alright then. How much would the ring cost?” Maniram inquired.

The astrologer replied, “Twenty thousand rupees. Best price guaranteed. I understand it’s quite a sum, but can you put a price on your daughter’s happiness?” He wore a faint grin on his face, confident in his persuasion.

Not convinced that a mere stone in a silver ring could alter her daughter’s fate, Maniram shifted the focus to the primary reason for his

visit. "What about her marriage?" he inquired.

"Ah, yes. That's the other matter. Your daughter is thirty-two years old, and she looks quite pretty. Given her profession as a chartered accountant, does she have any intentions of continuing to work after marriage?"

"Yes, she does. Is that a concern?" Maniram responded, curious about the astrologer's thoughts on the matter.

"Let me be frank with you about this matter. It's commendable that you're finding a suitable match for your daughter. However, let's face the reality. The surrounding society isn't as progressive as in the larger cities. Families may accept an educated daughter-in-law, but they may not be as open to the idea of her working with a sole male colleague. Choosing a regular job where the workplace is more suitable for females would be wiser for her.

Curious to understand what the astrologer meant by a "suitable workplace for females," Maniram asked, "Can you elaborate on what you mean?"

"I think educational institutions are a good

choice. They offer less work pressure and fixed timings. The profession she's in includes outstation trips, unpredictable hours, and high stress. Families desire a homely and caring daughter-in-law, don't they? If your daughter continues with her current profession, it might raise insecurities in her future husband and his family about her whereabouts. This could lead to friction and unnecessary quarrels," reasoned the astrologer. "Qualified women harbour their ego of independence and are quick to take offence to such matters. They end up choosing a divorce to free themselves of family bonds."

Maniram countered, "What if her husband works in such a profession?"

"That's a different matter. We expect men to work, being the breadwinners."

Maniram felt the urge to stand up and give the man sitting in front of him a firm slap but suppressed his emotions, mindful of his protesting wife back home. Deciding that arguing with this stubborn misogynist would be futile, he would try to reason with the groom's parents to sort this out.

“So, do you have any potential matches in mind?” Maniram asked, his hope waning as he observed the astrologer sitting before him.

“Oh yes, I have plenty of prospects. That’s why we recommend getting the horoscope made through us. This personalized horoscope opens a window into your daughter’s future, allowing us to filter out the best-suited grooms based on your caste and the attributes of their horoscopes. While our knowledge might be traditional, we’re among the first ones to embrace progressive technology.”

“I see. So, what does your match suggest for us?” Maniram inquired, fixing his gaze on the fancy laptop that Janakeshwar had pulled out of a crimson bag and turned on with effortless grace. The astrologer typed in a few keys, adjusted his glasses, and studied the screen.

“So, tell me, how are you faring?” the astrologer inquired.

Maniram looked puzzled and asked, “What do you mean?”

“I mean, how much can you afford to spend on your daughter’s wedding? It plays a

significant role in determining the class and category of prospective matches.”

“Shouldn’t her merit be the deciding factor?” Maniram countered.

“This isn’t a job application, my friend. The merit of your daughter’s candidacy for marriage depends on two factors. First is how grand you can make the wedding and second is her willingness to adjust to the family’s demands.”

“Define ‘grand’,” Maniram asked with a hint of scepticism.

“A three-day event for 1000 invitees at a three or four-star property, with a lavish spread of meals, can qualify as a grand wedding.” Janakeshwar stated, “Clothes, jewellery, and gifts for the groom and his family would earn you extra points.”

“But isn’t that extravagant?”

“Extravagant would be a destination wedding at a holiday resort, with an all-expenses-paid trip for 1000+ people.” The astrologer leaned forward, getting closer to his client. “What did you have in mind? Let me

make it easier for you. What is your budget?”

After a moment’s consideration, Maniram replied, “Around five lakh rupees?” The astrologer leaned back in his chair. “I’m afraid that budget would only account for a modest or average wedding. Don’t forget, you also need to provide gifts and jewellery for your daughter. Taking that into account, your minimum budget should be around ten lakh rupees if you want a groom from a decent family.”

Maniram shook his head in disagreement. “I can only afford five lakh rupees, and that includes everything.”

“Seems like you didn’t set aside much for your daughter’s wedding, eh? Looks like you’ve spent everything on her education. Well, it’s tight, but let me see what I can do,” Janakeshwar remarked. He turned the laptop towards Maniram, who adjusted his glasses to examine the names listed on an Excel spreadsheet.

“These grooms are undergraduates! Some are in small private jobs or managing their family businesses. A few who have stable jobs

are at least 10 years older than my daughter. She is far more accomplished and deserves better than these options!” Maniram’s voice expressed agitation and helplessness.

“These are the profiles I have for now. Let’s not rush this. How about we reconvene in a month? I’ll keep an eye out for any good profiles that align with your budget. Meanwhile, it will give you time to reconsider and explore options to enhance your spending capacity,” suggested Janakeshwar.

“Alright, I’ll come back next month,” agreed Maniram, gathering the papers and returning them to his file.

“Oh, there’s no need to come in person. My assistant will call you and send you the profiles via WhatsApp. If you find anyone you like, just let us know, and we’ll arrange a meeting.”

As Maniram approached the door, ready to depart, the astrologer added, “Oh, what about the ring? Are you placing the order with us now? I would recommend your daughter wear it for a fast-tracked favourable outcome.” Maniram paused and turned around. “Thank

you, but I will skip that offer for now. I'll let you know in case I need the ring."

Maniram departed from the astrologer's premises. Glancing at his watch, he realized three hours had passed since his arrival at Jabalpur. He was relieved to find an empty bus waiting to depart. Determined to avoid any unwanted encounters like the one he had this morning; he secured a window seat and put the file securely in his bag.

As the bus traversed through the countryside, Maniram's mind filled with myriad thoughts. His savings of five lakh rupees for his daughter's wedding seemed insufficient and mustering another five lakh rupees felt like a daunting task. If what the astrologer said was right, he might have to consider the possibility of mortgaging his house to meet the expenses.

After the bus arrived at Sheetalpur's bus station, Maniram disembarked and walked home. His daughter, Smruti greeted him at the door. "When did you come?" he asked.

"Half an hour ago," Smruti responded as she

touched her father's feet. He gave his customary blessings to her and then asked about her mother. Smruti gestured towards the gate, explaining that her mother had left a few minutes ago for her weekly visit to the vegetable market.

Maniram stepped inside and found that his daughter's friend was sitting in the drawing room. She greeted him with folded hands.

"Jyoti was on her way to Jabalpur, and I asked her to stay with us for a day," Smruti explained, bridging the gap between her friend and her father to ease any awkwardness.

"That's good! I'll freshen up and join you." Jyoti responded with a courteous nod. "Shall I make some tea?" Smruti offered. "That would be great! A large cup for me, please," her father replied.

Twenty minutes later, Maniram returned, ready to enjoy a steaming cup of ginger tea and crisp onion fritters with Smruti and Jyoti. "Papa, where have you been today?" Smruti enquired. Maniram sipped his tea before answering, "To find a match for you." He narrated his entire

day's effort, concluding with a sense of unease, as he noticed a frown on Smruti's face. "Don't you want to get married? I bet Jyoti's parents would look for a suitable match for her too," he said, looking at Jyoti.

"Papa, there is something that I need to tell you," said Smruti in a hushed yet resolute tone. The words piqued Maniram's curiosity, and he leaned forward in his chair, bracing himself for what his daughter was about to reveal. "Go on, what is it?" he urged.

"I do not want to get married," said Smruti, her voice tinged with a mix of anxiety and determination.

"What? But why? Don't worry, I understand your concerns. That astrologer's nonsense won't influence us. I'll find the best man for you. If you already like someone, just let me know. We will meet the boy's parents and take it forward from there," Maniram said, eager to reassure his daughter.

"No, Papa, it's not that," Smruti replied. Jyoti moved to the empty seat next to her friend, showing her support.

“I don’t want to get married to any man,” Smruti continued, her voice trembling with emotion.

Maniram felt surprised, but he composed himself and encouraged his daughter to speak. “What are your concerns?” he insisted.

Taking a deep breath, Smruti mustered her courage and revealed, “Jyoti and I are the best of friends. We want to be together.”

“That’s okay, my child. Having a friend like Jyoti is a blessing, and loyal friends stand by each other for life, don’t they? I’m sure your marriage will not take away your friendship with Jyoti,” Maniram spoke in a thoughtful tone, looking at both of them. Jyoti hesitated to make eye contact with him.

“No, Papa, it’s more than just friendship,” Smruti said, her voice firm. There is mutual love between us. We have decided not to marry anyone. Our dream is to be lifelong partners, providing support through all the difficulties. We want to explore the world together and create a home of our own—a place where societal standards do not judge us. Create our

world, unrestricted by societal norms. If that means settling in a country that accepts our relationship, then we want to do it.”

Maniram sat there in shock and awe, processing the revelation. “You mean you are, what they call, gay?” he asked, struggling to find the right words.

“Lesbians,” Jyoti replied, her gaze fixed on the floor. Maniram took a moment to absorb the information. “And your parents are okay with your decision?” he asked Jyoti.

“My parents don’t know about us yet,”

“Oh,” Maniram responded, trying to process the new information. He got up from his seat and walked to the window. The overcast sky mirrored the storm brewing inside him, a storm he was unprepared for. Jyoti, shifting in her seat responded, “Uncle, I assure you, Smruti and I have a deep connection, and our feelings for each other are genuine.”

Maniram’s brows furrowed as he countered, “Feelings? Why don’t you realise that this is unnatural? This is not what we envisioned for Smruti. We have some basic expectations, and

they are there for a reason. This is against rationality. It's going to bring so much trouble for both of you and us."

Smruti interjected, "Papa, please listen. We didn't choose to feel this way. Love is not something you plan; it just happens. We want to be honest with you, and we hope you can understand and accept us for who we are."

However, Maniram did not sway. "I don't have to learn from you what love is! Is this how you repay the trust we placed in you? What about our reputation? What will people say when they find out? How will we face our relatives?"

Jyoti, her voice steady, replied, "Uncle, we're not doing this to hurt you or tarnish the family name. The world is changing, and it's time to accept that love comes in different forms."

Maniram's frustration grew. "Changing? You aren't living in a first-world country. Do you know how difficult it is going to be for us?"

Jyoti, with a hint of sadness, said, "Uncle, we understand it might be hard for you, but we

hope that with time, you'll see the love and commitment we share." Maniram, feeling cornered, snapped, "I can't accept this. I won't accept this."

As tension thickened in the room, Maniram walked away from the window sill and sat in a corner. He thought about the people who surrounded them, the society they lived in, their relatives, his ex-colleagues, and their social circles. What would they think of his daughter? What would they say about him and Shailaja? Have they failed as parents?

"Papa, can you tell us what is going on in your mind?" Smruti began, her voice gentle but determined.

Maniram looked at her, his expression a mix of weariness and uncertainty. "I don't know if talking about it will change anything, Smruti. It's hard for me to accept all this," he admitted, his gaze fixed on the fading sunlight.

Smruti sat down beside him, her eyes reflecting a blend of empathy and resilience. "I understand, Papa. That is why we wanted to tell you everything, rather than going away from

you. But I also can't deny who I am and whom I love. Jyoti and I seek your acceptance, not just for us, but for you, too. We want you to be a part of our lives. Isn't our happiness and well-being more important than what society thinks?" Smruti replied, her eyes pleading for understanding.

Maniram looked at his daughter, torn between the ingrained values of a lifetime and the love he held for her. "I just worry about what people will say, about how they'll judge us."

"Papa, people will always talk. They'll judge no matter what we do. But should we let their opinions dictate our lives? You stood by me when I wanted to pursue education. You stood by me when I ventured out of town to seek my goals. Shouldn't we focus on the love we share and the happiness we can create together?" Smruti's voice was a gentle plea.

The silence that followed was pregnant with unspoken understanding. Maniram, seeing the strength in Smruti's eyes and feeling the depth of her love, unravelled the knots of resistance within him. "I might not understand this,

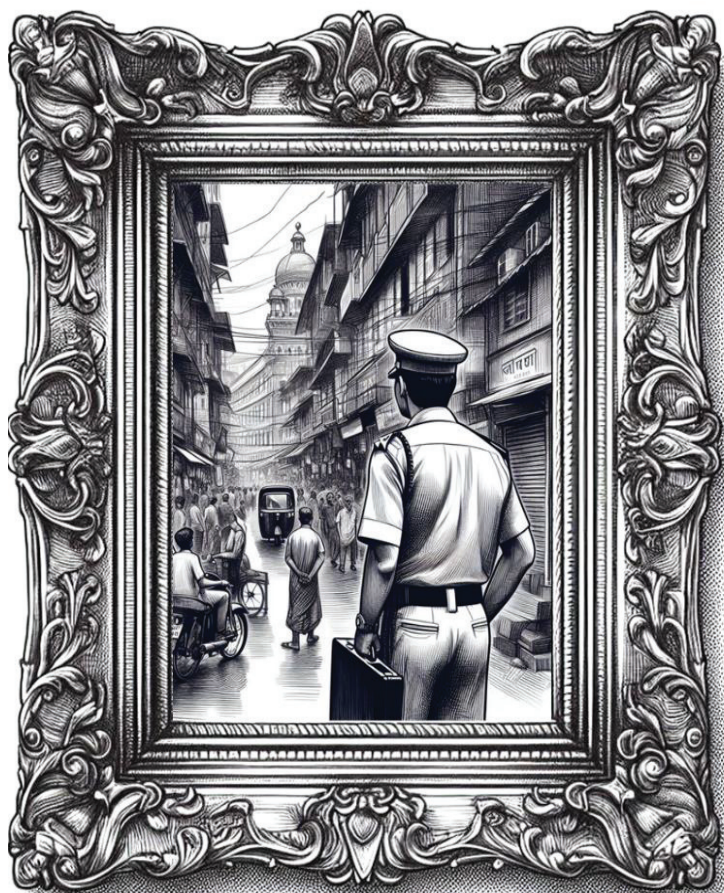
Smruti, but if this makes you happy, I can't stand in the way. Go ahead."

He walked towards his daughter and, in a moment of profound tenderness, embraced her in a warm hug. Smruti's held-back tears flowed as she clung to her father, feeling the gentle touch of his hand on her head. Maniram then extended his arm towards Jyoti, who rose from her seat and joined the embrace. "Does your mother know about this?" he asked. Smruti and Jyoti exchanged smiles. "She does!" they replied in unison.

Maniram smiled as the door-bell chimed. "Very well. Open the door and let your mother into the house!" Jyoti rushed to the door, and a beaming Shailaja entered the room. Maniram looked at her, sporting a smile, and she nodded in reciprocation. He then walked toward the balcony, gazing at the setting sun. On the far side of the horizon, a bright star-like object stood out in the crimson evening sky.

He fixated his gaze on the celestial body, smiling, and said to himself in a hushed tone, "Saturn. Oh, beautiful planet! Looks like my daughter doesn't need to wear an expensive

stone-studded silver ring to alter your estranged orbit and neither do all the children of this world, misled by astrologers. Crash on Jupiter if you wish to!"



7

MASK OF INTEGRITY

In the era of the 1990s, the city of Bhubaneswar in Orissa found itself ensnared in the clutches of corruption. This originated from the unchecked greed of those in positions of power, transforming from an exception to an accepted reality. What began as a seed of wrongdoing had grown into a menacing tree, casting its dark shadows across the city's moral landscape.

Want a new phone connection? It was not just about tons of paperwork; you had to slip some extra money for the man in charge. Buying a car or scooter wasn't just about making a deal; it was like going to a temple where you offered money to the Gods for your prayers to be answered. Driving your vehicle needed a payment. It was no longer a show of skills, but money. Traffic cops had mastered the art of finding faults and awaited their opportunity to fleece you. Officials demanding money controlled even basic things like ration cards,

meant for helping people. The government now acted like a silent auctioneer, selling rights to the highest bidder.

The sound of money also tainted private businesses. Want a loan from a bank? It wasn't based on your ability to repay. What mattered was how much money came with your application to the bank manager. Getting into school or college wasn't about grades; it was about slipping extra cash, disguised as donations to the school management. People in charge of pulling strings through powerful connections exploited the system to amass fortunes for themselves. Bhubaneswar, once known for its temples and traditions, was now covered in shadows. Every wish, no matter how simple, had a price. In the middle of all this darkness, a small spark of resistance was waiting for the right time to shine.

Things took a turn during the Orissa state elections of 1994. The JMM Party used the social evil of corruption to its advantage. It campaigned hard, raising awareness amongst citizens. It promised a free and fair society. The party appealed to people's support and got

elected with a strong majority.

Meanwhile, to tackle corruption at a national level, the central government came up with a new ordinance. In the future, each state could choose its own Anti-Corruption Bureau, and these bureaus had full power in their state's government. Central Bureau of Investigation and the Vigilance Committee would monitor them. The idea was to give states the authority to fight corruption in their own way.

When Damodar Patnaik became the elected Chief Minister, everyone knew he meant business. With a crystal-clear mandate to wipe out corruption, he wasted no time in taking action. Patnaik created a strong policy to address corruption. One of his first moves was handling the transfer of IPS Officer Sushil Rajkumar from Aurangabad to Bhuvaneshwar. They appointed Sushil as the head of the state's anti-corruption efforts. It was a bold step, signalling the chief minister's commitment to rooting out corruption and bringing in someone he trusted to lead the charge. They set the stage for a determined fight against the deep-rooted issue, with Patnaik at the helm and his trusted

man ready to take on the challenge.

Sushil arrived at the Chief Minister's office, armed with an impeccable record of battling corruption. He stepped into the role with a reputation that echoed in government corridors. His name and shame policy preceded him. It created an aura of apprehension among those accustomed to indulging in malpractices.

"Welcome Sushil, we've been waiting for you. I'm glad you accepted our offer," said Patnaik, as he offered a chair to his guest.

"Thank you, sir. It's an honour to serve under your leadership." Sushil took his seat opposite his new boss.

"I have heard a lot about your achievements and reputation. You have a knack for exposing and arresting the corrupt, no matter how powerful they are."

Sushil half smiled, almost embarrassed at the compliment. "I'm just doing my duty, sir. Following the oath that I have taken for my country."

A butler arrived with two cups of coffee and the two gentlemen relished the aroma of a fresh

brew emanating from their respective porcelain cups. “I am counting on that. Just keep doing what you do best. You have my full support. Spare nobody, and I mean it. No matter how powerful or high profile they are, you have absolute authority and autonomy in the way you deal with them. I promise you will not have any interference from anyone,” said Patnaik, sipping his coffee.

“That is all I need from you, sir.” Sushil smiled in affirmation.

“Excellent. Your time starts now. I need to see tangible results in the next three months, and I am counting on you.” Sushil rose from his seat and shook hands with his boss. His mind had already started chalking out plans as he walked out of the room.

In the next few days, Sushil assembled a team of 20 individuals. Some were his trusted aides from previous assignments, while others were fresh recruits. He conducted a two-day workshop to share his strategy with the team and make them battle-ready. Their mission - gather intelligence, unearth the depths of dishonesty and bring the guilty to justice.

In the next three months, Sushil's team conducted operations focused throughout the state, ensuring thorough searches in every area. Their ruthless approach spared nobody in their pursuit. The team's targeted raids resulted in arrests, causing government officials, ministers, and business owners to face the consequences of their corrupt practices.

Despite the mounting pressure from political lobbies attempting to stop the crackdown, Patnaik remained resolute in his support for Sushil. Armed with explicit authority, the team created an atmosphere of zero tolerance towards corruption.

Sushil was a master at leveraging the power of media, newspapers, and billboards. He orchestrated a widespread campaign to convey his message. Through these mediums, he encouraged the public to report any instances of bribery or neglect of duty. Citizens, motivated by this call to action, became active participants in tightening the screws on lower-level corruption.

The city's denizens were witnessing a dramatic change. Government officials and

politicians, for the first time, thought of their jobs as more of a curse than the once-coveted boon they used to be. Parents who had long sought grooms with stable government jobs for their daughters began rejecting marriage prospects that came with the burden of such employment.

The fear of accountability loomed large, casting a shadow over public-facing employees who now operated with caution. They lived amidst the threat of a random complaint that endanger their jobs. Contrary to expectations, an unforeseen outcome surfaced. The pace of carrying out public projects experienced a significant boost. People started receiving services at fast rates, and, to their amazement, with no additional charges. The bureaucratic processes, known for their slow pace, now appeared to operate with a newfound efficiency.

As Sushil's plans played out, the government machinery showed its effectiveness. This brought a positive change for the public. The worry about corruption lessened, and citizens saw the advantages of a system benefitting

them. The JMM party capitalized on this and claimed credit for the change. Patnaik became a superstar, and Sushil emerged as an influential supporting figure in the narrative.

Three months had passed since Sushil's appointment, and the time had come for him to present his findings to Patnaik, the man who entrusted him with the task. Sushil, armed with a compiled report, stood before the seasoned leader, ready to unveil the progress made. "Sir, I have something important to show you," said Sushil as he handed over a dossier to his boss.

Patnaik opened the report and scanned through the pages. "Wow, this is impressive. You have done a remarkable job, Sushil. The public reporting channel has been a significant change. My sources are giving me favourable reports that corruption has reduced at the lower levels of administration."

"Thank you, sir. But there is more to the story," said Sushil, pointing to a section in the report. "This is the part that concerns me the most. There is still a powerful nexus of politicians and business owners who are involved in money laundering. Tax havens and

Hawala are used to conceal black money and avoid taxes. Sir, it's challenging to trace and catch them."

Patnaik frowned. "I see. This is indeed a serious matter. How do you propose we deal with them?"

"Sir, I have a plan. But it is risky and ambitious. We need to scale up our operation to a national level. We need authorisation from the union foreign secretary to question the banks in these tax havens. If we can get access to their records, we can expose the names and accounts of these culprits. We then have a chance of recovering the stolen wealth of our country and bringing the culprits to justice."

Patnaik nodded. "That sounds like a bold strategy and a challenging one. Do you think the union foreign secretary will agree to this? Do you have enough evidence to support your request?"

Sushil hesitated but regained his composure. "Sir, I have some preliminary data. However, I need more time and resources to gather more concrete proof. I also need your backing, sir.

You are a respected and influential figure in the government. If you can vouch for me and my team, we will get the authorization we need.”

“I understand, Sushil. This is a big decision. But I also see the potential impact of this operation. I will do what I can to help you. I will talk to the union foreign secretary and see what can be done.”

Sushil stood up from his seat, sensing that the conversation was over. “Thank you, sir. We are ready to take on this challenge and will not let you down.”

Patnaik smiled. “I am sure you won’t. You have my full support and trust. Keep me updated on your progress. Be careful. This is a dangerous game. There are powerful enemies out there who will stop at nothing to protect their interests. Stay safe and vigilant.”

Sushil got up from his seat and shook hands. Once he left the meeting, Patnaik reached out to his desk and picked up the phone. “Connect me to Mr. Rawat”.

The chief minister endured an agonizing wait for a few minutes before a strong and resolute

voice boomed through his receiver. “Yes Patnaik, what can I do for you?” The caller explained the background and his ask.

“That sounds very impressive. I commend you and your team for your efforts. What do you want from me?”

Patnaik took a sip of water from a glass on his table before answering. “Your guidance, sir. I appointed Sushil to fulfil my mandate, and the promise made to the public before our election to office. I thought Sushil would stop at this and not go any further. However, I'm concerned he will do more than what is required. How do I stop him?”

“Well, I had warned you about him. He is relentless. Now that you have taken the risk, deal with it.”

Patnaik frowned. “But sir, he wants to approach the foreign ministry. Because of his determination, I am sure he will bypass me and approach CBI if I deny his request. That will put me and my core group of ministers in the spotlight. He will then not stop investigating our connections. This will lead to larger

problems.”

“Hmm. So you want me to approve the authorisation?” said the bureaucrat from Delhi.

Patnaik stuttered. “Yes, yes, Sir”

“Are you baffling? Do you realize the implications of this request?” Rawat waited but did not hear a response. He regained his composure and explained.

“Look here, you are a reasonable man, aren’t you? Doing a large-scale witch hunt will ruffle a lot of feathers in the central government. I cannot grant any authorisation that will put you, me, and a lot of others at risk. Keep your political stunts at your state level. This officer of yours will land you in trouble if you go any further. You still have your ambition to reach the union cabinet, don’t you? Get rid of Sushil. Speak to the CBI head and get him transferred.”

“He wouldn’t agree, sir”, Patnaik tried to counter.

“What do you mean won’t agree? You have the power to do so, don’t you? He’s a civil servant, for God’s sake! When did you become so soft? Get rid of him and don’t bring your

problems to me again. Solve it and move on. Deal with him and I'll keep the leadership informed of your aspirations. Your value to us is only if you can handle yourself."

Patnaik replaced the receiver. He pressed a button on his desk and, in a few seconds, his secretary appeared. "Yes, Sir?"

"Speak to Mr Dhule in CBI, Delhi. Get Sushil transferred to Assam, with immediate effect."

The secretary had a puzzled look on his face. "Are you sure, sir?"

"Do you have any doubts? Do as I say or I'll kick you out for insubordination!" Patnaik screamed, letting off his frustration from his previous call. The hapless secretary bowed and turned away. As he was leaving the room, his boss spoke again. "Arrange for a farewell gift."

The secretary returned in a couple of hours, bearing with him a fax from Delhi. Patnaik looked at it and smiled. "You know what to do with it, don't you?" he said. His secretary nodded.

The next morning, when Sushil reached his office, a small leather briefcase with an envelope

awaited him at his desk. He read the letter, sighed, and put it in his coat pocket. Retrieving his diary from a drawer, he noted an address on a paper. Picking up the briefcase and the address-borne paper, he left his office. With a sense of purpose, he drove his car and navigated through the narrow alleys of the old market area until he reached a small antique furniture store.

Upon entering, Sushil's eyes darted around, and with practised precision, he located the inconspicuous back door. Stepping through it, he entered a small enclosure that concealed a hidden room. Sushil's arrival caused the man to pause at his desk job.

A heavy silence enveloped the room when Sushil produced a gun from his coat, his eyes fixed on the man facing him. Sushil sensed the thickening tension in the room and cut to the chase with a pointed inquiry. "Are you involved in Hawala activities?"

The man rose from his seat, denying any association with such operations. Sushil advanced toward the man's desk, placing the gun against his head. He pressed for crucial

information, keen on unravelling the intricate web of connections. Despite the visible unease, the man maintained a facade of composure, denying any involvement. Convinced otherwise, Sushil persisted. “Tell me the names of the people you serve, and I promise I will not implicate you.”

The man smiled. “I won’t. I’ll take those names to my grave.”

“You’ll reach there earlier, if you don’t,” Sushil threatened, raising the gun at the man’s forehead. The man, however, stood firm, refusing to part with the information.

Sushil shifted the aim of his gun to the wall behind the man, firing a shot that reverberated through the room, mere inches away from the man’s left ear. Startled, the man ducked, but as the echoes faded, he rose again, determination etched on his face.

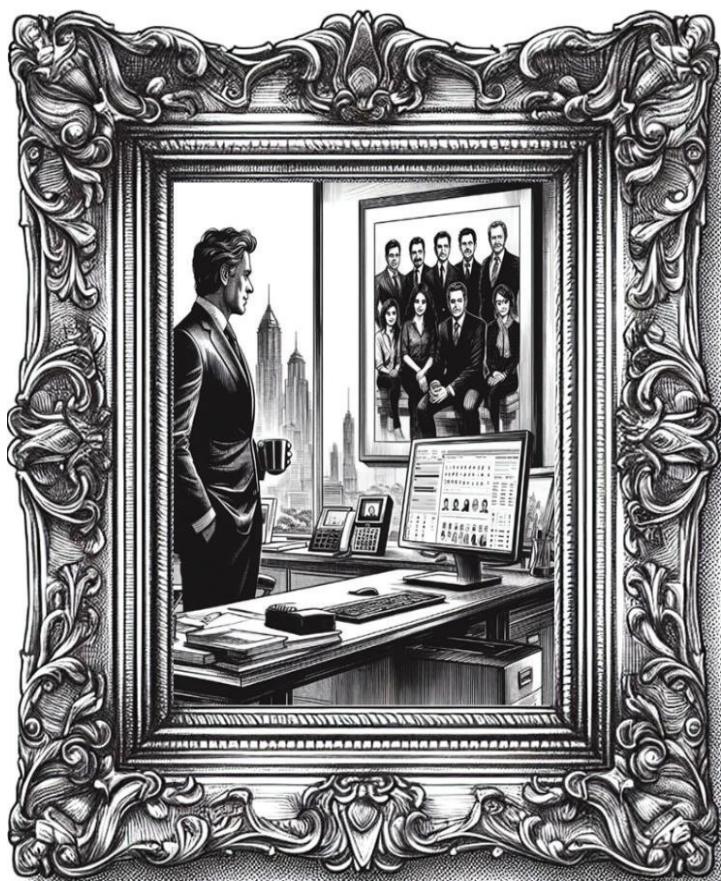
Sushil asked again, “Have you changed your mind?” The man, a bit shaken but determined, stuck to his decision. Sensing the impasse, he leaned back, his gaze never leaving the man’s eyes. “You know, secrets have a way of

surfacing, and the consequences can be more severe than you expect.”

The man, maintaining a steely resolve, responded, “I am well aware of the risks, but I will not compromise the trust placed in me.” A subtle smile played on Sushil’s lips as he observed the man before him. “Impressive!,” he remarked.

Sushil handed over the briefcase and a paper to the man. who opened it and looked back at him. “Will you do it?”. He smiled and nodded. “Give me two hours.”

Sushil replaced the gun in his coat and walked away. His silhouette merged with the shadows of the narrow alleys. Meanwhile, the man returned to his desk, the dim light casting a subtle glow on his face as he dialled a number on his phone. “Two Crore rupees to a numbered account in Switzerland. Account number 548-8475-3015, Zurich National Bank.”



8

FIRE DRILL

The foggy sky painted a gloomy picture over Mumbai, a city always on the move. The traffic flowed like a winding snake through the busy streets. Amid honking horns and people rushing around, the shiny glass in front of Mobi Motors' main office stood tall. In the posh neighbourhood of Worli, the building sparkled, revealing the tough times the big car company was facing.

In the heart of this storm stood Vikram Iyer, a seasoned Managing Director and India CEO of Mobi Motors. His office, perched on the top floor of the towering building, reflected his 28 years of hard work, determination and leadership. Framed accolades and trophies adorned the shelves of a wall in his office, illustrating the success stories of a man who had weathered countless storms to keep the company afloat.

At 51, Vikram Iyer carried his responsibilities

with dignity. His towering, self-assured figure revealed his prominence in the industry. Salt-and-pepper hair and a clean-shaven face reflected decades of accumulated wisdom. The firmness of his gaze reflected the countless decisions made in conference rooms across the globe.

As sunlight streamed through the expansive windows, Vikram sat behind his mahogany desk, engrossed in the quarterly reports that painted the firm's bleak financial picture. Sales were declining. They were losing market share with every passing quarter. Silence in his office belied the turmoil within.

A desk phone, an ominous black slab on the desk, interrupted the quietude with a sharp ring. He answered, his voice a measured baritone, "Yes, this is Vikram."

On the other end of the line was Marcus Reynolds, the Global CEO of Mobi Motors. His voice, steady and confident, carried a weight that set the tone for the conversation. "Vikram, I hope you're sitting down," Marcus began, his words measured.

Vikram, sensing the seriousness in Marcus's tone, leaned forward in his leather chair. He looked at the expansive skyline visible through the floor-to-ceiling windows. "I am Marcus, and listening," he replied. The voice was steady, betraying none of the apprehension building within.

Marcus wasted no time in delivering the sombre news. "The board will meet in a few minutes. Given the financial challenges, we may need to cut our leadership staff by 25%. This would apply to the India operations too. We have to weather this storm, and it means making some tough decisions."

The weight of Marcus's words hung in the air, and for a moment, the only sound in the office was the distant murmur of the city below. Vikram's eyes narrowed as he absorbed the directive. He understood the implications of such a decision.

"Marcus, you understand the roles these executives play in their respective divisions. They are the backbone of my business in India. Losing a quarter of our leadership would be devastating," Vikram responded in his firm

voice, tinged with concern.

“I understand, Vikram. The way things are going, my gut feeling is that the board will vote for it. I’ve spoken to a few members and they believe that it’s non-negotiable. A necessary step to ensure the company’s survival. I’m counting on your leadership to help us through this,” Marcus explained, his tone empathetic but resolute.

Vikram sighed, the weight of responsibility settling on his shoulders. “I need more than just a directive, Marcus. I need details – who, how, and why. These are people I’ve worked alongside for many years. It’s not just about their positions; it’s about the impact on their lives.”

Marcus, recognizing Vikram’s plea for clarity, “You can choose which of the Executive Directors will face the axe. You are safe. We need you there, more than ever. It needs to be three out of the eleven people reporting to you. If the vote passes, the axing will have to be smooth and swift, and with immediate effect. Listen, I need to go. They are calling me there. Drop whatever you have now and get to the

task. If the board votes for it, we need to be ready. You have two hours to figure out the names. I trust your judgment. I'll call you after the meeting."

The line went dead. Vikram knew he couldn't afford to delay. The clock had ticked, and the gravity of the situation demanded his immediate attention. With a heavy sigh, he reached for the intercom on his desk. "Please clear my schedule for the day. I need to focus on something urgent. Do not divert any calls to me and ask the butler to get me a strong cup of coffee." Sneha Pendse, his efficient and long-serving secretary, acknowledged. "Yes, sir."

A large photograph that adorned the far side of his cabin drew his attention. It captured a moment, frozen in time. A snapshot from the last management offsite in Singapore. The framed image depicted his eleven most trusted men and women. Pillars of his leadership team, radiating joy and camaraderie. In the centre of the frame stood Vikram, a symbolic figurehead of unity and strength.

The photograph had become more than a decorative piece; it was a tangible reminder of

the bonds forged during times of triumph and challenge. Each face in the frame carried a story, a testament to their shared journey in steering Mobi Motors through turbulent waters. The smiles captured in that frozen moment belied the storm that now raged within the confines of Vikram's mind.

As he stood before the photograph, lost in thought, a soft knock on the door jolted him back to the present. "Yes," he bellowed. His tone reflected the gravity of the moment. A butler entered, bearing a silver tray adorned with a steaming cup of coffee and a delicate assortment of cookies. The aroma wafted through the air, offering a brief respite from the tension that lingered. Vikram, appreciating the gesture, nodded his head in acknowledgement. The butler, maintaining an air of quiet professionalism, bowed his head before retreating from the room.

Vikram stepped away, picked up the coffee cup and a cookie in another, making his way back to the photograph. Biting the cookie, he cradled the cup in his hand, its warmth a stark contrast to the chill of the running air-

conditioner. Vikram summoned the resolve to undertake the arduous task at hand. Starting from the left side of the frame, he began his assessment.

The first person was Ayesha Verma. Her climb through the ranks had been nothing short of meteoric. A testament to her intellectual capabilities and steadfastness. Two patents decorated her professional journey. One for a fuel injection propulsion system. The other for an innovation on carbon fluids, that had revolutionised the company's stance on fuel efficiency.

Rajesh Singh was next a stalwart figure in the realm of production and manufacturing. He was a veteran, a maestro of the production line. Vikram's gaze lingered on the man who had, for fifteen years, been the linchpin of the firm's manufacturing unit.

Priyanshu Sharma, an IIM Ahmedabad graduate, represented the new wave of leadership. He was a torchbearer for innovative approaches to Sales and marketing. In a brief span, he had infused a breath of fresh air into the company's branding. Each strategy was a hit

that resonated not just within the company, but throughout the automotive industry.

Anuj Patel was another pivotal figure. He leads the silent but vital cog of Supply Chain and Logistics. Anuj's role in the company went far beyond a mere title; he was the conductor of a ballet involving inter-state transport, procurement of raw materials, and the seamless movement of goods through a complex supply chain. His network spanned a vast expanse, from suppliers to transportation authorities.

Sameer Gupta was captain of the Finance ship. He exuded a calm assurance, reflecting his role in steering the company through the waters of financial management. A team of adept chartered accountants and auditors operated under his leadership.

Neha Kapoor was the weaver of the firm's human fabric. As the head of Human Resources, she had a nuanced understanding of the human element. Neha played a pivotal role in fostering a culture of collaboration and professional growth. Her deceptive smile in the photograph hinted at the potential ramifications of parting ways with the guardian of the company's

human capital.

Radhika Menon emerged as the tech maestro, heading the Information Technology division. The digital backbone of the company, her presence in the photograph, resonated with an aura of prowess. She was the orchestrator of the company's technological landscape, leading with a blend of innovation and strategic vision, handling an indispensable role of technological stewardship.

Maya Joshi led the Quality Assurance and Control division. She was a defender of the firm reputation for precision, balancing production exigencies with quality standards.

Rajat Chatterjee headed the Environmental and Sustainability team. He was the driving force behind the company's commitment to eco-friendly practices and long-term environmental responsibility. With a visionary approach, he leads initiatives that integrate sustainability into the core of the company's operations.

Nishant Shah was the Government and Public Relations man. A seasoned lobbyist who orchestrated the delicate dance between the

corporate realm and the corridors of power. With finesse and strategic acumen, he navigated the deals through government interactions. He ensured that the company's interests were not just represented but amplified.

To the far right was Arvind Mehta, who assumed the role of the company's legal guardian, navigating the intricate labyrinth of laws and regulations.

He scanned the faces in the photograph and found himself in a web of dilemma. Each face seemed to radiate an aura of indispensability. As he pondered the weight of the impending decision, a knot tightened in his stomach. These were not just professionals; they were architects of the company's triumphs over the last decade. Each of them was a star performer in their own right. He could discern no justifiable reason to sever ties with any of them. He checked the clock. An hour had elapsed since he had spoken to Marcus. In New York, the board meeting would have been in motion now. Vikram wished he could've been a fly on the way to that meeting.

At his desk, he sat with a notepad and pencil.

It felt like he was in a wrestling match with the 11 faces from the photo. Each face had its own story, not just about work, but also about the relation they shared. The notepad and pencil, which helped to make things clear for him, now felt like tools for figuring out a puzzle. On a neat list, he noted the eleven names on the notepad, one below the other.

Thinking about Ayesha Verma, who was the first person on Vikram's list, he knew it wouldn't be easy to find someone like her. Her team in the Research and Development (R&D) department counted on her leadership. Ayesha was the go-to person for all the technical stuff; no one else in the department knew as much as she did. Even though she could be tough to work with and wasn't the best at getting along with others, her team under her made up for that. Having a genius on the team sometimes means they might not connect well with everyone else.

Anuj Patel was like the heartbeat of the supply chain and logistics part of the company, keeping things running. Sameer Gupta was the financial brain holding onto important secrets.

Vikram knew these two were just as crucial, like puzzle pieces that the company couldn't do without.

Thinking about Rajesh Singh in production and manufacturing and Priyanshu Sharma in Sales and marketing, Vikram knew they were the key players in the company's revenue generation. It would hurt the firm to let them go. The people working under them might feel less motivated, and that could lead to fewer goods being manufactured and sold. It would be like taking out the star players from a team—the entire game might not be as good without them.

Nishant Shah was the company's star lobbyist, the go-to person who made sure their plans could move forward with no hassles from the government. If they lost him, it would be like losing a key player in the game. Vikram remembered it took him over two years to convince Nishant to join the company. Losing someone with that much experience and finesse would be a big setback for their plans and ambitions.

Rajat Chatterjee was another key ally,

helping him navigate the tricky realm of environmental norms. With global warming and other environmental issues gaining prominence, his presence was paramount in avoiding unnecessary public interest litigations and lawsuits concerning his company's environmental impact.

He struck off seven names from his notepad, narrowing down his choices to four. As he contemplated Neha Kapoor, the head of Human Resources, he found his thoughts oscillating. While Neha had managed her responsibilities, her standing among her colleagues wasn't as credible. Often slow to respond and lacking popularity among the leadership, she struggled with providing swift answers and maintaining open communication. Her tendency to assert control and reluctance to consider advice painted a challenging picture. Vikram pondered whether the team could thrive without her, contemplating the possibility of promoting someone from Neha's team as an organic solution. He marked a tick against Neha's name on the notepad. One down, two to go.

Arvind Mehta was next. He led a team of thorough legal and compliance professionals and trained them well. However, off late, his capable team had ensured that everything ran on auto-pilot, with minimum interference from him. They sought Arvind's expertise only during complex legal matters, and even then, they often outsourced their litigations to several law firms with varied expertise in specific fields. Arvind, more or less, played the role of a legal facilitator.

He gave a deep thought and decided. Given the scenario, Arvind's loss might not be as heavy an impact as the others. Also, Arvind was well off, having made enough money through his career as a corporate lawyer and then as an Executive Director at the firm. With a handsome severance, he should be able to retire and lead a peaceful life. Vikram marked a tick against his name. Two down, one to go.

Down to the last two names on the list - Radhika Menon in charge of Information Technology and Maya Joshi from Quality Assurance. Radhika was a support for the company and did a great job at maintaining the

firm's technological prowess. Maya wasn't doing as well. There were constant disagreements between her quality assurance team and the production unit, causing a lot of internal disagreements. Even though her team wasn't happy with her leadership style, they complied with her autocratic ways. He often found it hard to talk to her because she was stubborn. Between the two, it seemed like Maya could be the one to let go.

But there's more to Radhika's story. During her initial years at the firm, she and Vikram were colleagues in the production division. They had dated each other. The relationship lasted for two years, during which Vikram was looking forward to marrying Radhika. However, he later found that she was considering the prospect of marrying an entrepreneur whose alliance her family had chosen for her.

Heartbroken, he confronted Radhika and had to end their relationship when she confessed that she no longer had any feelings for him. Over the years, their professional relationship was working fine, but Vikram was

uncomfortable dealing with her because of their history. He avoided personal talks. Over the years, though married, Radhika yearned for his attention. She tried her best to regain his friendship, but Vikram maintained his fair distance from her.

Vikram looked at the last two names and considered them. The ticking clock reminded him. He grabbed his intercom and said, “Sneha, can you send another coffee, please?”

A few minutes later, the butler came in, putting a cup on Vikram’s side table. Standing by the window, he sipped his coffee, watching the busy traffic on the road. His thoughts were like a traffic jam in his mind, making it tough to make a rational decision. After finishing his coffee, he went back to his desk.

He checked his notepad, and the names Radhika and Maya seemed to challenge him, daring him to decide. Vikram shut his eyes to think. After taking a deep breath, he opened his eyes, crossed out Maya’s name, and marked a tick next to Radhika’s name. As he put his pen down, his desk phone rang.

“Vikram, I’ve got news,” Marcus began, his voice carrying a sense of urgency.

Vikram closed his eyes to brace for the impact. “What’s the verdict?” he asked.

“The board has voted against downsizing the leadership,” Marcus explained. “Instead, they will cut costs by shutting down a loss-making plant in Canada. We’re selling it to a competitor.”

A wave of relief washed over Vikram. “That’s a relief,” he admitted, exhaling. Marcus continued, “Did you draw the names for the cut?”

Vikram nodded, grateful for the shift in focus. “Yes, I did.” Curiosity getting the better of him, Marcus inquired, “So, would you like to tell me the names?”

Vikram grinned and his relief was clear in his voice. “Well, Marcus, do the names matter? Let them stay with me for now.” Marcus, sensing Vikram’s positive tone, replied, “Good to hear. Thanks for being battle-ready.”

Vikram disconnected the call, with a smile still playing on his lips. He tore the sheet of

Story # 8 - Fire Drill

paper from his notepad, the names now irrelevant. Walking over to the paper shredder, he fed the paper through it, watching as the pieces fell into the bin. They had avoided a fire drill.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

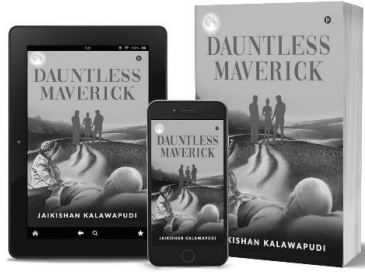
Jaikishan Kalawapudi is an avid storyteller, deeply influenced by human experiences. Having travelled extensively across the country, he gathers memories and experiences that vividly colour his stories.

Beyond his love for writing stories, he dives into the worlds of notaphily and philately, discovering the untold stories within currency and stamps.

His curiosity takes him on celestial journeys into astronomy, while he also finds wonder in heritage architecture's intricate designs and rich histories.

He resides in Mumbai with his wife Komal and daughter Anvika. His first book, *Dauntless Maverick* was published in January 2021. *Ephemerals* is his second book.

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DAUNTLESS MAVERICK

Journey into the enigmatic world of Badri, a nonagenarian ex-government servant, as he grapples with a life-altering secret on his deathbed. To his family, he's been the embodiment of simplicity, a man of modest means. Little do they know that behind his unassuming facade lies a clandestine past that has propelled him into a realm of unimaginable wealth.

As Badri confronts a terminal ailment, the weight of his untold secrets becomes a burden on his departing soul, yearning for closure. In a final act of defiance against his silent torment, Badri issues a challenge to his unsuspecting family – unravel the mysteries of his past, and they shall inherit a fortune that defies all expectations. Fail, and the entirety of his wealth will find its way to charitable causes.

The stakes are set, and Badri's family courageously embarks on a quest that promises fortunes or benevolence. Will they decode the cryptic narrative of Badri's life and lay claim to his hidden legacy? Prepare for an exhilarating ride through the labyrinth of Badri's existence, discovering the pivotal events that shaped him into the dauntless maverick he became. This is not just a story; it's a captivating expedition into the heart of a man whose life defies the ordinary.