

BEHIND YOUR MASK

Dewanshu Purohit



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Summary

What happens when ambition becomes a mask?

What do you do when you no longer

recognize the person staring back at you in the mirror?

This is the story of Aryan, a young UPSC aspirant buried under expectations, comparisons, and the silent pressure to succeed. He wears confidence like armor and speaks like he has it all figured out - but inside, he's unraveling.

From the crowded coaching rooms of Delhi to the still mornings of Phalodi, this novel traces a journey that isn't about topping exams... but about surviving yourself.

Through heartbreak, breakdowns, unspoken childhood wounds, and the weight of pretending, Aryan slowly begins to shed everything that isn't truly his - ambitions that weren't his own, voices that kept him small, and a city that never felt like home.

What begins as a story of cracking an exam becomes a story of cracking open the soul.

He meets friends who don't care about ranks. He listens to uncles by the riverside, plays gully cricket in his village, eats homemade mathris, and finds peace in conversations that don't measure his worth. Slowly, the race slows... and life begins.

In the end, Aryan doesn't win the world. He reclaims himself.

8 For Everyone Who's Ever Felt Not Enough...

This is more than a book -

It's a mirror for every student, dreamer, and struggler trying to make sense of their worth in a loud, achievement-obsessed world.

It reminds us:

•
> "You don't need permission to begin again.

And you don't need a rank to matter."

Author Bio: Dev Purohit

Dev Purohit is a passionate writer, thinker, and UPSC aspirant from Rajasthan, India. Deeply observant by nature, Dev is drawn to the everyday moments and inner conflicts that shape people's lives - especially in the world of students chasing big dreams.

His debut book, *Behind the Mask*, was born from a desire to connect with young readers who often feel overwhelmed by the pressure to perform, succeed, or fit in. Through storytelling that feels real and rooted in Indian life, Dev offers gentle clarity and meaningful reflection for those caught in the noise of modern ambition.

When he's not writing or preparing for the civil services exam, you'll find him enjoying a quiet cup of chai, creating content for his page "Janta Bites," or thinking about how to help others grow through honest and relatable stories.

In the future, Dev envisions contributing to public life - not just through policy, but by deeply connecting with people, listening to their real stories, and working toward a more understanding and emotionally aware society.

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Chapter 1:

The Mask He Wore

The mirror had always been his first audience.

Aryan adjusted the collar of his shirt with a precision that had become muscle memory. The sleeves were rolled halfway, revealing just enough forearm - strong, structured, deliberate. He raised his eyebrows slightly and gave himself the same smirk he wore in public. The confident one. The arrogant one. The one no one dared question.

From the outside, Aryan was the guy everyone admired. He always knew what to say, how to say it. People laughed at his jokes, reposted his reels, took his advice like gospel. He was "the guy who had it all figured out."

But nobody ever asked why he needed to look that way.

Not even his family.

In the Purohit household, silence was love and expectation was law. Emotions weren't shared - they were swallowed. Aryan's father, a man of few words and many opinions, expected nothing less than perfection from his son. His mother never said much either, but her eyes always scanned - marks, clothes, manners, friends - calculating who he was becoming.

So Aryan learned early: if you want to be safe, be impressive.

The transformation began in school. Aryan had always been a little quieter than the others - thoughtful, sensitive. But being sensitive came with a cost. When he once cried in class after

being shouted at by a teacher, a few boys started calling him "cry baby." One of them mimicked him for a week. The laughter stung more than the insult.

That was the day he learned the rule: don't let them see weakness.

So he did what many boys do - he covered his softness with steel.

He grew louder. Sharper. He trained himself to speak without hesitation, laugh louder than others, and shut people down before they had the chance to see through him. It wasn't who he really was, but it worked.

In college, his image was cemented. Aryan was the charismatic one. The sarcastic one. The leader. The guy with "main character energy," as one girl put it. But no one knew how much of that energy was forced.

He was exhausted. All the time.

When he would lie in bed at night, phone screen glowing in the dark, he wasn't looking for entertainment - he was scrolling through notifications, seeking something to remind him he mattered. A message, a mention, a story reply. Anything.

Sometimes there were none.

That's when the silence got louder.

And Aryan hated silence. Because in silence, there was no applause. No performance. Just the boy he was trying to outrun - insecure, unsure, aching to be enough.

His father rarely said much, but when he did, the words were always sharp-edged.

"You should learn to be a man," he said one night, watching Aryan fumble with a college form, anxiety rising in his chest.

Aryan nodded, hiding the storm behind his eyes. What did it even mean to be "a man"? To never show fear? To never fall apart?

His friends didn't know either. They saw him as a rock. The one who made plans, paid for things when needed, acted like life was simple. But it wasn't simple. Every dinner bill he covered added weight to a growing guilt - his bank account was thinning, his confidence with it.

Then came the breakdown.

One night, he returned from a friend's engagement party. Everyone was dressed to perfection. People were laughing about investments, salaries, foreign trips. Aryan had smiled through all of it.

But when he reached home, he sat in the bathroom for over an hour.

The shower was off. The lights were on. He just sat there, fully clothed, phone on silent, heart racing, staring at the tiles.

A single question echoed in his mind: "Who am I without the act?"

And for the first time, Aryan had no answer.

The next day, he looked in the mirror again. But this time, he didn't adjust his collar. He didn't raise his eyebrows. He didn't smirk.

He stared.

Long and hard.

He saw someone tired. Not physically, but spiritually.

And beneath that tiredness, he saw a boy - the same boy who once cried in class and was never allowed to cry again.

A part of him wanted to talk to that boy. To tell him it was okay to feel weak. That pretending for too long doesn't make you strong - it just makes you hollow.

But he didn't know how.

That would come later.

For now, Aryan reached for the mask again. Not because he wanted to - but because that's all he knew.

Yet something had shifted.

The mask didn't feel as light anymore.

It felt heavier.

And he knew, deep down, that one day, he wouldn't be able to wear it at all.

Reflections & Lessons

Life Lesson:

The world may love your mask, but only you live behind it. Pretending to be strong is not strength - real strength starts when you're honest with yourself.

Reflection Prompt:

Where in your life are you performing? Who do you pretend to be around others - and why?

Action Step:

Write a letter to yourself titled: "Who I Am When No One Is Watching." Let it be raw. Let it be messy. Let it be true.

Chapter 2:

Pressure Mounts

"Not everyone collapses in chaos. Some collapse in silence."

Part 1: The Return Nobody Celebrated

When Aryan stepped out of the train at Jaipur Junction, it wasn't the crowd that overwhelmed him - it was the silence in his own chest. The station hadn't changed - same tea sellers, same loud announcements, same pigeons perched on overhead wires. But Aryan had. Or maybe, he hadn't. That was the problem.

His father had come to pick him up, standing stiffly in a pale cream shirt that looked like it hadn't been ironed, just folded by habit. They didn't hug. Just nodded, like men trained by tradition not to show softness. The ride home was quiet, only interrupted by his father asking, "Aage ka kya socha hai?"

Aryan didn't answer for a few seconds. "Dekh raha hoon... kuch karna hai." His father nodded, but the disappointment was already visible in the rear-view mirror.

At home, his mother made aloo parathas and kept asking if he needed more ghee. It was her way of saying "I missed you." Aryan ate slowly, more out of guilt than hunger.

His old room was just as he'd left it three years ago. Trophies from school debates, a cracked poster of Lionel Messi, and a desk drawer still holding faded pens and dream journals. But now, the room felt foreign. He lay down and stared at the ceiling fan - still squeaky, still crooked. So much had changed. And yet, here, everything felt stuck.

By the second week, the phone calls started. "Beta, Sharma ji ke ladke ka placement ho gaya." "Tu bhi kuch karle ab." "Govt job ke form nikle hain - dekh le."

Every suggestion felt like pressure wrapped in concern. He didn't want to seem idle, so he applied for jobs online. Dozens of them. But each rejection felt personal. The silence after interviews echoed louder than rejection emails.

The confidence he once wore so easily - that charming arrogance, that voice that never stuttered in debates - it began to fade. He moved into a PG with three others - a law aspirant, a CAT repeater, and a guy who claimed to be "figuring things out." They all wore the same face: fake chill with undertones of stress.

Aryan made routines. Woke up early. Made to-do lists. But soon, the lists were just checkboxes waiting to be ignored. He tried content writing freelance gigs - most underpaid him. One client even ghosted him after two weeks of work.

At home, no one asked how he was feeling. Only what he was doing.

Even his friends, who used to talk to him daily, now messaged less. They were busy with new lives - new cities, new jobs, new dreams. Aryan had none of that. Just a slowly fading image of who he thought he was.

Part 2: The Slow Disappearance

There wasn't a single moment when Aryan broke. It was like erosion - one moment at a time.

One morning, while getting ready for a walk, he caught his reflection. His beard was uneven, his eyes tired, and his body

slightly thinner than before. He thought: What happened to me?

He began skipping breakfast. Sleeping during the day. Some days, he didn't talk to anyone until evening. Not even a "hello" to his roommates.

Once, while crossing the road, he zoned out so completely that a scooter brushed past him, honking wildly. He just blinked and kept walking.

His mother noticed the change. She asked gently, "Sab theek hai?" He replied, "Haan, bas thoda busy hoon." She didn't push. She just left some kheer on his table later that evening.

He got an internship offer - unpaid, but full-time. He took it. He needed to feel useful.

The office was in a basement startup in Civil Lines. Plastic chairs, loud fans, and a boss who talked like every word he said was life advice. Aryan smiled, nodded, even made memes and reels for them - but inside, he felt invisible.

They praised one of his juniors. Gave him credit. Aryan said nothing.

That evening, he went to a chai tapri, sat on the sidewalk, and watched a dog drink from a broken tap. He felt the same - thirsty, desperate, unnoticed.

He started lying to his parents. "I'm working on a big project." "Salary aa jayegi next month." "Client bahut impressed hai." None of it was true.

He skipped weddings, functions, college reunions. Once, he saw a picture of his old crush with someone else - in Goa, laughing. He stared at the photo for five minutes. Then muted her story.

Aryan stopped writing. Stopped reading. He just scrolled endlessly - reels, tweets, strangers pretending to have it together. He tried doing the same.

Posted a photo from a café once with the caption: "Hustling hard." Got 63 likes. Felt nothing.

Part 3: The Collapse

It happened on a Tuesday.

He had just finished work - unpaid, unappreciated - and walked past the coaching centre street. A group of students stood outside, arguing about GS paper and optional subjects. He had once been that passionate. Now he couldn't even fill a form.

He took a right, ended up at a dimly lit park near MI Road. Sat on the last bench. No one around. No lights. No pressure to perform.

And he cried. Not loud, not messy. Just slow tears. Ones that carry years of pretending.

He whispered, "I'm not this person." And then again, "But I don't know who I am either."

He sat there for an hour. Then walked back.

His roommates didn't notice anything. One was on a call, one playing BGMI, one snoring.

Aryan lay down, stared at the ceiling, and for the first time, didn't want to pretend anymore.

Echoes After the Fall

"They think I'm lazy. But I'm tired - of pretending, of comparing, of falling short of their dreams."

"My confidence isn't gone. It's just buried under unpaid bills, unread emails, and unspoken fears."

"The world says men shouldn't cry. So I laugh louder, while falling apart inside."

Reflection for the Reader

If you've ever:

- Faked strength to avoid looking weak
- Posted happy photos on days you felt broken
- Smiled at a job you hated
- Compared your life to strangers online
- Lied to your parents because you didn't want to see their eyes fall...

...then Aryan's story is yours too.

This chapter isn't about giving up.

It's about the moment just before the real journey begins. The breakdown before the breakthrough.

The death of your mask... before the birth of your truth.

"You're not late. You're just paused. And it's okay to rest before you rise."

"I got a job, yes. But I've lost myself in the process." - 24, Indore

Chapter 3:

When it Slips Away

"Some people don't leave you because they don't love you. They leave you because you don't love yourself."

Part 1: Love on Borrowed Time

It started like all broken things do - beautifully.

Her name was Riya.

He met her at a small café in Jaipur. Not a fancy one, but the kind that smelled of old books and ginger chai. He was there editing a poster for a freelance project, sipping sugarless coffee, when she walked in wearing a mustard kurta and a tired expression. She sat across from him, sharing a table because the others were full. No words exchanged at first - just glances, awkward smiles, and the quiet rhythm of people pretending not to notice each other.

The first conversation happened when Aryan's pen fell and she picked it up. "You don't look like a guy who uses pens," she said. He smiled, half-genuine. "You don't look like a girl who returns them."

That made her laugh. And that laugh - it disarmed him.

They began meeting - casually at first. Shared coffees turned into shared stories. She was a psychology student, finishing her master's, planning to open her own therapy practice one day. She spoke like someone who'd seen pain but didn't let it ruin her. Her eyes held calmness; her voice had no drama. She didn't try to impress. She didn't need to.

Aryan, on the other hand, was a man full of empty rooms. But he never let her see that.

He wore his mask well. He told her he was "freelancing," "working on multiple creative campaigns," "between two offers." All half-truths, all hiding the ache underneath. He wanted her to see him as someone sorted, someone stable.

But deep down, he wasn't sure he even liked himself.

And yet - when they sat together in that café, or walked the lanes of Raja Park at dusk, he felt seen. Like she wasn't blinded by the glow he was trying to project.

One evening, under the yellow streetlight outside her PG, she said, "You don't talk about how you feel." He smirked. "That's because I'm always feeling good." She didn't laugh. "That's not true, Aryan. I can sense you're... hiding something." "I'm just private," he deflected. "No. You're afraid."

He looked away.

That was the first time he realized: She didn't want his perfection. She wanted his truth. And that terrified him.

Because what if he showed her his truth - and she left?

Part 2: Unloving a Mask

It started small - like most breakings do.

A week after that conversation under the streetlight, Riya offered to pay for their chai. Aryan insisted. "No, I've got this," she said. He smiled, but inside, something twisted. He had only Rs.173 in his account.

He checked his phone while she wasn't looking - his UPI limit was close. Still, he paid. He always paid. He wanted to prove

something. Not to her, but to himself. That he was still the man he said he was.

They began going out more. Not expensive places, but life costs money. Auto rides, birthday gifts, a phone recharge when hers ran out. And slowly, Aryan's anxiety turned into quiet panic.

He skipped meals some days. Said "I already ate" when she asked. He smiled wider. Laughed louder. All the while, his mind calculated bills like a cracked Excel sheet.

Then came the moment he feared. Riya asked, "Why don't you ever let me help?" "With what?" he played dumb. "Your life. You never talk about your work, your struggles, anything real." He leaned back, crossing his arms. "That's because I'm handling it. I don't need help."

She paused. "But being strong all the time isn't strength. It's survival."

He stayed silent.

That night, he walked home slowly, his wallet almost empty, his chest full of noise. The next day, she showed up with a book in her hand - *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl. "I think you should read this," she said gently.

He took it but never opened it. He felt insulted. He didn't want to be her project. He wanted to be her pride.

One weekend, she offered him a therapy session - "Just as a friend, with one of my mentors." Aryan snapped. "I'm not your client, Riya. I'm not broken." Her eyes softened, but her voice was steady. "But you're not okay either. And that's alright."

He didn't talk to her for two days. Not because he was angry. But because he knew she was right.

Then came the evening that undid it all.

They were sitting near Jal Mahal, watching the sun melt into the lake. She looked at him and asked, "Are you really in love with me, Aryan?" He looked at her. "Of course I am." She shook her head, tears in her voice. "No, you're in love with how I make you feel. You don't know how to give love - you're too busy trying to prove your worth." "I've done everything I could!" he raised his voice. "No, you've done everything to hide who you are." She paused, took a breath, and added:

"You've been wearing confidence like a mask for so long, you don't even know what your real face looks like anymore."

And with that, she stood up. Walked away.

She didn't slam doors. She didn't scream.

She just left quietly - like someone who'd already said goodbye a hundred times in her heart.

Aryan didn't stop her.

Because deep down, he knew... He wouldn't know how.

Part 3: The Mirror Cracks

The silence after she left wasn't just around him. It was inside him.

Aryan didn't cry the first night. He didn't shout or break things. He just stared at his phone like it had betrayed him.

He opened Instagram. Saw her last story - a picture of a book and black coffee. He wanted to reply. Type something witty. But his fingers didn't move.

Instead, he opened WhatsApp and deleted their chat. Then opened Google Docs and stared at a blank page titled: "For Riya."

He didn't write a single word.

The next few days blurred.

He didn't go to the internship. He ignored calls from home. He let his beard grow. Skipped baths. Lived on water and leftovers.

The PG felt heavier. His roommates came and went. No one asked him anything.

Once, the law aspirant said, "Bro, tu theek hai?" Aryan nodded, smiled like a stitched wound. Then lay back on the bed, headphones in - no music playing.

He started watching videos late at night - not entertainment, but therapy clips. "How to stop pretending." "Signs you're emotionally unavailable." "Why confidence can be fake."

He watched them like confessions. He felt like each line was a punch in the gut.

One night, he opened her gift again - Man's Search for Meaning.

He read the first line aloud to himself: "When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves."

That was the first time he wept. Not from heartbreak - from truth.

He wasn't grieving the relationship. He was grieving the mask he had to bury now.

A week later, he went home.

His mother opened the door. He hugged her tightly - for longer than usual. She looked surprised. "Sab theek hai?" "No," he whispered. "But it will be."

He cleaned his old room. Took down the poster. Threw away the old trophies. Sat with a notebook and wrote:

I am not what I pretend to be. And maybe... that's where I'll begin."

The next morning, he woke early. Made chai. Sat in the balcony as Jaipur woke up - the honking, the vegetable vendors, the temple bells.

He didn't feel happy. But he felt present.

And for the first time in years, Aryan didn't feel the need to perform.

Echoes After the Fall

"She didn't break my heart. She broke the mask I wore to protect it."

"Sometimes, it takes losing someone to realize you've been lost to yourself."

"Healing didn't begin when she loved me. It began when she left me."

Reflection for the Reader

If you've ever:

- Tried to hold a relationship with borrowed confidence
- Felt afraid of being truly seen

- Equated your worth with your income or emotional control
- Lied to yourself just to keep someone close
- Or realized too late that love doesn't fix your brokenness
- only you can...

Then this chapter is yours.

This is not about heartbreak. It's about truth breaking through the noise. About looking into the mirror and not flinching anymore.

"To be loved is not the goal. To be known - and still loved - is where freedom begins."

You are not your act. You are not your perfection. You are the quiet person underneath, waiting to breathe.

Chapter 4:

The World Starts Whispering

Part 1: The Silence of Familiar Rooms

When Aryan returned to Jaipur, the city hadn't changed - but he had.

The familiar buzz of the coaching lane, the scent of samosas from the corner tea stall, the rusted cycle chained to the gate of his PG - everything looked the same. Yet, something about it felt distant. Like it all moved just a second faster than him now.

He unlocked his room. The fan squeaked its slow circle overhead. His roommate, Beniwal, looked up from his bed where he was watching reels on his phone.

"Bhai, tu gaya tha ya ghaayab ho gaya?" Beniwal grinned, tossing a pillow his way. Aryan managed a faint smirk. "Bas thoda break le liya tha."

Beniwal was that guy - loud, funny, brutally honest. But more loyal than most quiet ones. He gave Aryan space. Didn't push. Just said, "Chal, chai peene chalte hain. PG ki hawa mein udasi chipakti hai."

At the tea stall, they stood in their usual corner. The same steel counter, the same glass cups steaming in the Jaipur winter.

Manav, another PG mate and UPSC aspirant, joined them. Always in formals, always holding his tablet and ambition like a sword.

"Tu paper se do din pehle bhi gayab ho jaata hai, aur abhi bhi. Sab theek?" Manav asked, eyes sharp behind his glasses.

Aryan shrugged, blowing on his tea. "Bas... soch raha hoon. Kabhi kabhi sab kuch rethink karna padta hai."

Beniwal laughed. "Matlab heartbreak pakka. Tu toh pehle confident banda tha."

Aryan said nothing. He just sipped his chai and looked at the steam like it held answers.

Back in the room, while Beniwal snored lightly on his bed, Aryan stared at the ceiling fan. His mind drifted.

It wasn't just about Riya.

It was about everything.

He remembered how his confidence once filled this room. How he would come back from class and argue about polity, challenge current affairs, laugh the loudest in chai breaks. People used to turn to him for notes, advice, even career clarity.

Now, they barely noticed if he entered or left class.

He had become a shadow in his own story.

In class, it was worse.

His teacher, Sir R.C. Meena, was discussing ethics.

"True character," Meena sir said, "is revealed not when we are praised, but when we are ignored."

The words hit Aryan like a slap.

His pen froze. He glanced sideways - a few benches down, Beniwal was already looking at him. Their eyes met for a second. Beniwal gave a small nod, like he knew.

Aryan looked away.

Later that evening, while walking back from the library, Aryan passed the same bench outside the coaching building where he and Riya used to sit. It looked emptier now. Not just because she wasn't there - but because he wasn't there anymore either.

He pulled out his phone. Opened their old chat. Typed something. Deleted it.

Typed again.

Deleted.

He wasn't ready.

Not yet.

But something had shifted.

The world around him had stopped seeing the "Aryan" he wanted them to. And started seeing the one he was afraid they'd find.

Part 2: Cracks in the Reputation

The whispers didn't start with insults. They started with silence.

Aryan noticed it in the little things.

When he entered the library, heads no longer lifted. When he posted a note in the group, only two blue ticks.

When mock interview lists were released, his name wasn't on it.

A few months ago, people used to seek him out - "Bhai, mains strategy bata do," "Mock test ka kya plan hai?" "Tere wali notes bhej de na."

Now, the group had moved on. So had their trust.

It stung most when Rachit, his roommate from first year, visited the PG and didn't even ask about him. "Beniwal bhai, Aryan kya kar raha hai aaj kal?"

Beniwal replied with a short smile, "Sambhal raha hai khud ko. Banda andar se hil gaya hai."

Aryan was in the next room.

He heard it all.

Later that night, Beniwal said softly, "Bhai, gussa mat hona. Par log wahi bol rahe hain jo tu chhupa raha hai."

Aryan didn't respond. He sat on the edge of the bed, holding his old wristwatch. The one he used to wear proudly - now covered in dust.

He had spent so long trying to be something that he forgot to feel anything. Now, feelings were all that remained.

One morning, Aryan walked into the reading room and sat in his usual corner. Manav was talking to another guy - a fresher who admired Aryan months ago.

"Bhai, Aryan sir kya strategy follow karte the?" the fresher asked. Manav half-laughed. "Woh toh Instagram strategy mein expert tha."

Aryan looked up, eyes cold.

It wasn't anger. It was recognition.

They were slowly reducing him to a punchline.

He had become a memory in rooms where he once led conversations.

That afternoon, he opened his phone and scrolled through old reels - the ones he posted with motivational captions, blaring music, and his perfectly timed expressions.

In one, he had written:

"Let them doubt you. You'll shock them with results."

Now even he doubted himself. There were no results. Just regrets.

He stared at his reflection in the dark screen.

For the first time, he felt like a man trying to find the echo of a voice he had lost long ago.

That evening, during chai, Beniwal sat next to him in silence for five whole minutes. No jokes, no nudges.

Just this one line:

"Bhai, tu logo ko mat gussa ho. Tu apne aap se sach bolna shuru kar."

Aryan didn't reply.

He just nodded - barely.

The world wasn't screaming at him. It was whispering.

And somehow, that hurt more.

Part 3: The Uninvited Memory

Aryan sat at the corner desk in the coaching library, pretending to study. But page after page, his eyes didn't register a word.

The whispering hadn't stopped. Not from outside. Not from within.

He opened his notebook to take notes but instead found a page where Riya had scribbled something months ago. A small doodle with the words:

"You're too much in your head. Come out sometimes."

He closed the book quickly.

The memory arrived uninvited - Riya's voice, soft but frustrated:

"Tu sabko impress karta hai, par mujhe kab samjhega?"

She had walked out of that caf angry that day. Not because he failed. But because he pretended he hadn't.

"You want to be seen as strong, Aryan. But you don't want to *be* strong. You think looking confident is enough. It's not."

He had laughed it off then. Now her words echoed.

Back in the present, he scribbled something in his notebook:

> "When you live as a performance, even silence becomes your critic."

That night, he sat on the rooftop of his PG. No stars. Just pollution and a quiet moon.

Beniwal came up with two chai cups.

"Pee le. Banda toh tu hero hai, par scene thoda emotional ho gaya hai."

Aryan chuckled. First time in weeks.

"Hero fake tha. Banda abhi dhoondh raha hoon."

And for the first time, the laughter didn't feel forced.

Part 4: The Family Mirror

Aryan stood outside his home in Jodhpur, suitcase in hand. He hadn't informed them he was coming.

The gate creaked open like it hadn't been moved in weeks.

Inside, his mother was drying clothes on the line. When she saw him, her eyes lit up - not in joy, but in worry disguised as welcome.

"Achanak?" she asked, walking over and hugging him tight. He nodded. "Thoda break chahiye tha."

"Sab thik hai?"

He smiled weakly. "Ho jaayega."

She didn't ask more. Mothers often know when not to.

The house hadn't changed - the worn sofa, the old Bajaj fan, the smell of dal and detergent. But Aryan noticed things now: how quiet his father had become, how his sister Anaya had grown taller, more mature.

That evening, over dinner, his father finally spoke.

"So, how's the preparation?"

Aryan looked up from his plate. "Thoda slow chal raha hai." A pause. A sip of water. Then the quiet cut of honesty. "Slow, or off-track?"

His mother tried to change the topic - "Chawal lo na aur," - but the damage was done.

Aryan didn't defend himself. He couldn't. Because his father wasn't wrong.

Later that night, sitting in the verandah under the tube light's hum, Anaya came and sat beside him.

"Bhaiya" she hesitated. "Can I ask you something?" "Hmm?"

"Are you happy?"

He looked at her - barely sixteen, schoolgirl eyes, curious but scared.

He didn't lie.

"I don't know."

She didn't prod. Just placed her head on his shoulder.

"It's okay if you're not," she whispered. "You don't always have to be the strong one."

Aryan closed his eyes.

Maybe this was what love looked like. Not romance. Not admiration.

But quiet acceptance.

The next morning, his mother came into his room while he was making his bed.

She handed him a small diary - brown cover, old pages.

"I found this while cleaning. You wrote this in 11th standard. Your school essays. You used to love writing."

Aryan flipped through it. One piece caught his eye: "The Man I Want to Be"

Written in blue ink. Dreamy handwriting.

He sat on the edge of his bed and read it.

- > "One day, I want to be someone who is kind without fear,
- > strong without noise,
- > and brave enough to be broken, yet whole."

He closed the diary. Tears stung, but he held them back.

That boy - the one who wrote that - He wasn't gone.

Just buried.

That afternoon, he cleaned his old desk. Opened his laptop.

No reels. No noise. No pretending.

He started typing again.

Not to impress.

Not to post.

Just to heal.

Echoes After the Fall

"When you stop being who the world expects, the whispers begin.

But so does your own voice."

"It's not your failure that breaks you.

It's the weight of pretending you never could."

"Family doesn't always understand.

But sometimes, they love you even when you don't."

For the Reader:

Have you ever felt yourself disappearing - not because life got harder, but because the act got heavier?

Have you ever watched the people who admired you start to doubt you - and worse, watch you doubt yourself?

Then this chapter is for you.

This is the chapter where you stop asking the world for
applause, and start listening to your soul for truth.

This is not a fall.

It's the beginning of your rebuild.

The sun Chapter 5: The Mirror Doesn't Lie

Part 1: Buses Don't Need Tickets for the Past

The soft tapping of laptop keys echoed in Aryan's room like rainfall in a quiet temple.

He had been writing since morning- not for UPSC, not for anyone's approval, but to bleed

truth onto paper. Paragraphs that dis-'need'-filters. Lines that didn't beg for applause.

It had been years since he'd felt that strange peace yourself on paper. the kind that comes when you meet

Outside, the afternoon sun hung lazily over the rooftops of Jodhpur. A distant temple bell rang. Vendors shouted in the lanes below.

But Aryan's focus didn't waver until a familiar voice startled him.

"O bhaH Daarwaza khula chod ke likh rahe ho toh mehmaan andar aa hi jaayenge!"

He turned.

Beniwal, dusty from the road, grinning like a boy who'd just snuck into a movie without a ticket.

"Tu..Jodhpur mein?"

"SSC ka paper tha aaj. Socha tumhare ghar se better celebration kahan milega?"

Before Aryan could react, Beniwal grabbed the chair near the window and flopped into it,

tossing his backpack aside. His shirt clung to his back from the heat, but his eyes sparkled

with mischief.

Aryan stared at him, half in disbelief, half in gratitude.

"Kuch bol bhi le ab. Bas ghoor raha hai jaise main reality nahi hoon.

"Nahi.

bas, achha laga tujhe dekh ke," Aryan muttered.

Just then, Lata ji, Aryan's mother, entered the room balancing a steel tray.

"Arre Beniwal beta! Tu yahan?! Kaha tha ki aayega?" she said, surprised but pleased.

"Bas aunty, paper tha toh socha Aryan ko surprise de doon.

She chuckled and set the tray on the table two steaming cups of chai, Bikaji Bhujia, and a

plate of crisp fariyali mathri, golden and flaky.

"Thak gaya hoga exam ke baad. Pehle kuch kha le."

Beniwal folded his hands Ake a kid. "Aapke haathon ki mathri hQ toh 10 paper de doon, aunty!"

Aryan watched the interaction with a soft smile. His mother had always liked Beniwal polite, warm, and the kind of person who made himself at home everywhere.

Between sips of chai and bites of namkeen, the room filled with lazy conversation.

"Waise Aryan," Beniwal said, licking salt off his fingers, "Tere ghar. ka silence ab kaafi loud

lagta hai. Sab theek?"

Aryan didn't answer directly. He just looked down at the cup in his hand

"Bas.. likh raha hoon thoda. Soch raha hoon sab kuch."

"Sochne se yaad aaya

kabhi wapas Phalodi gaya hai?"

Aryan blinked.

"Phalodi? Kahi saal ! ho gaye, Dada ke chautha ke baad se nahi gaya

Beniwal leaned forward, voice quieter now.

"Shayad ab jaana chahiye. Wahan sab raw hai

yaad, rishtedaar, mitti...aur sach."

Aryan didn't reply, but something shifted in his chest.

His mother, overhearing from the doorway, added softly:

"Kabhi kabhi wapas jaane se apne aap se dobara milna hota hai."

The sun dipped lower, casting golden light on the floor tiles.

Aryan stood up, walked to the window, and watched the kids playing gilli-danda in the alley.

He didn't know what he was running from - but he was tired of running in circles

Maybe Phalodi wasn't the answer,
But maybe, just maybe
it was where he'd lost the question.

Part 2: The Invisible Weights

That night, sleep didn't come easy.

Aryan lay on his back, staring at the ceiling fan slicing the air in lazy circles. Beniwal had dozed off on the floor, one hand beneath his head and the other holding his phone. Lata ji had quietly placed a second pillow under Beniwal's head before going to bed herself.

In the silence, Aryan's thoughts grew
louder.

Words he had written during the day spun back in his mind - not as paragraphs, but as truths he hadn't spoken aloud in years. "Why do I always feel like I'm running out of time?"

"Why do I feel like I have to prove
something even when no one is asking me to?"

"Why am I so afraid of being average?" He reached over and picked up the old diary from under his bed - the one his sister had returned to him just weeks ago. The paper had yellowed, but the words were still loud.

He turned to a page from when he was fifteen.

*"Papa never said he's proud of me. Maybe he thinks it'll make me
soft"*

"/ scored 89, but Bittu mama's son scored 94, so everyone looked at

11

me like I came last.

"Mummy hugs bhaiya when he comes

11

home. She just asks me if I've eaten. Aryan closed the diary and shut his eyes. There was no monster outside.

The monster lived within - disguised in praise, hidden in comparisons, forged in silence.

The next morning, Aryan woke up to the sound of a pressure cooker whistle and the smell of ajwain in hot parathas.

Beniwal was already up, freshened and scrolling through his phone, half-pretending to look bored.

"Maa ke haath ke parathe. Tu toh VIP

nikla," he grinned.

"Tu chhod, kal ki baat soch raha hoon." "Kaunsi?"

"Phalodi."

Beniwal looked up.

"Sach mein jaana chahta hai?" Aryan nodded slowly.

"Wahan kuch chhoda tha. Wapas jaake usi se shuru karna hai."

Later that day, Aryan sat with his mother in the veranda. She was sorting coriander leaves in her lap, sunlight streaming across the floor in golden lines.

"Maa... agar main Phalodi jaun, kuch din ke liye... theek rahega?"

Lata ji paused for a moment, looked at him carefully, and then smiled.

"Kab tak apne aap se bhaagta rahega? Ja. Wahan sab hai - jise tune dafan kiya tha." He didn't reply.

But deep down, he knew this journey was not a trip.

It was a confrontation.

By evening, Aryan was on the bus to Phalodi.

The seats were worn out, the windowpane scratched with names and dates from unknown lovers, and the air smelled of diesel and dust.

He didn't mind.

The road stretched out like a vein to the past, and he didn't blink.

With his backpack by his side and the diary in his lap, Aryan stared out the window as dunes, dry trees, and stone houses blurred past.

And for the first time in years, he wasn't performing.

He wasn't "Aryan the confident."

He wasn't "Aryan the UPSC aspirant." He wasn't "Aryan the one Riya had left." He was just Aryan - raw, unsure, unfinished.

Halfway through the journey, an old man seated beside him said softly:

"Beta, akela safar sabse zaroori safar hota hai."

Aryan turned to look at him.

The man didn't elaborate. He just smiled - the kind of smile that comes from losing something once, and finding yourself in its absence.

When Aryan finally arrived in Phalodi, night had already fallen. The air was cooler, scented with the earth and faint hints of cow dung, dry wood smoke, and neem. The old gate creaked as he pushed it open. Inside, the house still stood - faded, cracked, but familiar.

Voices echoed from the kitchen. Children laughed. A transistor played a Rajasthani folk song from a neighbor's house.

His *kaka* looked up from the charpai and

said, surprised, "Aryan? Tu?"

And just like that, he was home.

Not because of bricks and walls - but because the silence here wasn't heavy. It was honest

Part 3: Where the Wound First

Bled

The next morning in Phalodi didn't begin with an alarm.

It began with the earthy scent of cow dung

plastered floors, the distant mooing of

buffaloes, and the old harmonium from the temple next door humming a morning bhajan. Life here didn't rush; it flowed -

like time wasn't something to chase, but something you shared.

Aryan woke up to sunlight filtering through the wooden jaali of the old window. A faint breeze carried the smell of bajra rotis being flipped on the chulha outside.

He sat up, looked around the room - cracked lime walls, an old wooden almirah, and a rusted frame of his childhood photo with a forced smile.

It was like walking into a paused memory. When he stepped into the courtyard, his *chachi* was drawing a rangoli with rice paste.

His younger cousin ran past him, waving a school notebook.

And *kaka* was seated cross-legged,

sipping tea from a saucer.

"Tu abhi bhi sota hai jaise sheher ke log... gaon mein subah uthte nahi kya?" Kaka teased, but with warmth.

Aryan smiled and took the cup of tea offered to him.

The tea wasn't just kadak - it tasted like time.

◀' : A Visit to the Broken Wall

Later that afternoon, Aryan walked alone to the *aangan* behind the house - the place where he once flew paper kites with his cousins. The neem tree still stood, older now, and so was the broken boundary wall his father had once promised to repair "next year."

But the wall was never fixed.

Just like the silence between father and son.

As a child, Aryan never questioned why his father never praised him openly.

But now, as a man, he wondered: *Did I mistake discipline for distance?*

He remembered the night he had topped his 10th board exams. While the entire family congratulated him, his father simply said,

"Bas abhi toh shuru hua hai. Aage dekhte hain."

At that time, Aryan had told himself that his father was just being practical.

But now he knew -that sentence had built the first brick of self-doubt inside him.

A Conversation with the Past

In the evening, Aryan visited the fields where his father used to take him during summer vacations. The soil cracked under his feet like his brittle memories.

He sat on a stone under a banyan tree and whispered aloud:

"Main achha hoon na, Papa? Mujhse galti kaha ho gayi thi?"

"Maine kab mask pehna shuru kiya - aur

kyu lagta tha ki main bina uske kuch bhi nahi hoon?"

There was no answer.

But the wind blew dry leaves toward him, as if the village itself had been waiting to hear him ask.

The Grandfather's Diary

That night, his elder cousin handed him an old diary - one that had belonged to Aryan's *dadaji*.

It was worn, almost fragile, but inside were pages of reflections, written in a mix of Hindi and Marwari.

One line stood out:

"Insaan ke andhar ka dard sabse pehle uski aankhon mein chhupna band karta hai."

*(A man's pain first forgets how to hide in
his eyes.)*

Aryan closed the diary and stared at the moon outside his window.

Perhaps, the greatest courage isn't pretending to be strong.

It is sitting quietly with your pain -until it stops being a stranger.

⁺.} **Healing Begins with**
4

Acknowledgment

The next morning, Aryan joined the family for breakfast - bajra parathas with white butter and raw onion.

His cousins cracked jokes. His aunt served him extra butter, saying,

"Tu sheher mein rehke patla ho gaya hai." He laughed, genuinely - not because it was funny, but because it felt safe to laugh without earning it.

Later that day, Aryan walked to the village library. It hadn't changed.

On the wall hung a faded photo of his father from the year he won a local poetry competition.

That day, Aryan didn't just read about his father -

He *saw* him.

A boy who once dreamt. A son who once doubted. A man who had his own mirror to face.

Aryan sat on the steps of the library till the sun turned orange. And in that silence, he knew:

He wasn't becoming someone new. He was returning to someone he had abandoned long ago.



Echoes of Truth

(Reflections After Chapter 5) "Wounds that are never spoken about become legacies we unknowingly pass on." In the chaos of life, many of us learn to wear masks early. Masks of confidence.

Of strength. Of indifference.

We're taught that vulnerability is weakness, and that silence is strength. But as Aryan's journey showed us -
silence can also be where our truth dies a slow death.

Aryan didn't fail because he felt broken. He nearly failed because he believed he couldn't afford to be.

Phalodi wasn't just a village.

It was a mirror - cracked, dusty, but honest.

It showed him what the city never could:

That being misunderstood is painful, but misunderstanding yourself is fatal.

What this chapter reminds us:

- **Confidence isn't noise.**

It's the quiet knowing that you are enough, even when no one is clapping.

- **Childhood wounds aren't erased by success.**

They resurface in relationships, self-doubt, and perfectionism - until we confront them.

- **Returning home - emotionally or physically - isn't going backward.**

It's retrieving parts of ourselves we buried to survive.

- **Your pain is valid, even if no one else sees it.**

And healing doesn't start when others understand you - it starts when *you* do. *"Sometimes, the journey back home isn't about the people.*

It's about finding the courage to sit with the version of you that once felt small -

and telling him he's safe now." This is not just Aryan's story.

It's the story of every boy who grew up with unspoken expectations.

Of every girl who smiled when she wanted to scream.

Of every human who's ever faked strength to avoid being seen as broken.

And it's the beginning of something all of us must do:

**Taking off the mask - not to prove
anything - but to finally breathe.**



Chapter 6:

The Weight of Words

Part 1: Rusted Bats and Open Roads

The sun in Phalodi rose without apology - golden, dry, and honest. Aryan stretched on the charpai in the veranda, a thin white cotton sheet still clinging to his chest.

Somewhere near the well, someone was pumping water with rhythmic thuds, while in the courtyard, a rooster crowed like it had something urgent to prove.

He sat up, rubbing his eyes. The quiet was different here -not empty, but unhurried.

His phone was still off. And for the first time in years, he didn't feel guilty about it.

"Uth gaya sheher ka neta?" The voice was teasing, familiar -and deeply Phalodi.

Aryan turned toward the gate.

A tall boy, dusty and tanned, stood with a cricket bat resting on his shoulder. He wore an old-school India jersey, faded blue with a tear near the sleeve. His smile was crooked and confident.

"Pintu?" Aryan stood up, surprised.

"Arey haan, aur kaun? MLA nahi ban gaya abhi tak?" Pintu walked in, slapped Aryan's back hard enough to sting, and grinned. "Tujhe laga tu Phalodi bhool gaya, toh hum bhi bhool gaye?"

Aryan laughed -the kind that bubbles
from a place deeper than lungs.

They shook hands, and then hugged like boys who grew up
fighting over marbles and mangoes.

"Chai. Cricket chal raha hai nadi ke paar. Tu aayega, ya ab sirf
gym aur UPSC ka net practice karta hai?"

"Bat to pakadna bhool gaya hoon," Aryan smiled.

"Perfect. Tabhi tujhe opposite team mein rakhenge." They
both laughed and walked toward the dried riverbed, dust
rising around their slippers.

Part 2: Where the Dust Holds Answers

Later that evening, Aryan and Pintu rode through the golden
hour streets of Phalodi. The bike hummed beneath them like
an old tune you forget you knew, and the dry wind curled
around their faces, carrying smells of jaggery, dust, and ghee-
fried snacks.

"Ek kaam karte hain," Pintu said, turning the handle toward
the old town square, "Nandu ke yahan chalte hain. Teri ek
pehli cigarette wahi chhodi thi, yaad hai?"

Aryan smirked. "Maine cigarette chhodi thi, ya tum logon ne
chhuda di thi?"

Pintu laughed. "Wahi baat hai."

Nandu Pan Bhandar

The kiosk looked exactly as it did a decade ago - a rusted tin
roof, glass jars filled with supari and clove, and Nandu bhaiya
still wiping the same counter like it owed him rent.

"Nandu bhaiya!" Pintu called.

From inside, a pot-bellied man in a white vest and lungi looked up. His mustache twitched.

"Arey Pintu! Aur yeh toh Aryan sa! Aatma jag gayi kya sheher mein?"

Aryan grinned and folded his hands, "Ram Ram bhaiya."

Nandu handed them two masala sodas with a lazy elegance.

"Phalodi se door jaake sabko apni rooh yaad aati hai. Yeh mitti aisi hi hai."

They stood under the neem tree, sipping soda, watching the sun dip like a coin into the dusty horizon.

Nandu said, "Jab insaan sheher mein hota hai na, toh khud se milna mushkil hota hai. Yahan, har raat ka andhera tujhe teri asli shakl dikhata hai."

Aryan didn't speak. He just looked at the fizz rising in his soda glass, thinking how much truth a paanwala could carry without a degree.

Bhaiya Nadi Ki Mandali

They stopped near the dried-up nadi. There, five old uncles sat in a loose circle

- dhotis, woolen shawls, and silver beards glistening in the moonlight.

Pintu whispered, "Yeh log toh Phalodi ke philosopher hain."

One of the uncles noticed them. "Arey Aryan! Aagaya sheher ka beta?"

Aryan joined his palms. "Ram Ram, Bhaiya sa."

They made space, offering him a spot on the dusty chatai.

One uncle, chewing on a neem twig, said, "Zindagi mein sabse bada jhoot hota hai - 'Main theek hoon.'"

Another laughed. "Aur doosra jhoot -'Kya log kahenge?'"

A third uncle, with a voice like gravel, added, "Beta, agar zindagi likhne jaoge na, toh punctuation pe mat atakna. Kayi baatien comma ke baad samajh aati hain."

Aryan sat still, listening, not debating, not analysing. Just listening.

Mahendra Dhaba

The night ended at Mahendra Dhaba -old

cots, aluminum plates, and a smell of fried onions and diesel in the air.

Eight boys had already gathered. Their laughs echoed louder than the pressure cooker inside.

Pintu called out, "Dekho bhaiyo, sheher se bhatak kar ek adarsh chhatra wapas aa gaya haH"

Cheers rose.

"Abey Aryan! Baith yaar. Chicken nahi khila sakte, par yaadein garma-garam milengH" said Lakshya.

Everyone introduced themselves in their own way:

Lakshya (L): "Main abhi bhi shaayari karta

hoon, sirf HR forms mein feelings daalni padti hai ab."

Tarun (T): "Mujhe toh batana hai ki Badrinath Sir abhi bhi 'A for Aardvark' padhate hain."

Yug (V): "Aur Kundan Sir ka danda? Aaj bhi table pe rakha hota hai jaise 'Brahmastra' ho."

Jatin (J): "Yeh toh kuch bhi nahi. Staff room se birthday cake churaya tha!"

Samar (S): "Aur us cake ke andar se nikalke Sonam ki chappal mili thi!"

Nakul (N): "Aryan ka woh love letter yaad hai? Jo galti se library mein reh gaya tha?"

Jay (J2): "Jiske baad Principal ne 'moral values' ka lecture diya tha!"

Dev (D): "Aur Aryan ne bola tha, 'It was a social experiment.' Beimaan!"

Aryan couldn't stop laughing. For the first time in years, he didn't feel behind in life. He just felt part of something real.

Part 3: Where Silence Speaks First

The morning in Phalodi arrived like an old friend - unannounced, unhurried.

Sunlight streamed through the jaali windows of the guest room, casting patterns on Aryan's face as birds chirped in disorganized harmony outside. The floor was cool beneath his feet as he stepped onto it, still wrapped in sleep.

He walked past the verandah, where Lata ji sat cross-legged, cutting lauki while humming an old Meera bhajan. She looked up and smiled.

"Subah ho gayi, sheher wale sadhu."

Aryan smiled back. "Aaj kuch likhne ka mann hai... par pehle thoda ghoom ke aata hoon."

The Village School

Aryan's feet led him to his old school,
tucked between neem trees and yellowing boundary walls. It
was a simple government building -pale blue paint peeling like
old bark.

Inside, the rooms smelled of chalk and ink. The blackboards
were still dark green, the benches scarred with initials carved
during boring classes. He ran his hand along one of them and
smiled.

On the wall was a faded quote in Hindi: "Shiksha woh deep
hai jo andheron mein bhi raasta dikhata hai."

He sat on a bench and wrote:

"Main ab bhi wahi hoon. Bas dhool hata raha hoon."

The Open Fields

Later, Aryan walked into the dry open fields beyond the
school. He stood near the well where, as a boy, he once
watched his father talk to local farmers.

Maybe his father wasn't distant. Maybe he was just... tired.

Worn out by responsibilities no one saw.

Maybe... they were more alike than Aryan ever admitted.

That evening, Aryan returned home quieter, but lighter.
Under the neem tree, he began writing again - not to
impress, but to understand.

Pintu brought two kulhads of chai.

"Tu kuch likh raha hai?"

Aryan nodded slowly.

"For the first time, not for exam or someone's approval."

"Phir kiske liye?"

Aryan looked up, eyes steady, voice soft: "Apne liye."

Echoes of Truth

There comes a time in every person's life when their own voice starts sounding like noise.

When even success feels hollow. When

every applause echoes like an empty shell. When the city's noise, no matter how shiny, fails to drown the weight inside.

That's when you don't need inspiration - You need grounding.

Sometimes, it's not the world that has changed.

It's just that you've drifted so far from your roots, you mistake performance for purpose.

Aryan thought healing came through pushing forward - through becoming someone new.

But Phalodi taught him: healing often comes from pausing. From remembering who you were before the world told you who to be.

It wasn't a guru, a bestselling quote, or a viral reel that gave him clarity.

It was:

A cracked wooden bench at Mahendra Dhaba.

Eight friends laughing like boys who never grew up.

A paanwala who understood silence.
Old uncles discussing life over neem twigs and dust.
A school where chalk dust still carried his name.
A friend who didn't offer advice -just presence.
These weren't grand gestures.
They weren't aesthetic Instagram posts. They were real, which
is why they healed.
Because sometimes, you don't need someone to fix you.
You just need someone who reminds you that you were never
broken.
Roots aren't meant to impress.
They're meant to hold you still when life tries to uproot you.
In a world obsessed with becoming something,
there's power in returning to the places and
people who loved you when you were just someone.
Cities teach you how to dream.
But it's villages like Phalodi - in their dusty lanes, dhabas,
childhood friends, and quiet mornings -
that remind you how to breathe.

Chapter 7:

The Quiet Things that Heal

Part 1: Where Names Carry Memory

The morning had peeled away the last
trace of the city in Aryan's breath.

He sat under the neem tree in the aangan, scribbling a few
lines in his diary. Dust floated softly in the golden light, the
kind that made silence feel full.

Lata ji emerged from the rasoī, wiping her hands on the edge
of her dupatta. She had been up since dawn -making lauki ki
sabzi, kneading dough, and humming a Meera bhajan that
wrapped around the house like incense.

"Roti leke aati hoon, pehle garam garam khana," she said, her
voice warm but firm.

Aryan nodded, still half-lost in his thoughts, but her presence
-so constant, so real - anchored him without saying much.

From inside, the low rustle of voices grew louder.

They had come.

One by one, familiar shadows entered the courtyard -each
carrying the weight of their years and the scent of home.

Badepapa, tall, slightly bent, walked with a steel stick he
refused to replace with a new one. His kurta still had the same
ink- stained pocket from his time as a government school
teacher.

Badimaa, her bangles clinking softly, handed Lata ji a small container. "Ghar ki banaayi saunf aur methi ke laddu. Aryan ko pasand hain."

She looked at Aryan and smiled. "Bada ho gaya hai... par aankhon mein wohi bachpan hai."

Tauji came next - louder, brisk, and never short of opinions. He wore a crisp white dhoti and an amulet around his neck. "Aryan! Kya sirf sheher ki hawa khaata hai ab, ya kabhi kheti ki yaad bhi aati hai?"

Aryan stood and touched his feet. "Tauji, yaad sab kuch aata hai... bas waqt nahi milta."

Taiji, ever the quiet one, came with a small steel thali - freshly picked tulsi leaves and a soft cotton gamchha. "Aaj sham ko mandir le jaungi," she said softly. "Oil ko sukoon milega."

Then came Chacha, the youngest of the three brothers - more casual, half a shirt unbuttoned, with a red thread tied loosely around his wrist. "Aryan bhaiya! Finally yaad aayi hum logon ki bhi?" he teased, before wrapping him in a one-armed hug.

And trailing behind with a sweet, graceful walk was Chachi, her dupatta pulled over her head. She had brought Aryan's favorite

- besan ke laddoo, warm and slightly melted in a steel dabba.

"Thoda mooh meetha kar lo," she said. "Sheher ka kadva taste yahin mita denge."

Aryan stood in the middle of the courtyard surrounded by them all -voices overlapping, old jokes returning, someone asking about his UPSC prep, another already predicting his posting in Jaipur.

And for a moment -just a moment - he wasn't a boy preparing for India's toughest exam. He was Aryan: grandson, nephew, son, bhatija, pota, beta.

Each name they called him held a different version of him.

And all of them were true.

Later that afternoon, as the men sat on

wooden cots discussing crop prices, government rates, and diesel woes, Aryan walked with Pintu around the house.

"You know," Aryan said, "I always felt Phalodi was small... too slow. But now I feel it's the only place that moves at my pace."

Pintu threw a stone into the open field. "That's what real places do. They wait. Cities move on, but villages... they remember."

Aryan looked back at the house, where laughter echoed and steel glasses clinked. "I think I needed to be remembered."

Pintu nodded, "And you were."

Part 2: Conversations Without Lessons

By late afternoon, the heat had settled into a warm lull.

The men had retreated indoors, escaping the sun's grip. The courtyard was quiet, save for the buzzing of flies and the occasional creak of a ceiling fan.

Aryan sat with Badepapa in the aangan, under the shade of the old neem tree. A glass of chaas sat sweating beside them on a charpai. The air was thick, but peaceful.

Badepapa was sharpening a pencil with a knife - a habit that hadn't changed since his days as a schoolmaster. His fingers moved slow, deliberate.

"Yeh sab chhod ke aaya hai kuch dino ke liye, ya sirf bhool gaya tha?" he asked without looking up.

Aryan hesitated. "Shayad bhool gaya tha... ya bhoolne ki koshish kar raha tha."

Badepapa smiled slightly. "Phalodi ko bhoolna mushkil nahi hai, beta. Sirf mehsoos karna band kar dete ho tum log."

The pencil finally sharpened to a smooth point. He held it up to the light and said, "Zindagi bhi aise hi hoti hai. Kabhi kabhi use dobara tez karna padta hai. Uske liye rukna padta hai. Thoda kaatna padta hai."

Aryan didn't reply. He just looked at the pencil and felt something shift inside - like a tiny knot loosening.

Later that evening, while everyone prepared for dinner, Aryan wandered into the old storeroom at the back of the house.

The door creaked open like it had a memory of its own.

Inside, dust floated like stories waiting to be told. Old trunks, broken chairs, rusted lanterns - and in the corner, a cardboard box labeled "Aryan" in black marker.

He crouched and opened it slowly. Inside were:

Old school notebooks, yellowed with time

A science project that had once won him

3rd prize at the district level

A tattered cricket glove

A postcard from his cousin

And folded neatly, his first essay, written in Class 4: "Mera Sapna: Collector Banna"

He read the first few lines and smiled. His handwriting was crooked, but the words were filled with something he had lost somewhere along the way -innocence without doubt.

From behind, a soft voice entered the room.

"Woh file mil gayi jisme tu collector ban gaya tha?" It was Chacha, arms crossed, watching with a grin.

Aryan held up the essay and nodded. "Kaafi serious aspirant tha main..."

"Tab tujhe pata nahi tha ki UPSC mein kitne paper hote hain," Chacha laughed.

Aryan joined in. "Tab lagta tha bas mehnat karo, toh sab ho jayega."

Chacha sat beside him on an old trunk. "Aur ab kya lagta hai?"

Aryan paused. "Ab lagta hai... jaise sirf mehnat kaafi nahi hoti. Kabhi kabhi apne aap ko sambhalna bhi padta hai."

Chacha looked at him for a moment, then said, "Toh yeh ghar isi liye hai. Sambhalne ke liye."

That night, dinner was simple - bajre ki roti, ker sangri, dahi, and gur. The entire family sat on the floor, plates in hand, laughter bouncing off the walls.

No one asked Aryan about marks.

No one compared him to Sharma ji ka beta. No one told him what to do next.

And for the first time in years...

He didn't feel the pressure to prove anything.

~Part 3: The House That Doesn't Judge

The air after dinner was soaked in stillness.

The courtyard smelled of mitti and incense, and a faint breeze carried the scent of tulsi from the temple room. The family had retired to their corners - some reading newspapers, some lying on charpais under the stars, whispering stories only the night could hold.

Aryan sat near the tulsi pot in the center of the courtyard, staring up at the sky. The stars were brighter here - not because the sky was different, but because his mind finally had space to see them.

A gentle rustling broke his trance.

Taiji walked over, her silver hair loosely tied and a shawl around her shoulders. She handed him a cup of warm haldi doodh,

the kind only she made - thick, yellow, with a hint of jaggery.

"Thoda pee le. Sheher ka stress nikaal dega," she said, sitting beside him.

Aryan accepted it, both hands wrapped around the warmth.

For a while, they said nothing. The kind of silence that doesn't feel awkward - it just breathes with you.

Then she said, "Kabhi kabhi lagta hai tu bohot thak gaya hai."

Aryan looked at her, surprised. "Kaise pata?"

She smiled. "Pehchaan hai beta... maa se kam nahi hoon."

Aryan blinked, the milk suddenly warmer than before. His throat tightened.

"Main kabhi kabhi sochta hoon... yeh sab kaamyaabi, padayi, mehnat... kahin main khud se door toh nahi ja raha?"

Taiji gently placed her palm on his head. "Zaroori nahi har sawal ka jawab dhoondna ho. Kabhi kabhi jawab milta hai bas saath baithne se."

The next day, Aryan walked into the outhouse, an old shed at the edge of the haveli. The door creaked, and inside - leaning against the wall - was his father's

black bicycle, the one he used to ride across farms and into town for work.

Its handle had a torn grip, the seat covered with a jute rag. But it stood like a relic - quiet, dependable.

Aryan ran his hand along the handlebar. He remembered being a child, riding the front rod as his father pedaled through mustard fields, telling him stories about the "real world" - the kind that schoolbooks never taught.

He closed his eyes.

His father had never been good with words. He hadn't said "I'm proud of you." But he had always made sure Aryan never missed a tuition class.

He had saved old coins in steel boxes.

He had brought home broken radios and fixed them with patience.

He had said love in all the ways silence permits.
Aryan stood there, resting his forehead against the handlebar.
He wasn't angry anymore.
He just wished he'd understood sooner.
That evening, Badimaa called him into the kitchen.
"Ek kaam hai," she said.
She handed him atta in a steel plate. "Aaj
roti tu bel ke de."
Aryan looked confused. "Main?"
"Roti perfect na bhi bani, chalega. Par hath gundein toh lagega
tu apna hai," she smiled.
He laughed and rolled up his sleeves.
As he struggled with the belan, Badimaa began humming an
old Rajasthani folk tune.
And in between broken circles and burnt edges, something
inside Aryan began to feel whole.
That night, Aryan sat beside his mother, Lata ji, on the
rooftop. The stars were overhead, the night quiet.
"Thik ho?" she asked softly.
Aryan didn't answer immediately. He looked out at the
horizon where the fields disappeared into the dark.
"Shayad... thik hone laga hoon." Lata ji smiled, and without a
word,
wrapped her dupatta gently around his
shoulder -like a promise that didn't need speaking.

Phalodi hadn't given him solutions.

It had given him pauses. Faces that didn't ask questions.

Rooms that remembered him.

A house that didn't care if he cracked

UPSC

Because it already knew who he was.

Echoes of the Hearth

(After Chapter 7: The Quiet Things That Heal)

Some truths don't arrive with thunder. They don't shout.

They don't command. They just... sit beside you.

Like a Taiji who hands you warm milk without asking questions.

Like a Badepapa who sharpens pencils while softening your fears.

In a world obsessed with answers, Phalodi gave Aryan something rarer - a space where questions could rest.

Where life didn't need fixing.

Where a broken roti was still accepted. Where your name didn't need a title to feel complete.

We often carry our ambitions like armor. Heavy.

Metallic.

Loud.

But no armor can shield you from yourself.

What Aryan realized was not some divine insight -it was a quiet homecoming.

He didn't need a new version of himself. He just needed to remember the version that hadn't yet been bruised by expectations.

And that version still lived -

In the rust of his father's old bicycle. In the laughter of cousins who never outgrew their nicknames.

In the storeroom where his Class 4 dreams still lay folded in a box.

In the tulsi leaves his Taiji offered him without conditions.

In the broken cricket bat by the back door that never made him feel like a failure.

Cities teach you how to climb.

But villages...

They teach you how to sit still without crumbling.

Phalodi never once asked Aryan who he had become.

It simply reminded him of who he had always been.

In the glow of that courtyard, with the scent of bajra roti and the sound of charpais creaking under bedtime stories, Aryan understood something that no interview, no exam, no success could teach:

That he was never supposed to be extraordinary to be loved.

He was just supposed to show up -as he was.

And maybe... that was the most extraordinary thing of all.

Chapter 8:

When the City Doesn't Feel Like Home Anymore

Part 1: The Silence You Carry Back The train pulled into the station with a

screech that shattered the dawn silence.

Aryan stepped onto the platform like someone returning from a war no one knew he'd been fighting. He wasn't carrying much -just a small bag of clothes, his diary, and a packet of mathri Badimaa had quietly slipped into his bag, saying, "Train mein bhookh lage toh khol lena. Ghar ka swaad thakawat mita deta hai."

The city hadn't changed.

It was still loud. Fast. Rushing nowhere

with the urgency of survival. Autos honked even before moving. Vendors shouted louder than needed. Officegoers moved like clock hands - precise, tired, and predictable.

But Aryan had changed.

And suddenly, everything felt unfamiliar.

The chai didn't taste like Pintu's roadside tapri.

The air didn't smell like mitti - it smelled

of deadlines.

Even the streets he had walked for years felt like they belonged to someone else now.

At his PG room, the dust was exactly where he had left it. The water bottle was still half full. His notes lay open on the study table, frozen mid-thought.

He sat on the edge of the bed, looked at the wall he had covered in charts and motivational quotes.

"Push Yourself!"

"No Pain_ No Gain"

"Rank 1 is waiting for YOU!"

He stared at them like they were relics from a life he wasn't sure he wanted anymore.

Not because he didn't want to succeed - But because now he knew success meant nothing if it came at the cost of stillness.

That night, he walked to the rooftop.

Same view. Same cityscape. But Aryan wasn't seeing buildings anymore - he was seeing absences.

The absence of Badepapa's pencil-sharpening rhythm.

The absence of Taiji's soft haldi doodh. The absence of the tulsi scent that made the air feel like prayer.

He looked up at the stars. They were dimmer here.

Maybe they weren't - maybe he was

dimmer here.

At 2 AM, the phone buzzed. A message from Pintu:

"Aaj bhi library ke seedhi pe baitha hota toh

tu.

Shayad kuch kehte nahi, par tu samajh jaata."

Aryan didn't reply.

He just stared at the screen, and something inside his chest - something stitched together with quietness, softness, belonging - gave way a little.

This city didn't hurt him.

It just didn't hold him anymore.

Phalodi had spoiled him - not with comfort, but with truth.

There, he didn't have to earn love.

Here, he had to explain his existence every morning.

•

The next morning, he stood in front of the mirror.

His hair was messy. Eyes sunken. Shirt slightly creased.

But he didn't look broken. Just... different.

Not a man chasing success.

A man chasing something deeper: alignment.

And for the first time, he removed the quote on the mirror.

"No Pain, No Gain" - peeled off, slowly. In its place, he scribbled with a marker:

"I am allowed to breathe. Even while becoming."

This was not a dramatic beginning. It was quiet.

But in that quiet...

lay the seed of the man Aryan was truly becoming.

Part 2: Where Nothing Fits Anymore

The city hadn't grown colder. Aryan had simply grown warmer.

And warmth, when brought into a cold place, hurts more than cold ever could.

He walked down the lane that led to his coaching centre.

Same chaiwala near the corner, brewing tea in bulk like dreams in a pressure cooker.

Same faces rushing in and out of class, clutching notebooks like lifelines.

Same air -thick with anxiety masked as ambition.

Aryan slowed his pace as he neared the gate.

He looked up at the blue board that read: "India's No.1 Coaching for UPSC Aspirants"

- a statement as hollow as the smiles inside.

He stepped in.

Inside, the receptionist barely glanced at him.

A student brushed past, mumbling "Sorry

bhaiya," without meaning it.

Voices bounced off the walls -last year's topper's name, AIRs, test dates, revision plans.

Aryan took a seat at the back of the corridor, outside his old classroom.

It was filled again -new batch, new faces. Same noise.

Through the glass, he watched a teacher scribble fast on the board, repeating words with the practiced rhythm of someone who had forgotten the meaning behind them long ago.

"Economy is about scarcity... value...

opportunity cost..."

He had heard this lecture before. But today, the only opportunity cost Aryan could feel was peace.

He took out his diary - the one he hadn't opened since Phalodi - and flipped to a blank page.

Then, without thinking too much, he wrote:

> "They're still running. I'm still breathing.

Maybe we're no longer in the same race."

Just then, a familiar face appeared - Sameer, his old batchmate.

Thin, nervous, eyes always darting as if chased by something invisible.

"Abe Aryan? Tu? Tu gaya tha na kuch dino ke liye?"

"Hmm..." Aryan smiled lightly, "Gaon gaya tha."

Sameer chuckled, "Kaise pad paaya wahan? Mujhe toh shor chahiye ya stress... tabhi dimaag chalta hai."

Aryan looked at him for a second and said,

gently, "Wahan sirf khud se baatein hoti hai. Aur unmein bhi sawaal hote hain - par daant nahi."

Sameer frowned slightly. "Mujhe toh darr lagta hai akele rehne se."

Aryan nodded. "Pehle mujhe bhi lagta tha. Par fir samjha... ki akele rehne se nahi darta tha main -

Apne aap se milne se darta tha."

Sameer smiled awkwardly and mumbled something about a class starting. Aryan nodded and let him go.

That evening, Aryan didn't attend the revision lecture.

Instead, he walked to a park nearby. Sat on a bench under a dying tree. Listened to the leaves talk to the wind.

No achievement there. No announcement.

Just presence.

There, an old man sat next to him, feeding pigeons crushed biscuits from a paper bag.

"You look tired, beta," the old man said.

Aryan smiled. "I think I'm just... quiet."

"Good," the man nodded. "Quiet is the sound that comes before real answers."

Aryan looked at him, surprised.

But the old man wasn't looking back. He was watching the pigeons -like they were wiser than either of them.

And maybe... they were.

On his way back, Aryan passed a bookstore.

Inside, he saw a young boy, maybe 14, sitting cross-legged in a corner reading a novel, lost to the world.

Aryan watched him -unmoved, unread by the chaos outside.

Just... connected.

He didn't know why, but he whispered under his breath:

> "Stay like that. Don't let the world teach you to rush before you learn to feel."

That night, Aryan sat alone in his room. No motivational videos.

No timelines. No quotes.

Just him. And the growing realization:

Maybe you don't have to climb the ladder everyone's climbing.

Maybe you just have to build your own ground and stand there. Firm. Real. Free.

And for the first time since returning to the city...

He didn't feel lost.

He just felt like he wasn't meant to be found by what was never his.

Part 3: The Places That No Longer Call You

The sun had begun its descent, casting a golden hue over the tired walls of the coaching district.

Aryan walked aimlessly -not to reach anywhere, but to feel where he no longer belonged.

The juice stall where he used to stand between classes now felt too loud.

The photocopy shop -where notes were bought like fast food -reeked of rushed dreams.

Even the chaiwala who once greeted him with "Tension wali chai ya focus wali?" seemed like a character in a play Aryan was no longer acting in.

It wasn't that these places had changed.

It was just that he couldn't pretend anymore.

He wasn't hungry to become someone. He was now curious to be himself.

He passed by a small Hanuman temple, tucked between two buildings, unnoticed

by most.

On a sudden impulse, he stepped in.

Inside, the bell rope was worn with years of repetition.

The murti stood simple -no gold, no
glitter - just orange tilak and folded hands.

Aryan folded his hands too. Not in prayer. In surrender.

> "I don't know what I'm asking for," "I just know I want to feel... whole."

"And I'm tired of chasing things that make me forget myself."

A soft wind passed through the mandir corridor -like a response that didn't need

words.

He stood there for a while, breathing not from his chest... but from somewhere deeper.

For the first time, silence felt holy.

That night, back in his PG room, he didn't turn on the light.

He sat at his table in the dark.

The city buzzed outside -horns, engines, voices. But Aryan was somewhere else now. Inside.

He took a pen and wrote across a fresh page in his diary:

> "I used to think clarity comes from books. But it came from soil. From quiet.

From people who didn't try to teach me - but sat with me.

I thought peace would come after success.

But peace came when I stopped confusing applause with love."

> "This city made me sharp. Phalodi made me soft.

And I think... I was always meant to be both."

He underlined the last sentence.

Then he looked around his room -the

books, the dreams, the identity he had built here.

He didn't hate it.

He just no longer mistook it for home.

Echoes in the Smoke

(After Chapter 8: When the City Doesn't Feel Like Home Anymore)

Some places don't push you out. They simply stop holding you.

The chai still tastes the same.

The syllabus still mocks your limits. The same autos still speed past,

and your own room still welcomes you with dusty silence.

But something in your bones refuses to pretend.

The world thinks transformation is loud - a declaration, a decision, a bang.

But the truest kind of transformation is quiet.

It happens when you walk into an old space and feel nothing pulling you back.

Aryan didn't abandon the city.

He simply stopped borrowing his worth from it.

The chairs he once sat on now felt smaller. The voices he once followed now felt

rehearsed.

Even the words "topper," "strategy," "AIR 1" sounded less like goals and more like echoes

from a life he no longer wanted to chase.

In Phalodi, he didn't gain clarity through answers.

He found it in pauses.

In food served without questions. In laughter that didn't perform.

In people who remembered his name even when he'd forgotten his own reflection.

When Aryan walked past the coaching centre for the last time, no one noticed.

No doors closed behind him. No banners fell.

No mentor wept.

But something invisible had been released.

He had shed the idea that he must prove himself to be enough.

He had picked up something far heavier, far purer:

Peace.

The city will always keep moving.

But some people aren't meant to race
through it.

Some are meant to slow down, to write at their own rhythm,
to breathe without guilt,
to stop climbing ladders that lead away from themselves.

And when they do? They don't fall behind.

They begin to rise -finally - as who they really are.

Chapter 9:

The Reclaiming

Part 1: You Don't Need Permission to Begin Again

The decision was made before the words came.

Aryan didn't pack his bags with rage.

He packed them with clarity.

One pair of jeans. Three cotton kurtas.

A diary, a black pen, and a folder -not filled with notes this time, but with blank pages.

He looked around the PG room one last time.

This wasn't an escape.

This was a release.

He didn't say goodbye to anyone. Not because he was bitter - but because some exits don't need announcements.

The train wasn't crowded. He found a window seat and sat down. As it pulled away, he didn't look back at the platform. Because what he was leaving behind had already left him long ago.

The city shrank behind him. And with it, the voices - "Success lies in Delhi."

"You have to earn your seat at the table." "You're nothing without a rank."

Aryan didn't respond to any of them.

He just looked out the window and whispered:

> "I'm not chasing a seat anymore. I'm building my own room."

Back in Jodhpur, he didn't go home immediately.

He walked.

Feet dusty. Mind calm.

No coaching material. No pressure. Just presence.

He stopped at the tea stall outside the railway station. The same one where he used to calculate test scores in his head while sipping chai he didn't taste.

The vendor recognized him. "Bhaiya, result aa gaya?"

Aryan smiled. "Nahi aaya. Par main aa gaya."

The chai vendor didn't understand. But Aryan didn't need to be understood by everyone anymore.

That evening, Aryan returned home.

Lata ji was folding clothes in the veranda. She looked up. Didn't speak.

Just... smiled. The kind of smile that only mothers give when they know you've come home with more than luggage.

She didn't ask where he had been. Didn't ask what rank he got.

Just said:

> "Pehle roti thandi ho rahi hai. Baaki sab baad mein."

And just like that - the war inside him softened.

Over the next few days, Aryan sat on the terrace.

He read.

Wrote.

Cooked with Lata ji.

Watched pigeons fly without maps.

But something inside him was growing now.

Not pressure -but purpose. He knew he wasn't done.

The fight wasn't over.

But for the first time in years... he wasn't fighting himself.

One afternoon, he received a call from an old school teacher -Mr. Rajesh Mehta, his Class 10 English sir.

"Aryan? I heard you're back. Doing anything these days?"

Aryan paused. Then said, "Healing. Writing. Thinking."

"Good," said Sir. "We're doing a session at school next week. On failure, purpose, and redefining success. You should come.

Speak to the students."

Aryan hesitated. "Sir... I haven't succeeded yet."

"Exactly," Sir replied. "That's why they'll listen."

~Part 2: The Voice That Was Always Yours

The school hadn't changed.

Same rust-stained gates. Same cracked walls.

Same board outside the staff room that still misspelled "achievement" as "acheivement."

Aryan walked through the corridor with slow steps, his hands tucked in his kurta pockets.

Kids rushed past him in uniform, laughing, shouting, living in a rhythm unbothered by the weight of futures.

The school bell rang -

a sound that once meant freedom, now just felt like a memory waking up.

He reached the auditorium. It was already half full.

Plastic chairs arranged in rows. Mic screeching with feedback.

A banner above the stage read:

"Success Stories: Inspire Before You Arrive."

Aryan almost laughed. Not because it was funny -

but because he didn't feel like either. Not a success. Not an inspiration.

Just... real.

Mr. Mehta spotted him and walked over with that same crooked smile he wore during surprise tests.

"I knew you'd come."

Aryan shrugged, "Still not sure why I'm here."

Mehta sir patted his shoulder. "Because they don't need a hero. They need someone who didn't give up on himself."

Aryan looked at the students - most of them barely 16, 17.

Eyes filled with dreams not fully formed. He could see versions of himself in every row - the boy who laughed the loudest, the one who sat quietly in the back, the one overconfident, the one scared to even breathe wrong.

When his name was called, Aryan stepped up to the mic.

He didn't clear his throat. Didn't pull out notes.

Didn't greet with "Good morning."

He just stood there for a moment. Looking.

And then said:

> "I was you.

I sat in those chairs.

Dreamt of being known. Being first. Being right."

> "I believed success was a mark, a medal, a rank.

That if I didn't get it, I wasn't worth remembering."

A pause.

> "But here's the truth they didn't tell us - You can be everything the world wants, and still not feel like yourself."

> "I chased success until it outran me. Then I sat down.

In a village. With my mother. With people who didn't ask about marks - but asked if I was sleeping well."

The room was silent now.

Not bored.

But breathing slower.

Listening in a way that meant they weren't just hearing - they were feeling.

> "I don't stand here as a topper. I'm not." "I don't stand here as someone who 'made it.' I haven't."

"But I'm here. Still standing.

And maybe that's enough for now."

One student raised her hand.

"Bhaiya... aren't you afraid? That you won't succeed?"

Aryan smiled.

> "I used to be.

Until I realised... fear doesn't go away when

you

win.

It fades when you stop tying your worth to the scoreboard."

When he stepped down from the stage, no one clapped too loudly.

And yet, it was the loudest silence he had ever felt in his life.

A few students came up -not for selfies. Just to say thank you.

One handed him a folded note. It read:

> "Aap jaise dikhte ho, waisa banana simple lagta hai.

Par jo aap jaisa feel kar sake... shayad

wahi asli winner hota hai."

Aryan held the note like it was a medal. Except this one didn't shine -

It healed.

That evening, he walked home alone. Sun melting over rooftops.

Bag light on his shoulder. Mind lighter than ever before.

He didn't know what tomorrow held. But for the first time...

He trusted himself to meet it - not with

armour, but with truthPart 3: The Return to Yourself is the
Real Arrival

The sun had just dipped below the skyline of Jodhpur when
Aryan stepped into his room.

Not his PG room in the city - his real room. The one where
the walls held memories,

not targets.

His old cupboard. The faded posters of

A.P.J Abdul Kalam and MS Dhoni still clinging on. A stack of
dusty storybooks - Panchtantra, Guizar, and Premchand - left
untouched since school.

But today, he reached for them before even touching his
UPSC notes.

He sat cross-legged on the floor.

The diary lay open in front of him. A blank page.

The kind of blank that doesn't scare you anymore -it invites
you.

He picked up the pen.

> "I don't want a rank if it costs me my reflection.

I don't want a seat at the table if I have to eat someone else's
truth to stay there.

What I want...

is to write something that makes a boy in a village feel seen.

To say things that silence cannot hold anymore.

I want to live - not impress. To breathe - not perform.

To love - not edit.

And if I still have the strength to prepare,

I will.

But not as a prisoner.

As a poet. As a man. As Aryan."

He signed it. Slowly.

Then closed the diary - not because the thought was finished,
but because the decision was made.

Later that night, Lata ji found him helping her in the kitchen
- rolling dough for rotis.

"Kya kar raha hai tu?" she asked, half-smiling.

"Zindagi," Aryan replied.

She paused. Then gently smacked him with a flour-covered
hand.

"Zyada filmy mat ban." But she was smiling.

And this time, Aryan was too. Not politely

- but deeply.

Just before midnight, he sat at his desk again. Not to study.
Not to revise. Just to look at everything for the last time - the
notes, the charts, the coaching tags, the ranks scribbled on
paper.

He didn't tear them.

He didn't frame them either.

He just put them all in a box.

Not out of anger. But out of completion.

Then he did something he hadn't done in years.

He opened a new Word document on his laptop.

And titled it:

> "The Boy Who Survived Ambition."

Not a novel.

Not a manifesto.

Just the beginning of something only he could write.

His truth.

And the truth... doesn't need approval. It just needs air.

Outside, the city continued its chaos. Inside, Aryan finally heard his own voice.

Clear. Unshaking. Whole.

Not because he found all the answers.

But because he had finally - finally - stopped asking the wrong questions.

~Echoes of the Unwritten

(After Chapter 9: The Reclaiming) Some victories are not tweeted.

Some healing doesn't come with hashtags. Some growth can't be seen in mirrors - only felt in silence.

Aryan didn't defeat the system. He didn't become a topper.

He didn't conquer the city. What he did was rarer.

He reclaimed the right to live on his own terms.

The world taught him to prove himself.

But Phalodi...

his mother's kitchen...

a dusty school auditorium...

a terrace under a quiet Jodhpur sky... They reminded him:

> "You don't need permission to start again.

And you sure as hell don't need applause to belong to yourself."

Maybe you're reading this right now, feeling like you're behind.

That someone else is ahead. That time is slipping.

That you're late.

But here's what Aryan learned - and what life whispered to him when the race finally quieted:

> You're not late.

You're just now arriving at your real starting line.

He stopped defining himself by outcomes.

He began to measure his days by peace.

Not how many tasks he completed - but how many thoughts he truly felt. Not how many hours he studied - but how many lies he unlearned.

Not how loud his ambition was -

but how still his truth had become.

And if you're wondering where success lives,

It doesn't live in Delhi. Or in headlines. Or in
gold-lettered result sheets.

It lives in the moment you sit down... and say to yourself:

> "This is who I am.

I have nothing to hide.

And nothing to prove to anyone anymore."

That's the moment life stops testing you. And begins to trust
you.

Chapter 10:

The Becoming

Last Part : The Freedom to Be Whole Again

The morning was still, like the world had paused for breath.

Aryan sat at the edge of his terrace, watching the pale orange sky stretch itself awake. Birds moved without rush. A cow ambled by on the street below. A man cycled past with a bundle of newspapers

- tossing truth at each doorstep without reading it himself.

Aryan closed his eyes and exhaled. There was no race left inside him.

But strangely, this... this felt like arrival.

He hadn't made grand plans after walking away from the coaching factory.

No speeches. No announcements. Just alignment - between who he was and who he was pretending to be.

Every morning now began with a cup of chai with Lata ji.

No scrolling. No "to-do list." Just her quiet questions:

> "Soya theek se?" "Sapna dekha?" "Oard kam hai?"

She wasn't asking about his sleep.

She was asking about his soul.

One evening, Aryan walked to the colony park, where a group of uncles sat playing cards and arguing about the same old politics. One of them - Chaturvedi Uncle

- noticed Aryan.

"Beta, aajkal dikhai nahi dete coaching wale kapdon mein."

Aryan smiled. "Kapde badal diye uncle... socha pehchaan bhi thodi badal loon."

The others laughed, not fully understanding. But Aryan didn't need to explain.

They weren't expecting him to win. They were just glad he stayed.

Later that night, Aryan began writing again. Not to teach. Not to impress. Just to offer.

He wrote about shame. About fake smiles. About how dreams can choke you when they stop being yours.

He wrote like someone finally stopped gasping -and started breathing.

He posted one of the pieces online with no name. Just the title:

> "The Day I Stopped Performing and Started Living."

He thought no one would care.

By midnight, it had over 14,000 shares.

A week later, a 19-year-old student from Pune wrote to him:

> "I was about to drop out. I thought I was a failure.

But after reading this, I've decided to stay

- not in college, maybe - but in life."

Aryan read it twice.

Then whispered to himself:

> "Maybe I didn't become a topper. But I'm finally becoming myself."

In the weeks that followed, Aryan began mentoring a few students - not through coaching material, but through conversation.

He didn't ask for their ranks. He asked them:

> "What scares you?"

"When was the last time you felt peace?" "Who are you when no one's watching?"

One evening, a student asked him:

"Bhaiya... how do you know when you're on the right path?"

Aryan looked at him for a while. Then replied:

> "When you no longer feel like a stranger in your own body.

When you no longer have to fake a smile to
be accepted.

When your silence doesn't make you feel lost - it makes you
feel home."

He had reclaimed his story. Not by fighting the world -
But by finally choosing himself.

And in doing so, he did something more powerful than
clearing any exam:

> He reminded others they could do the same.

*This was never about success.

This was always about coming back to your truth.*

And truth doesn't need a stage. It just needs space.

Aryan created that space - Not for applause.

But for healing.

And in that space, he became.

Echoes of Becoming

(After Chapter 10: The Becoming)

There comes a moment when you stop asking,

"What will they think of me?" And start whispering,

"What do I think of myself?"

Aryan's story was never about how high he could climb.

It was about how deeply he could return -

To the boy before the performance. To the silence before the
pretending. To the breath before the burden.

We are taught to wear masks before we're taught to love our
faces.

To compete before we learn to feel.

To win before we understand what we're even fighting for.

And in that chaos, we lose the one person who was always
worth saving:

Ourselves.

But you can come back. You can stop performing.

You can sit in the middle of your messy, unpolished, tender
truth

and say:

> "This is who I am.

I do not owe beauty to the world.

I owe honesty to my soul."

Success will still matter. Results will still hurt.

Failure will still visit.

But now...

you won't crumble with it.

Because when you're not acting anymore, even failure feels like a lesson, not a verdict.

Let this be your reminder:

> You are not a number. You are not a rank.

You are not the applause.

You are a becoming. An unfolding.

A truth that doesn't need to be shiny to be sacred.

And when it feels too hard again - when the noise returns, when your reflection starts to blur again... Remember Aryan.

He did not win the world.

He simply found his own peace in it. And sometimes...

that's the most legendary thing you can ever do.

This is not the end.

This is you, turning a page - back to yourself.

