

Moments at *the* Crossroads My Lifeline

The Hand That Guided Me Through Life

Dr Syed Raza



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New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

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ISBN: 978-93-7310-917-6

Cover design: Yash Singhal

Typesetting: Namrata Saini

First Edition: December 2025

Dedication to Father

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A passage dedicated to my late father, Dr Z. B. Raza. I also dedicate this book to him.



This book is a humble tribute to my late father who was more than a parent to me – he was my compass, my constant source of strength, and the quiet voice that guided me through life’s uncertainties. From my earliest memories, his hand was always there to hold mine, steady and reassuring, reminding me that I was never alone. He taught me not only how to dream but how to pursue those dreams with integrity and courage. Whenever I stood at life’s crossroads, unsure of which path to take, his wisdom lit the way. Even now, though he is no longer beside me, I still feel his presence – in my decisions, my values, and the person I strive to be. He was, and will always remain, my mentor, my advisor, and my greatest guide.

Being a doctor, he not only provided healing hands to his patients but also served humanity taking care of and helping poor and downtrodden throughout his life.

I am still carrying his legacy of striving for the noble cause he lived and died for. He inaugurated my charity organization 'Raza Foundation' just six months before he left for his heavenly abode.

'In your everlasting loving memory, though absent your presence and light of guidance lingers in every line and every page of this book'

Chapter 1

Shaku!

Shaku!

Shaku!

I could hear a faint voice call out my name; irritating as it was, the beauty of the place I was in seemed to drown out the voice. The warm rays of sunlight filtered through the crystal-clean windows and fell on my face in patterns that made me look at my best. My hands moved along the smooth leather, taking in the buttery feel of it, almost luxurious. It wasn't hot, not like how I usually felt when we went to school, and despite having clothes on I had never worn before, it all felt normal, as if this was but another moment in my life.

The crisp blue shirt and the beige shorts I adorned weren't anything I had seen before; we never wore new clothes— the only time we had new clothes was Eid, but it was not my clothes that caught my eye. The silver lining around the gear glistened up ahead, and all I could see was the

dashboard towering over me. A familiar tune played from the speakers ahead, and the air conditioner worked wonders, none I had felt before.

I couldn't see the driver; in fact, I didn't see anyone in the driver's seat, but the car somehow moved along its path and showed me the beauty and colour of the Indian streets. Silence and peace ensued, and it seemed as though nothing could harm me, that this was something I could bask in for the rest of my life, enjoy this uninterrupted comfort and not feel the pangs of pain and suffering. My eyes darted around like two beads trying to take in everything, feel, experience, and remember.

The car pulled into a broad driveway outlined by neatly trimmed shrubs. The grass wasn't long enough to sway in the wind; they were mowed the perfect length. Everything around me was perfect. The enormous house towered in front of me, boasting its expensive architectural splendour, and I was but a speck amongst the grandeur of everything. My body instinctively moved toward the house as if it knew where it had to go and what it had to do while I continued to stare at this new place. The doors opened as I stood in front and was led to the dining room, where I was served a meal of meat, a variety of cheese, and all the types of bread known to man. A line of butlers stood beside me; they watched as I struggled with the knives and forks but eventually surrendered and ravished them with my bare hands. Their expressionless faces remained the same, which egged me on to have more. No one would judge me, so the meal tasted all the better.

After I was done and all cleaned up, I walked around the house with one butler who followed me around and showed me where everything was, for even though my body seemed to know the place and moved in accordance with its own will, I didn't know where I was headed, and everything was all new to me.

"Master, would you like for me to run a bath?"

"No, that won't be necessary," I replied before I had the time to process what I was saying.

A few minutes later, I was back in the car and taken around the city. The buildings zoomed around me and formed a swirl of cream-brown-beige-white hazy view of the city. I leaned over and stared outside, trying to feel and experience everything better.

Suddenly, there was a loud bang that pierced through my ears. I was just wondering what could have caused the excruciating sound in this moment of happiness.

I awoke suddenly, the familiar feeling of being sucked into a pool of beige leather seats and metal chucks lingered on, and I heaved a sigh of relief. Harsh rays of sunlight hit the mango tree that provided shade to my room and filtered through the metal railing on my window.

I squinted at the sun and lifted my hand to shield my eyes from the strong rays that blinded me. What was that noise? Who was calling me?

Was that real? Was that just a dream? Oh.... I was just dreaming, a beautiful dream that gave me comfort and pleasure I never experienced before.

The sun dimmed all too soon, and suddenly everything became cooler- more comfortable.

"Shaku! - it was my mother who was calling me.

"Shaku, wake up; you're going to be late!" My mother cried out as she jolted me awake.

"Urrggh, five more minutes amma." I groaned and turned around while covering my face with a pillow. I could hear the low rumble of the car that my father tried to start. The engine snarled and growled, refusing to start- to take my father to work.

The terrible noise, coupled with my lack of interest in wanting to go to school, only made me more irritable.

"What is wrong with you? Get up now, or you'll be late for school!" she said as she pulled the pillow away from my face. She walked out of the room to wake my other siblings up, and I closed my eyes and covered my ears with a pillow to block out the horrendous noise that came from the car my father was trying to fix.

My mother walked up to my door a second time and gave me a look of relief, "Ah, you're finally awake. Get up; It's late; you need to get ready for school."

I stretched out the sleep from my body and discovered the reason for my inability to breathe, or rather, my inability to

sleep. My father poked and prodded outside my room at his second-hand off-white Ambassador car. It wouldn't cooperate and start when he turned the key. Instead, it coughed and sputtered while breathing out heavy, thick fumes that floated toward the house.

I sat up and moved toward the edge of the bed. "I am awake; you can go now." I knew she could sense how irritated I was to be woken up, and I needed to explain why or risk getting grounded for speaking back.

"You woke me up from my dream, amma. It was a really nice one, and I was just getting to the good part." I said, wiping the sleep away from my eyes.

The Ambassador car just outside my room roared again; this time, it sounded like it would start— it must have given my father much hope, but to his dismay, the engine coughed and went quiet. The sound of metal against metal was what eventually got me out of bed. I couldn't stand the noise, and my father just wouldn't give up on the broken car.

"Ah ha." She crossed her hands and lifted an eyebrow, and continued, "You can't keep dreaming your whole life. You need to get up and do something. Dreaming won't get you anywhere." Her matter-of-fact tone only made me want to justify why I wanted to see the dream.

"You've got to dream big, amma, and that was exactly what I was doing. First, dream big and then achieve!" I hopped

out of bed and flexed my scrawny hands in front of the mirror to show her that I was definitely going to go places.

"Okay, enough of this now; you don't want to be late. Get ready and come have your breakfast." She walked out of my room and busied herself with what mothers usually do, which we, as children, are never grateful for.

In ten minutes, I was ready and at the table, swinging my legs from the chair, waiting for breakfast to be served on the silver plate that had indents to divide the curries from the roti.

A simple man's food. But as a child of not more than five years, I could not stand to have another meal of vegetables slide down my throat. My nostrils flared at the sight of the ghastly vegetable curry, and all I could do in my childish innocence was stamp my right foot and demand chicken, which we could have easily afforded if not for my father's lifestyle and values.

Children should be seen and not heard, or so I have heard throughout all my years of being a child. But what of it when a child requests meat?

A scolding, followed by tears, taught me never to ask for chicken unless I was served chicken, and with a tear-streaked face and a lesson learned, I swallowed mouthfuls of roti and vegetable curry, trying to remember the dream I had. I would do anything to distract myself from the awful vegetable curry I was forced to eat.

Just as I swallowed my last mouthful of food, I heard the car roar awake and my father calling out to my mother- "It worked! I'm going to work now. I don't want breakfast, I'll just get some on the way, I'm late." and with that, his car sputtered out of our garage and down the narrow lane.

My father never dropped me off at school. He never dropped any of my siblings at school. He would go to work with his Ambassador car and come home in the same, wash it on the weekends. Our family was too big for all of us to fit in the car but we would somehow adjust with great difficulty. But when my oldest brother and sister moved out to study and pursue their higher education, suddenly, there was so much more space for all of us, but we never took the car. I didn't mind that we didn't get to travel in the car as much, as I often entertained myself with other useless pastimes and mischievous tricks. I preferred walking and breathing in the fresh morning air because I hated the smoke and fumes from all the vehicles my father used to drive alongside- they made me cough till there were tears in my eyes, and my mother would have to pour water on my face and wipe away the tears and water with her saree.

"Amma, I'm going to school." I called out while slinging my light bookbag on my shoulder and skipping out of our quaint little house in the direction of my school to learn of the million useless things children are taught are important in their lives.

"Remember to ask the teacher about the science book that has gone missing." My mother called out from the kitchen.

I winced at the reminder and paused before turning around and screaming, "Ah yes, yes, I'll ask the teacher." I took off down the lane, clinging onto my bag, hoping my mother didn't see the guilt on my face.

This lie couldn't go on anymore; she would sniff it out and figure out everything at some point. I needed to think of another plan.

"What do I do?" I said out loud, now that I was out of sight from my house. I passed the tiny stream that ran alongside our house and past the lane so that it broadened near the school and formed a makeshift lake. The pages of the science book were probably floating in the lake, somewhere below the water's surface. But my mother didn't know that, and my teacher didn't either.

It happened on a day school let out early- an outbreak of a viral fever led to the principal deciding to close school early to prevent more children from getting sick. My friend Amit and I still hadn't contracted the fever, so we decided to make little paper boats to float on the river, and before we knew it, we had created a fleet of ships to battle each other, and my science book was gone. There was nothing that could be done except lie.

I never took my studies seriously, hence why it was not a grave concern of mine when the science book "went missing." It didn't matter at all, and me being a short-sighted child, I did not stop to think that my mother would meet my teacher at the parent-teacher meeting and all my

lies would unfold. I was too busy causing trouble in the neighbourhood and getting up to all sorts of mischief.

School, for me, was a bore- just like any other day. Teachers would drone on about the solar system, why we needed to learn to add and subtract, and the importance of washing our hands. I never listened, I didn't study, and I didn't learn. All that mattered to me was to run out of the classroom and into the school grounds, and when the final bell rang, I would be the first to dash out of my class toward my home to play cricket with all the boys in the neighbourhood.

My team needed to win, or rather, the team I was on had to win. I ran down the lane and through the front doors that were always left open, for the heat in India baked the houses like little loaves of bread and those inside it, and threw my bag and shoes in the hall.

"Shaku, come here now! Take your bag and shoes to the room!" My mother cried out, tired of always having to nag me.

"Yeah I'll take them away after." I called out as I dashed toward the open field my friends and I used to play on.

With my school uniform on, I took my place as a bowler and flung the ball toward the batsman, who was a couple of years older than me. Age didn't matter in the neighbourhood, so I was allowed to play with the bigger children and partake in all their activities despite being only eleven. But that didn't mean they looked after me. It was

every man to himself, and you had to carry your weight around- something I was quite good at doing.

Puffs of sand lifted from the dry ground and stained our white school shirts a dusty brown that our mothers would have to bend over and scrub for hours, but we didn't think about that. All that mattered in our small minds was to win the game.

"Amit, move behind." A boy older than us cried out. He was the team leader and had a scar on his lip. No one knew where he got it from, and no one dared ask, for he would get upset over it and beat the one who asked the innocent question.

"Is this enough?"

"Yes, yes, stay there."

"Now, you better bowl and get us this wicket." He eyed me, and all I could do was shudder at the sight of the scar on his lip. I nodded, hoping he could see the determination on my face, and with that, I ran toward the pitch at full speed, the tiny yellow ball left my hand, and the batsman whacked it out toward Amit, who didn't catch it.

"Tchk. Useless fellows." The team leader said, looking away.

Soon the sun hid its face, and the sky cried tears of red, yellow, and pink, and we went home. Amit and I walked together since our homes were in the same lane, and soon everything became too serious.

"Have you studied for the exams?"

"No, what exams?" I looked at him, confused.

"The mid-term exams are coming up. The one where we can't fail."

"Oh, that exam."

"Yes, that exam. Have you started studying?"

"Nope." I grinned, hiding the fear and stress that started building within me.

"It's in three weeks; when do you plan to start?" He gave me a concerned look. Like a mother would look at a sick child. Amit was a serious boy, who was always at the top of our class, his books were always complete, and all the teachers loved him. On the other hand, I was the opposite. There is nothing more to say about me; people were tired of having to nag, scold, and advise me. So, they let me be and do my thing.

"Oh Amit, all this talk of exams has spoiled my mood. Come let's do something fun." I grabbed him by the wrist and sneaked into my house, ensuring my mother wouldn't hear me. I tiptoed toward my room and pulled out a mask I had been working on and a white bedsheet before scooting out of the house and down the ally, where I made Amit help me tie the devil's mask on my face and put the bedsheet on my head.

The stars glimmered in the evening sky, and instead of finishing our homework, I sneaked in front of a window to scare the first victim.

"Amit, come here and help me up."

"No, we are going to get in trouble. Can you stop this now? I'm scared."

"Quit being a scaredy cat and help me up. It won't take long."

"Okay, fine." Amit extended his cupped palms and gave me a lift so I could hang onto the window's ledge. I knew Ruby would be studying for the upcoming exams. It was the perfect time to scare her.

"Sshh, now don't make a noise Amit, she's occupied."

"Syed, you're dumb. You're going to get us in so much trouble." He said while I balanced on the ledge.

"Never mind that, we can make a run for it."

I moved closer to the window and tapped on it like I had seen in scary movies. There was always a sign or warning before the ghost arrived. Ruby turned to look at the window but didn't move from her place. I tapped again, this time harder than the last, and moved away from her line of sight. She got up, and as she moved closer to the window, I jumped out of my hiding spot, screaming nonsensical words before falling down in a heap on top of Amit. The blood-curdling scream that followed was what I was looking for, and soon Amit and I scurried out of the alley and into the broad darkness of the night. Mission accomplished.

We wouldn't get caught; no one saw us, I was sure of it.

"Amit, come fast, we need to get out before anyone sees us."

"What if someone already saw us?"

"No one saw us. Sshhuusshhh you're speaking too loud."

"But what did someone do? What do we say, then?"

"No one did. Can you calm down and stop causing such a fuss over this silly prank."

"I'm telling you someone saw us, Syed. I can feel it in my bones. My heart is beating."

"Our hearts always beat silly."

"Yes, but it's beating faster than usual."

"Just tell it to stop beating then."

"I would die then, Syed."

"No, you wouldn't."

"Yes, I will. Our heart beats to pump blood to all the parts of our body, which is what keeps us alive. But you would know this, if you had studied instead of playing pranks."

"Our heart beats to pump blood bla bla." I mocked and imitated him.

"You two, come here this instant." a deep voice bellowed from the darkness. We hadn't realised how loud we were while we bickered on about blood and hearts, and now we would be exposed.

"Sshh. He can't see us Amit, let's just pretend we don't exist. Close your eyes."

"Syed just because we can't see him, doesn't mean he can't see us."

"Keep quiet, will you, he will hear your voice."

"Let's just go and tell him and apologise. The consequences will be less."

"Are you mad? My parents will ground me!"

Amit sat silently beside me as we peeked from the bush near Ruby's house. He traced shapes in the sand as he patiently waited for my signal for us to run back home.

"Now, Amit! Let's go!" I whispered louder than I expected to.

We jumped out of the bush to dash back home, but Ruby's father did a good job of hiding and staying silent, and he caught us by the collars of our shirts.

"You two boys- you're in so much trouble." His eyes glinted with a menacing look, and all Amit could do was cry and mumble how he wasn't a part of it. I didn't want to give in, and as obstinate as I was, my parents and Ruby's father knew I had pranked and disturbed her.

"Syed apologize to uncle."

"No. I didn't do anything."

"Shut up, naughty boy. Tell you are sorry." My father ordered.

"No. I didn't prank Ruby, Abba." I whined.

A sharp tap on my head eventually led to me rubbing the back of my head and reluctantly apologizing to the uncle, who, in my opinion, was a conceited man. He didn't deserve the apology; if anything, it was Ruby I needed to apologize to, not him. But he gained a sort of pleasure seeing a child in discomfort, and he smiled an eerie, satisfactory smile from seeing little tears form in the corners of my eyes.

I ran toward my room and banged the door shut. I didn't want them to see me crying- that only made me weak. And I am one boy who isn't weak.

Chapter 2

“Come here, let’s put the nails here.” I pointed to a part of the road that narrowed where only bikes could pass through.

“Okay! Where are the nails?” Arshi looked at me.

“Here,” and I pulled out a tiny bag full of gleaming metal nails.

“We’ll probably get in trouble for this Syed.”

“If we hide, we won’t.”

“If you say so.”

I scattered the tiny nails all over the bumpy road and hid behind the fence of the house closest to the road. In the house lived a very old lady who complained of my pranks and my overall existence, but what of a complaining old lady? I went on with my childish mischief ignoring her.

“No one’s coming this way.” Arshi complained as we squatted near the fence. “My legs are falling asleep.”

“Falling asleep?”

“Yes.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Ugh, it’s like sand inside your legs. Numb.”

“Ahh. then sit and stretch your legs out.”

“My trousers will get dirty.”

“Your maids can wash them for you.”

“Yes, b-but my mother will scold me.”

“Sshh, here comes the first victim.” An oblivious cyclist whistled and rode right into our trap and was instantly derailed when his front tire was punctured. He screamed as the bike veered off the road, and he fell into a bush. Despite our hiding spot meant to conceal our identities, we burst out laughing and were instantly discovered. But having pranked numerous people, I was a master at escaping, and I bolted toward an alley with Arshi on my tail.

“Come back here, you pranksters!” The cyclist cried out, who was too old to chase us. If he were any younger, he would have attempted to chase us and would have ended up in a futile chase.

There was an art to escape, and I had learned it well enough to pull the biggest prank on anyone, although occasionally, I would be caught, reprimanded, and punished. But despite the punishments and the numerous warnings, I continued on with my pranks and mischief. When I look back, in

some ways, it could have been a coping mechanism or just fun and joy, but for me to put a finger on one and decipher would be most flawed.

We continued running down the dingy, smelly alleyway where rats came out during the day and scrounged for food until we were sure we had lost him.

“You really know how to get away in the nick of time.”

“Well, that’s because I am an ESCAPE MAN!” I said in a victorious tone.

“Yeah right, more like Escape boy.” And with that, Arshi and I burst out laughing, with no care in the world, days that would soon blur and slip from our fingers– lost to time.

Most people tell tales of their childhood days– of moments spent with friends, but the most amount of time I spent was with my brother Tufail who was just about a year and a half older than me. Despite this, we were in the same class, and so we were closer than most siblings were. Apart from being in the same class, we shared the same likes, among them being an obsession with Bollywood, in particular, a star named Amitabh Bachchan.

Tufail wasn’t the usual older sibling who ordered his younger siblings around; instead, we forged a bond like no other; we were friends, confidants, and what I would call soul mates.

“Psst Shaku shall we go watch ‘Sholay’?”

“Now?”

“Yeah now.”

“Right now?”

“Yeah, right now, silly!” He half whispered. We were toward the back of the class, and the teacher in front droned on about algebra, occasionally rubbing his un-kept greying beard.

“But how do we get out now?”

“I have a plan. Just do as I say and we can go. But before that ask Tinku and Ruby if they want to come.”

“Okay.” And with that, I hurriedly scribbled on a yellowing square-ruled paper that I had hastily torn from the back of my math book to write down the following words–

‘We are going to watch Sholay. Coming? Yes/No’

After folding the paper till I couldn’t fold it anymore, I asked my classmates to pass the note under their desks to Tinku and Ruby, who were seated next to each other. My eyes darted between the old teacher and the note being passed from the student’s hand until it finally reached my two friends. I continued to glance in their direction as they whispered and then put their heads down like two diligent children to write something on the piece of paper.

Then the stress, again. The note bounced from hand to hand until it reached me. But this time, it was all crumpled

up. When I opened the paper, I was met with disappointment. In it, the word 'No' was circled in Ruby's pinky gel pen, and under it was another note in her wobbly handwriting–

'Sorry, Sir will scold. I have to study.'

I tapped Tufail's shoulder and shook my head in disappointment, but instead of returning the same look of disappointment, he smiled at me.

“Don't worry Shaku, we can still go.”

“But won't it be boring?”

“No. Now come meet me in the boys' restroom down the corridor in five minutes.”

“Okay!”

And with that, Tufail stood up in class and said, “Sir, may I please use the washroom.”

“There's a break for that.”

“But Sir, I really have to go.”

“Can't you wait?”

“No sir.” And he pretended to look uncomfortable as if he would wet himself right there. The teacher must have had the same worry, and he dismissed Tufail without another word. Before he left the class, he winked at me, and then I knew I couldn't have had a better brother in the world.

Five minutes later, I stood up and posed the same question. Except this time, the teacher questioned where Tufail was.

“Come to think of it, your brother has gone for a while. Why don’t you go and find him and come.” He was seated at his table, marking books of children diligent enough to complete their classwork.

“Okay sir.” I said with a look of innocence, and with that, I left the class and bolted towards the boy’s restroom down the corridor.

“Took you long enough.” Tufail said, appearing from a bathroom stall that smelled worse than the gutters near our house.

“You said five minutes. I came in at five.”

“Okay, so shall we go then? Are you ready?”

“No. How do we get past the security guards?”

“We don’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s a small hole in the wall at the back of the school that has been boarded up with some wood. We can use that.”

I followed Tufail like a loyal follower until we reached the boarded-up hole. It was big enough to fit a tiny boy, and Tufail and I were relatively small for our age. We nudged at the wood, and soon we were able to wedge the wood off with a bit of tugging and pulling, in addition to the

occasional shots with a rock I found under the big Banyan tree that watched us with a smile.

“There! Try going through.” Tufail said.

“But what if I get stuck?”

“You won’t. Just try.”

He had a reassuring way of talking to his friends and siblings, and in that moment, I fully trusted him and crawled through the hole that clawed at my white shirt.

“I made it!” I shouted once when I was on the small road.

“See! I told you!” He screamed from the other side. I couldn’t see him, but I sensed all of his excitement.

When he was on the same side as I was, we skipped toward the big cinema down the road. The advantage of living in the city or rather quite close to it meant we had access to development and saw it happen right in front of us. The cinema was one of the biggest buildings in the city and always had a throng of young people around and in it- day and night.

If we went in our school uniform, the ticket master wouldn’t let us in, so Tufail suggested we wear a different shirt along with our school shorts.

“But where do we get the shirts from? We can’t go home, amma will find out and scold us.”

“We aren’t going home.”

“Then how do we get shirts?”

“I brought them. Here.” He poked his hand into his bag and produced two shirts. They were both his, but it didn’t matter, for we were roughly the same size, and so I took off my shirt under the big tree on the deserted road in glee and wore his orange and black shirt that was crushed. But that didn’t matter in my mind– we were going to the cinema to watch the famous movie “Sholay.” Once Tufail was done buttoning his shirt, we did a slow jog to the cinema and stood in front of it, marvelling at the magnificence of it all. We couldn’t afford the candy they sold at the cinema, for those were more expensive than the ones sold in the small shops in the town, so we bought two tickets and entered the cinema. Contrary to what most people would assume, the man at the ticket counter didn’t pose a single question.

What are you doing here?

Shouldn’t you be at school?

You are too small; go home.

He just gave us our tickets and continued to stare into the sky whilst he munched on beetles that stained his teeth red. Tufail and I, on the other hand, giggled in pure glee and walked into the blackened room and sat right in front. Those were the cheapest tickets, and we could only afford those on our lunch money. But that didn’t matter, for we watched the movie in awe– all we wanted to do and be was Amitabh Bachchan.

That same week we bunked several classes and watched the movie five times, each time with a different set of friends, but Tufail and I were constant and have remained the same to this date.

With my newfound passion for Bollywood, I made it my life's mission to emulate those actors. From the way they dressed to the way they spoke, I analysed and incorporated it into my life- in whatever way I could.

That Eid, when my father had taken Tufail and me to Shameem Sahab, the tailor, who was a thin man with a clean-shaven face and nasal twang in his voice, I asked for clothes that were in trend. The ones actors wore in movies and saved helpless people in. I was so obsessed with Bollywood that I had considered it as a viable career, but my parents didn't shatter my dreams, and they smiled whenever I said I wanted to be an actor.

"Shamim bhai, I want a shirt like this." And I pointed toward the shirt an actor was wearing in a magazine.

"You want like this?" he said between mouthfuls of paan. He would occasionally offer some to my father with Zarda called Rajanigandha, and the two of them would munch it in content silence whilst Tufail, and I made our pick of clothes and designs.

"Ah - ah, yes. Stitch what he wants." My father waved his hand dismissively.

“Uncle, I want the trousers also like this. See this.” And I pointed at a different page.

“But they are not matching.” He said, trying to speak in English.

“They will match. Just stitch it. Please.” I pouted my mouth at my father and made puppy eyes, so he would order him to do so.

“Yes, stitch it that way.” He said. He sounded bored out of his mind.

Tufail was no different, and so Shameem took our measurements with his yellow measuring tape with red numbers and wrote it down on his big CR book that had no front cover and pages were missing from. He had a good memory, and that was what mattered in our society.

“When will we get the clothes, Shameem?” My father asked, rummaging through his wallet.

“Sir, on the 16th? Five days before Eid.”

“Can you finish that fast?”

“Yes, yes. You no worry. I will do and give fast.” He said with an air of confidence.

“Okay, I’ll come on the 16th then to collect the clothes.”

We walked out of the shop and into the heat of the afternoon sun. Our necks burned, and all we could do was squint to get a better look at everything around us.

“We need to get your shoes.”

“From where?”

“That shoe shop down the road. I heard it was not expensive.”

Fifteen minutes later, we were out of the shop with loafers we had got at a discount in the bags that Tufail carried. One thing Indians are quite good at is haggling, and I came to know the art by watching my parents whenever we shopped or flagged a taxi down. Everything was a haggle.

“100 rupees is too much bhaiyya.” My father said with a look of agony on his face. He was tired and wanted to go home.

“100 rupees, best price. Only for you.”

“90 rupees. I am buying two pairs, no?”

“Sir, then where will my profit be? 100 rupees, I will give only to you.”

“Okay, okay.” He said in resignation. This was after bringing the final bill down to 100 rupees from 120 rupees. But these were small wins, and he walked out of the shop with a twenty rupee note safely tucked in his thin wallet.

On the day of Eid, we adorned our new clothes and shoes; with gelled hair and clean teeth, we walked out of the house to the masjid for the morning prayers, followed by traditional visits to relatives and friends. How new clothes and shoes could make me feel on top of the world, I don’t know, but what I do know is that those were simpler times.

Times when we didn't need much or want much. All it took was a new shirt and some new shoes from the bazaar.

Apart from my obsession with Bollywood, I also took to art. I've often heard that teachers play a pivotal role in a student's life, and this holds true, for I developed an interest in art only because of a teacher at my school.

"Okay, listen up all of you. Since we are focusing on herbivores this week, I need you all to pick a herbivore of your choice, draw it and bring it tomorrow."

"Okay teacher." We said in unison.

That night at home, I found a picture of a cow and couldn't be bothered drawing it since I had assumed it would be hard and I wouldn't draw it well. So I rummaged through my drawers and found a tracing paper to trace the happy animal and then colour it. Another reason I resorted to cheating was because my grades were slipping. I was tired of hearing the same things time and again.

'Syed, what's wrong with you? Is it so hard to study?'

'You've got the lowest marks. What do you have to say for yourself?'

'A disgrace.'

'A talent just wasted. Tch.'

So I coloured the picture in pretty colours and hoped the teacher would have something good to say- for once.

“Wow this is great Syed! You did this all on your own?” My teacher Mrs. Ahmad exclaimed.

“Yes...” I said, quite shy to be getting attention that wasn’t for being naughty.

“Amazing! I’ve never seen anything like it. Especially for a child your age.”

“Thank you.” I said, not wanting to reveal I enjoyed the attention.

It took only this one moment to catapult me into a hurricane of drawing material and endless hours spent in my tiny drawing room to paint the days away.

“See this, Amma,” I showed her a painting of a sunset I had made.

“Wow, Shaku! You are really an artist. You should show your father when he comes back from work. He’ll love it!”

“You really think so?” I said with a look of longing.

“Yes, he will!” and she squeezed my cheek in affection.

That evening when my father arrived home, he sang praises for my painting, and soon the painting was framed and hung in the living room amongst family portraits.

I never felt so proud and flattered before. It seemed my father had given me a prize for my good work and I felt so thrilled and inspired. But down in my heart I also felt the guilt that this was merely cheating and not merit. Nevertheless, the words of praise from my father became

an inspiration for me to make many more drawings and paintings that decorated every wall of our living room. For guests and visitors, the living room was no less than a free art gallery.

I would glow with pride when neighbours and relatives would visit and inquire about the paintings, and my father made a big show of how I painted it, and that ‘It was their talented Shaku boy who painted it.’

I would then stand in the middle of the hall, like Leonardo da Vinci, and give them the whole process behind the painting.

Those were the only moments I felt accomplished, or rather of some worth. People often associate success with studies, but I’ve come to realize that studying isn’t a one-size-fits-all concept. Children learn at different paces, and respecting that is key to raising successful individuals. But I was born during a time when this wasn’t understood, and I came to realize this the hard way.

In the early evening, we found ourselves seated in the serene courtyard, the last rays of the sun casting a warm glow on our faces. My father sat there with a radiant smile, clutching a box of delightful sweets in one hand and two envelopes in the other. There was an electric excitement in the air, a mix of pride and joy that enveloped us all. He proceeded to hand the box over to my mother.

"We will need the sweets soon." My father said with joy in his eyes. He knew Tufail would pass with flying colours; it was given—a fact no one could deny.

With genuine happiness, I extended my heartfelt congratulations to Tufail, my voice brimming with pride, "Congratulations, Tufail! You've done it, passed with flying colours." I couldn't help but pull him into a tight hug, a gesture that conveyed my love and admiration.

Amidst our shared joy, my father's booming voice called out, summoning my mother to join us. Curiosity danced in her eyes as she questioned the urgency, "What's going on?"

My father's face lit up with excitement as he proudly held up Tufail's envelopes, "Look at this! Our son has excelled. Bring the sweets on a plate; let's celebrate properly!"

Amidst the jubilation, a pang of unease tugged at my heart. I stood there, a mixture of hope and trepidation swirling within me. While the celebration for Tufail's success echoed around me, my mind was consumed by my own impending results. As my family revelled in Tufail's achievements, I felt like a silent spectator, anxiously awaiting my fate.

As my father opened my results, a hush fell over us. His reaction was subtle, a hint of sadness clouding his expression. Without uttering a word, he handed me the paper, and I gazed at it in disbelief. The stark truth lay before me, declaring my failure in stark black and white,

casting a shadow over the courtyard and dampening the jubilation.

Unbeknownst to the unfolding drama, my mother arrived with a plate of sweets, a joyful smile adorning her face. Yet, as she stepped into the courtyard, an unexpected tension seemed to hang in the air. Sensing the shift, she froze in her tracks. Tufail, who had been the centre of the celebration, now wore a look of shock mirrored by the dismay on our sister's face.

It was a moment frozen in time, a pivotal instant that would forever mark my journey. I stood there, words escaping me, my emotions in turmoil. The weight of disappointment settled heavily, and I couldn't escape the feeling that my own setback had cast a shadow over Tufail's hard-earned triumph. It was an unforgettable memory, a moment that stayed with me, a reminder of my own missteps.

I was shaken, my eyes were moist whilst my mind was blocked and as I stood there frozen waiting to see my father's reaction and possibly wrath, I felt a gentle hand on my right shoulder. As I looked up I could see my father gently smiling and he softly said - 'never mind son, there is always next time. One failure should not stop you from growing and being successful in your future endeavours' His words were so soothing and motivational that I could not hold my tears whilst my father hugged me tight in his arms.

With my father's powerful words of wisdom, I stood stronger than ever. I refused to be defeated. In those very

moments that followed, I made a silent vow to myself. "Yes, I stumbled. Yes, I marred Tufail's celebration. But from this moment onward, I won't let failure define me." With unwavering determination, I embarked on a journey of self-improvement.

The road was tough, filled with challenges, but I embraced them all. I poured my heart and soul into my studies, determined to prove my worth. Gradually, I began to climb the ranks, moving from fifth place to second and finally reaching the coveted first place in subsequent exams.

My story became one of resilience, of a spirit that refused to be broken. Through hardships and setbacks, I redefined my narrative. My failures became stepping stones toward my eventual success. In this transformation, I unearthed a wellspring of strength and tenacity that had always been within me, waiting for the right moment to shine.

Chapter 3

I wouldn't do justice to this story if I only spoke of the good times and times I won, for I wouldn't have achieved it if not for my hard work and effort. The mental strain and fatigue. There were bouts of sadness and grief, anxiety and stress behind the success that I spoke of. So, here is a retelling of the events that led to what marked the beginning of an illustrious academic life—

Back in my fourth-grade days, a restless eagerness had taken hold of me - the kind of longing that only a young heart can harbour. It was a fervent desire to step into a world different from my own, a world that held a peculiar allure - a boarding school named "Victoria Boys' School." The very name whispered promises of adventure and new beginnings. It was nestled amidst the vast expanse of tea gardens that adorned the landscape of Kurseong in the district of Darjeeling.

The thought of the boarding school tugged at my imagination, capturing my young mind with images of grandeur. The uniforms, the classrooms, the camaraderie -

they all danced before my eyes like fragments of a dream waiting to be realised. My heart yearned for the sense of belonging that those hallowed halls seemed to promise.

But dreams, as I was to learn, come with their conditions. My father, wise and pragmatic, laid down the ultimatum. To earn the privilege of admission, I had to prove my mettle academically. "You must excel," he told me, his eyes holding a mixture of sternness and encouragement. "Without academic success, they won't consider your application."

As the days unfolded, a subtle sense of loneliness began to take root within me. You see, my brother, my closest confidant, had tread the path to Victoria Boys' School before me. His presence had been a constant source of comfort, a pillar of support. But when he embarked on his journey to the boarding school, I felt a void in my life that I hadn't known before. His absence was a palpable ache, a yearning for the companionship that had been an integral part of my world. I remember the conversation I had with him just before he left, almost like a goodbye.

"So are you ready?" I asked one day.

"Yeah I guess so." He looked at a book, he seemed bored with it.

"Aren't you nervous?"

"Umm, coming to think about it, actually, no." He put the book down, and looked up at me.

“Really?! How come? I thought everyone gets nervous before moving to a new school.”

“Yeah well I won’t describe it as nervousness, just excitement and giddiness.”

“Hmm, you’re different I guess.” I looked at him in awe.

“How so?”

“Well, you aren’t nervous and you seem excited.” He laughed at my response and with that he opened up the book and continued to read.

Yet, there was another reason that fuelled my desire to walk the hallowed halls of Victoria Boys’ School. It was the thought of the trappings that the school bestowed upon its students. A list, a long and intriguing list, had been circulated - a catalogue of requisites that my brother would need in his new academic realm. Hockey shirts, shoes, boots - they were all part of this tantalizing inventory. And as I gazed upon that list, a spark ignited within me. If I could achieve academic success, if I could stand tall among my peers, then perhaps I, too, would be bestowed with such treasures. No longer would I simply watch from the sidelines, feeling like an outsider. I yearned to be part of that world, to don the garments of accomplishment and stride confidently beside my brother.

Thus, my aspirations were not just driven by a desire for education but also a yearning for friendship, a sense of belonging, and the material rewards that the boarding school represented. It was a juncture in my young life when dreams

were woven with the threads of hope, ambition, and a yearning to step beyond the boundaries of familiarity. And in the midst of it all, the name "Kurseong" held the promise of a future yet unexplored, a world waiting to be embraced.

The winter before the pivotal admission test had me on a journey of its own, a winding path that led me to the hills where the school of my dreams nestled. It was a journey marked by anticipation and a hint of restlessness, each passing mile amplifying the thrum of excitement and trepidation that coursed through my veins. The school's halls awaited me, a backdrop to the challenge that lay ahead.

Victoria Boys School, perched on the hills of Darjeeling in the town of Kurseong, stood as a testament to the pursuit of knowledge in the face of nature's challenges. Its elevated location, at an altitude of more than 1500 meters, marked a departure from the comforts of town life and thrust us into a world where cold winds and breathtaking vistas were part of our daily existence.

The journey to the school was an adventure in itself. It began at a place called Siliguri, nestled at the foothills of Kurseong. From there, a bus ride of one and a half hours awaited us, meandering through the winding roads that led to our educational sanctuary. The ride wasn't what I would describe as comfortable. The seats had sunken in from so much use and there was a smell in the bus that haunted me. It could have been the nervousness of the whole

experience and my mind could have been playing tricks with me, but what I remember vividly from that time was how green the surroundings were. The journey was not for the faint of heart, as the roads, though picturesque, were narrow and steep, demanding the skills of seasoned drivers to navigate the terrain safely.

Our chariots on these treacherous roads were the rugged "Jongas," sturdy jeeps capable of traversing the hilly landscape with ease. These vehicles were more than mere transports; they were lifelines connecting us to the world beyond the hills. The drivers, often Nepali experts, were masters of their craft, their expertise honed by years of manoeuvring through the challenging terrain. They were short men, dark skinned and strong. Most of them had radios blaring with Nepali music and I'd often wonder what they would have been if not drivers. It was something I did often- imagine what people might have done.

As we embarked on our commute, the winding roads and the breathtaking scenery served as a backdrop to our journey of discovery. The crisp mountain air, the sight of distant peaks, and the occasional glimpse of wildlife added to the charm of our daily routine. It was a journey that became an integral part of our school life, a passage from the familiar to the extraordinary, and a reminder that knowledge could be found in the most unexpected of places.

The setting sun painted the sky in hues of orange and gold, casting long shadows that stretched across the landscape.

My heart fluttered with a mixture of emotions - a symphony of eagerness, anxiety, and determination.

"How do you feel son?" My father looked at me, not showing much emotion. I've heard- the eyes are the gateway to the soul. But my father's eyes were gated, and I couldn't tell if he was trying to assess me or comfort me. After all, I was the son who had failed multiple times and brought nothing but shame to him and his family.

"Okay." I said, without looking him in the eye.

"That's it? Just okay?"

"Yes, I am okay."

"Do you feel ready?"

"I think so."

"What do you mean, 'I think so?' shouldn't you be ready by now?"

"I am ready. It's just that I don't want to get my hopes too high."

"And why is that?"

"Disappointment."

"Disappointment?"

"Yes. Disappointment. I've been disappointed most of my life, and not as a result of others, but at an expense of myself. I'm tired of always disappointing you and amma, and most of all, myself."

“You won’t disappoint us. I am sure of it.” And with that he didn’t smile, instead his words held a sense of determination and assurance that comforted me. That was all I needed. I felt every word of encouragement from my father made me stronger and more confident.

The journey, though invigorating, came at a cost. Sleep, that precious balm for a restless mind, escaped me. Thoughts of the admission test danced in my head, intertwining with the whispers of the wind that rustled through the trees. My mind was a whirlwind of hopes and doubts, dreams and uncertainties, each competing for dominance in the sanctuary of my thoughts.

Excitement bubbled within me like a bubbling spring, the prospect of gaining admission into the school I had yearned for held a magnetic allure. It was more than a mere academic endeavour; it was a gateway to the realm of possibilities I had envisioned. The very thought of being part of that revered institution, of walking its halls and imbibing its knowledge, sent waves of exhilaration through me.

However, beneath the surface of my excitement, a current of nervousness flowed. The weight of uncertainty pressed upon my shoulders. What if I stumbled, faltered, and failed to meet the expectations set before me? The spectre of failure loomed, casting a shadow on my dreams. The fear of not measuring up, of falling short in the eyes of others, gnawed at the edges of my confidence. I was brought up in a home where failure was not appreciated, much so not

thought of as ‘part of the journey’ or a ‘learning curve.’ It was victory or nothing and so the pressure of it all weighed on me like a boulder.

It was a delicate balance between hope and fear, a tightrope I treaded as I journeyed toward the school in the hills. The admission test held the power to shape my future, to pave the way toward success or disappointment. As I gazed out of the window at the passing landscape, I carried with me the dreams and aspirations that had led me here, along with the nagging doubts that attempted to anchor me.

The night before the admission test was woven with threads of excitement, nervousness, and determination. My heart held a melody of anticipation and apprehension, a symphony that resonated with the journey of a young soul on the cusp of a defining moment. The hills whispered promises of challenges and opportunities, while the stars above bore witness to the hopes that danced within me. And as the night deepened, I knew that the dawn would bring with it a new chapter, a chance to prove myself and seize the future I had envisioned.

The day of the test dawned cold and unforgiving as if nature itself had conspired to add an extra layer of challenge to the trials that lay ahead. The biting chill in the air cut through me, a relentless reminder of the task at hand. My body quivered, not just from the cold but from a deep-rooted nervousness that had taken hold of me, casting a shadow over my confidence.

As I sat down to face the examination paper, the pen in my trembling hand, I realized that this day was unlike any other.

Silence.

The deafening sound of silence ate me in that hall. All I wanted to do was run away from the noise of the silence. But I knew then that nothing could stop me from taking the test. The test that would determine the rest of my life.

My handwriting, usually neat and controlled, betrayed me on that fateful morning. It had become a scrawl, an illegible mess that mirrored the turmoil within me. Each stroke of the pen felt like an uphill battle as if my very nerves were conspiring against me.

The initial moments of the test were a struggle, a foggy climb through the fog of uncertainty. Doubts clouded my mind, and I questioned whether I would be able to finish what lay before me. The questions on the paper seemed like formidable foes, each one demanding more from me than I thought I could give.

To combat the bitter cold that clung to the room, I had layered myself with two sweaters, their warmth providing some respite from the biting cold. Yet, it was not enough to dispel the shivers that racked my body. The cold seeped into my bones, merging with the nervousness that coursed through my veins, creating a potent cocktail of discomfort and apprehension.

As I battled the elements and my own self-doubt, I reminded myself of the importance of this test. It was not just an examination of my knowledge but a test of my determination and resilience. The cold, the nerves, and the challenging handwriting were adversaries to be conquered, and I was determined to emerge victorious.

The day of the test, marked by its bone-chilling cold and the struggle it brought, was a trial by fire. It pushed me to the limits of my endurance, testing my mettle and resolve. As I persevered through those bitter hours, I knew that the challenges I faced that day would become part of the story of my journey, a reminder that success often requires overcoming the harshest of conditions. I finished the test and walked out of the room with mixed feelings of relief, excitement and uncertainty. I knew the period of uncertainty would be looming for another two months until I received my results.

D-Day was finally here. I looked at the crisp cream envelope. The stamps weren't pasted straight, and the birds on the stamps looked scared. I must have imagined it then, but I was more fearful than the birds on the stamps.

The contents of the envelope held my future; they would determine where I would go and what steps I would take next- if I would bring pride to my parents or eternal shame. The house was silent with trepidation. My parents sat opposite me as I tore open the letter with my father's wasted letter opener shaped like a smiling knife.

“Open it son.”

“I’m scared.”

“Just open it.”

“I can’t do this. I just can’t.” My eyes were glassy now as I held back tears. I couldn’t cry because it would warrant a scolding from my father.

“Shaku...” my mother trailed on, before continuing, “open it now dear. Don’t worry.”

“What if I haven’t done well?” I looked away from the letter and into my mother’s eyes.

“It’s done. You’ve done everything you could and now you can’t change the results. Open it and find out, once and for all.” My father looked at me with a mix of sternness and pity. I think he didn’t want to see me fail, not a second time.

My hands were sweaty from being overwhelmed from the situation and my eyes darted around the room like a scared deer in the spotlight. But what scared me was not my sadness or tears of the shame that would ensue but the disappointment on my father’s faces. They wouldn’t say anything, I knew they wouldn’t, they would just look down and utter words of comfort that would leave their lips and not their hearts. That was what scared me.

I slowly slit open the envelope, carefully, slowly, so as to not damage the contents within and my eyes immediately scanned the piece of paper only to see the words–

'We are pleased to inform you of your acceptance into...'

That was all I needed. Those were the words I had worked so hard for. I looked up from the piece of parchment, unable to digest and process the information. My parents sat opposite me, at the end of their chairs, hoping for the news to be good, with dinner-plated eyes and beating hearts that could be heard from a mile away.

"What? Shaku, what?!" My father said out loud.

"I got accepted." I said softly.

"What?"

"I'm accepted." I said out louder. A smile slowly lit up my face.

"What's wrong with you? Scaring me like that! I thought you didn't get accepted when I saw your face!" and with that, my father ran over to me and embraced me.

The weight of anticipation that had been resting on my shoulders lifted, replaced by a sense of elation that filled every corner of my being. I was to embark on a new chapter of my life, and the prospect was exhilarating. And with that, the rest was history. It's very easy to give up on a dream, so easy, in fact. But what makes a dreamer different from an achiever is the latter acts to fulfil their dream, and that was exactly what I did.

Victoria Boys School held an air of distinction, a place where dreams took flight and young minds were nurtured to reach their full potential. As I received the confirmation that I would be entering its halls as a fourth-grader, my heart swelled with pride and excitement. The journey ahead was paved with promise, a promise I was eager to explore and embrace.

In the shadows of this excitement, the presence of my elder brother added an extra layer of enthusiasm. He had paved the way for me, a trailblazer in his own right, and now I was to follow in his footsteps. The thought of joining him in this new academic adventure filled me with a sense of companionship that only siblings could share. The bond we had woven over the years was now being extended to the realm of education, and it was a connection that made my heart swell with joy.

But beyond the anticipation of reuniting with my brother, there was another facet of my newfound excitement. The prospect of donning the school uniform, a symbol of identity and belonging, held a special allure. The sight of countless uniforms hanging neatly in the wardrobe, each one representing a day of discovery and learning, ignited my imagination. It was a visual representation of the journey that lay ahead - a journey of growth, of forging new friendships, and of expanding horizons.

The dawn of my first day at Victoria Boys School brought with it a kaleidoscope of emotions, swirling within me like

a symphony of uncertainty and anticipation. It was much like eating something spicy followed by sweet- a burst of confusing flavours. As I stepped into the halls of the school, I was greeted by a sea of unfamiliar faces, each one a potential friend or ally in the uncharted territory of a new beginning. I walked along the edge of the corridor, my eyes darted around like a terrified bird and looked for signs of comfort, anything that would remind me of something I knew.

The teachers, pillars of knowledge and guidance, stood before us with welcoming smiles, their eyes filled with the promise of a transformative journey ahead. Their presence was both reassuring and daunting, a reminder of the responsibility that lay ahead. I looked at each of them, my heart a mix of awe and respect, realising that they held the key to unlocking the doors of understanding and enlightenment.

Mrs. S. Banerjee, our class teacher, was a master of the arts, a conductor of creativity and expression. She was not only responsible for moulding our young minds but also for instilling in us a love for drama, poetry, and debate. Her classroom was a canvas where words and emotions swirled, and where we learned to harness the power of our voices. When I look back, all I can remember was how much I enjoyed her class and how much she made us think out of the box. I've seen plenty of teachers who came and left, like ghosts in my life, but there were only a handful who made an actual impact on me as a child.

Mrs. S. Banerjee also served as my house teacher in Kellas House, a role that brought us closer as a cohesive unit, fostering friendship and teamwork among my fellow housemates. Under her guidance, we explored the realms of performance and rhetoric, nurturing skills that would serve us well in the years to come.

Mr. J Das Gupta, the headmaster, was a figure of authority who held a unique position within the school hierarchy. He presided over not one but two offices - one within the school grounds and the other, known as the "top office," perched atop the hills that overlooked our institution. From his elevated vantage point, he had a commanding view of the school grounds and all the activities that unfolded below. It was said that he had a watchful eye, one that could discern even the smallest of infractions.

In fact, I vividly remember Mr. Gupta catching two students smoking within the school premises. I didn't see this incident in particular, but I remember my friend recounting the incident with much detail, for he had been among the boys who hid behind the trees and watched it unfold before their eyes.

"Here give me a light." The boy said to a friend of his as they ducked behind a broken wall on the outskirts of the school premises. The friend pulled out a lighter and flicked it multiple times, before they both lit their cigarettes with it. Puffs of smoke filled the air and they didn't cough, just stared at the sky, they were used to the terrible smoke expanding in their lungs.

"I warned you boys about this." A voice thundered several minutes later. The boys, they scrambled to get away but it was too late, the headmaster grabbed them by their shirt collars and dragged them out from behind the broken wall.

"Sir, please forgive us." The boys cried out.

"Hah! Forgive you? I explicitly said you can't smoke. What is there to forgive when you have disobeyed me?"

"Sir please! Please Sir! We will not do it again!"

"Stop whining. Kneel here." They were in the grounds now, it wasn't lunch break so there were hardly any children around for them to witness the embarrassing incident. It just so happened that some of my friends who were bunking a class they hated, got a view of the debacle that unfolded.

"Sir please!" They whimpered.

"Show me your hands."

"Sir please..."

"Now! Put out your hands!"

The boys reluctantly showed their bare hands and awaited the punishment. For what seemed like hours to the boys they were beaten. It was not limited

The consequences were severe, with the student receiving a beating that left bruises for weeks. Mr. Gupta's disciplinary actions were known to be unwavering, proof of his commitment to maintaining order and upholding the

school's values. But it was precisely this that steered me away from my mischievous habits and fancies.

Despite his strict demeanour, Mr. Gupta was, at heart, a kind and fair man. Although I did not have the privilege of meeting him on my first day, our paths crossed several days later. I soon learned that while he demanded discipline and adherence to rules, he also supported and encouraged students who showed dedication and excellence in their studies and conduct. His support, albeit stern at times, was a guiding force that helped shape the character of many young minds within the school.

Victoria Boys School was not just a place of learning but an institution created with the influence of remarkable educators like Mr.A Banerjee, Mr. D. Banerjee , Mr. M.D.Moktan, Mr T. Das , Mr.S. Mukherjee, Mrs S.Banerjee, Mrs D. Bhattacharya and Mrs .Roy Choudhary. Their lessons, both in the classroom and through their actions, taught me not only the value of knowledge but also the importance of discipline, creativity, and the pursuit of excellence. In the years that followed, their teachings would become the cornerstone of my educational journey.

Among the sea of faces, I soon found solace and friendship in the company of those who shared my journey, both in spirit and geography - peers who would share in the adventure that awaited us. Bonds were formed with each introduction; laughter echoed through the corridors as we exchanged stories and shared glimpses of our hopes and

dreams. It was in those moments of connection that the intimidating landscape of the unknown began to transform into shared experiences.

Arshi, Baiju, and Deepak were not my classmates, but they might as well have been. They were classmates of Tufail and took me in with open arms. They hailed from my hometown, the very place I had left behind in pursuit of education and opportunity. Arshi, in particular, was not just a friend; he was a neighbor back in our hometown. As the only son, he was privy to a world of facilities and luxuries that sometimes left me in awe. Our shared roots and hometown ties bound us together, bridging the gap of years that separated us in the school hierarchy.

In addition to these, dear friends like Pranay and Phurba hold a special place in my heart. They were more than just companions; they were my confidants, the ones I could turn to in times of joy and adversity. Our bond ran deep, nurtured by shared experiences and mutual trust. Together, we navigated the challenges of our academic journey, each offering support and encouragement when it was needed most.

Anand, Tahqiquil, Sanjay and Sumanto, too, occupied a cherished space in my circle of friends. While not as inseparable as Pranay and Phurba, they were reliable comrades, lending a sense of companionship and unity to our group. Together, we forged memories and faced the trials and tribulations of school life.

The friendships I cultivated within the walls of Victoria Boys School were not just alliances of convenience; they were pillars of support and understanding. These companions, whether from my hometown or neighbouring ones, transcended the boundaries of age and classrooms, making our journey through the school's corridors one filled with shared laughter, shared challenges, and shared aspirations.

Yet, within this newfound camaraderie, there was a unique designation that set me apart. I was Junior Raza, a moniker that emphasized my position as the younger sibling of an already established presence within the school. My brother's legacy, his footsteps imprinted on the path I now tread, served as a reminder of the lineage I was now a part of. It was a name that carried a sense of belonging and responsibility, a mantle that I was both proud to carry and anxious to uphold. At the same time, I would be lying here to say I wasn't intimidated by the footsteps I had to follow suit in. I wanted to stand out in my own way, leave my mark, I wanted to be remembered for something novel altogether. I didn't like that I was always part of a shadow, away from the spotlight, away from the eyes that saw me for who I was, and this was something I carried with me for a long time.

My first day unfolded like a whirlwind of emotions, a carousel of fear and excitement that took me from one encounter to the next. I met my teachers, each one a guardian of knowledge, and my fellow students, who were companions on this uncharted voyage. The atmosphere

was different from what I had known - a chill in the air that wrapped around me like a comforting embrace. The school's location in the hills introduced me to a climate I was not accustomed to, prompting me to don woollen shirts and mufflers to ward off the cold.

As the day unfolded, I began to acclimate to the new surroundings. The initial fear and apprehension gave way to a sense of belonging, and the excitement that had once fluttered like a trapped butterfly in my chest began to take flight. The halls echoed with the laughter and chatter of new friendships, and the knowledge that I was a part of this vibrant community filled me with a sense of purpose. I distinctly remember walking into a class I knew no one in and sat towards the back. If I could melt away into the walls where no one could see me, I would have done so. But there was a part of me that was competitive, a part of me that wanted to do well. I needed to show the teacher that I was deserving of my seat in this school.

"The answer is 436.25," I replied when the teacher asked us if we knew it.

"Yes, you're right. That was fast, umm—what's your name?"

"Syed Raza."

"Ha, okay, that was quick Syed, well done." She turned to the board and began explaining to the rest of the class what the answer was and for a moment everything turned out as I glowed with pride. School wasn't so hard, maybe I could do it. My cheeks burned with a sense of accomplishment

and that was when I realised, I wouldn't fall behind, not when I came here to conquer.

In my quiet moments when I would retire to bed, my father's words of inspiration would always echo as if he was whispering in my ears - 'Do well son , work hard- I am there for you' . Each morning, I would wake up with more strength and courage and would thank my father for being my inspirational hero.

The first day, with its mix of sentiments and experiences, marked the beginning of a journey that would shape my character, mould my intellect, and leave an indelible mark on my heart. From Junior Raza to a member of a growing brotherhood, I stepped forward into the embrace of my new school, ready to embrace the challenges and discoveries that awaited me.

The first night in the dormitory was a blend of emotions that tugged at my heart. Excitement, like an electric current, surged through me, making it difficult to find rest. The novelty of the dormitory, the anticipation of new experiences, and the company of unfamiliar faces kept my mind racing, leaving little room for slumber. Yet, amidst the excitement, a pang of sadness clung to my thoughts like a shadow. The distance from my parents and the familiarity of home weighed heavily on my heart, casting a bittersweet hue over the night.

“Ssshhhhshhh. Light’s out.” The warden said out loud in his deep voice.

The boys scrambled to their bunk beds with thin mattresses and hid under their sheets. But as soon as the warden left, some of them got out of their bunks and started making noises around the room, disturbing the others and allowing no one to get rest easily. Then, I found it humorous, the novelty of the experience was what led me to feel that way. It was only later that I found the boys and their childish pranks disturbing and inconvenient.

Morning arrived with a jolt as the sun's first rays filtered through the windows, announcing the arrival of a new day. But it wasn't the sun that roused me from my dreams; it was the urgent voice of someone nearby. Startled, I realised that I had overslept, a realisation that struck a chord of fear within me. The night and early morning had conspired against my slumber, and now the repercussions were upon me. The unfamiliarity of the dormitory and the routines that governed it were still a puzzle to me, and I hurriedly prepared myself for the day that lay ahead.

Breakfast was a revelation, albeit not in the way I had anticipated. The dining hall, a hub of morning activity, presented a spread that didn't quite match my expectations.

The bread, though hard to chew and swallow, seemed like a minor inconvenience compared to the eggs that emitted an off-putting odour.

“Can you chew this bread?” I asked a boy closest to me at the table. He looked my age and was silent the whole meal.

“Yes. Why?”

“Isn’t it hard?”

“It is.”

“Then how are you eating it?”

“You figure it out and get used to it. I dip mine in some water or tea. It really depends on my mood.”

“The eggs though? They’re bad right?” I said, hoping he would reply in the affirmative. I couldn’t stand the stench of them.

“Maybe. I don’t really know. It’s hard to tell when you keep coming here and have the same food over and over again.”

“But it smells bad.” I looked at the eggs in disgust.

“You know how I tell if the food is good or bad?”

“How?”

“I will eat it.”

“What?!”

“Yes, that’s the only way to tell. If it tastes okay, then it’s fine to eat. If it tastes bad, then you’ll probably be stuck in the bathroom longer than you need to be.” And he giggled.

The meal left much to be desired, and the tea that accompanied it went untouched, an unintentional gesture

of my hesitance towards unfamiliar tastes. I was reminded of my father's words of wisdom. He would say 'as a student your main focus should be on studies and this may mean sacrificing sleep and food. Son, these sacrifices will pay you back one day.'

As breakfast concluded, the morning assembly loomed on the horizon. The gathering was conducted in a manner that mirrored the precision of a military drill, a display of discipline that both fascinated and intimidated me. Rows of students stood in unison. The air was charged with a sense of purpose, a reminder that this institution demanded not only academic excellence but also a commitment to structure and responsibility.

The assembly gave way to the commencement of classes, and we were guided to our respective classrooms. Each step I took carried a mixture of uncertainty and anticipation, a step into a new world of learning and growth. The walls of the classroom embraced us, becoming witnesses to the lessons that would shape our minds and fuel our aspirations. The day had begun in earnest, and as I settled into my seat, I couldn't help but feel a flutter of excitement mixed with a dash of trepidation.

The journey had only just begun, and the first night in the dormitory and the experiences of the morning were a prelude to the many chapters that awaited me.

Chapter 4

Entering the boarding school marked a turning point in my life. It was a place of new beginnings and fresh opportunities, but it also came with a weight of expectations and responsibilities that I couldn't ignore.

I can still vividly remember the mixed emotions on my father's face when he came to drop me at school knowing very well that I will be away from them on the hills for several months but for the right cause. When we parted, he gently lay his hand on my head and softly said I will miss you son but be good and prove your worth. He did not hug me. I am sure he would have found it difficult to hold his emotions. But I always felt his presence by my side holding me and giving me directions.

With each passing day, I found myself immersed in my studies, dedicating both day and night to my academic pursuits. It was as if a newfound determination had taken root within me, fuelled by the knowledge that my parents had placed their hopes and dreams on my shoulders. Their

sacrifices and belief in my potential were a constant reminder of the stakes at hand.

The past, with its disappointments and setbacks, was a shadow that I was determined to leave behind. The boarding school experience, with its structured environment and rigorous academic standards, offered a fertile ground for my transformation. It became clear to me that my only motive was to excel, to prove that I could rise above the challenges that had previously held me back.

The library became my sanctuary, the classrooms my battleground, and my textbooks my allies. I immersed myself in my studies, seeking not only to meet but to exceed the expectations that had been placed upon me. The late-night study sessions and early morning revisions were a testament to my commitment to change the trajectory of my academic journey.

“Can you switch off that light already?” A voice floated from under a blanket.

“Mmmhmm” I said back, my focus was on the math book in front of me.

“Go to sleep will you.” The boy was in my class, and he slept right next to my bed. There were times I felt bad that I disturbed his sleep, but as the months went on at school, I realised I needed to be selfish. No one was going to study for me and if I wanted to do well, I needed to put in the effort.

“Sorry, I’ll switch off the light soon.”

“You better.”

As the days turned into weeks and then months, I could feel the transformation happening within me. The subjects that had once seemed insurmountable became conquerable. The doubts that had plagued me were replaced by a growing sense of confidence. With each passing exam, I inched closer to the goals I had set for myself.

But beyond the pursuit of academic excellence, there was a deeper sense of purpose that drove me forward. It was the desire to make my parents proud, to repay their faith in me with tangible results. Their hope in my abilities became a powerful motivator, a force that pushed me beyond my limits.

The boarding school experience, with all its challenges and expectations, shaped me into a diligent and determined student. It was a chapter in my life where I learned the value of hard work, perseverance, and the importance of not letting past failures define my future. The journey was arduous, but it was a journey I was willing to undertake, knowing that the rewards would be worth the sacrifices made along the way. Beyond this, I always felt confident that I always had the blessings and support of my father. I knew he was surely deep inside happy seeing me move in the right direction.

Returning home for the winter break was a moment of great anticipation. The semester had been a whirlwind of intense studying and late nights. As I stepped back into the warmth of my family's home, I couldn't help but feel a sense of fulfilment and hope. But as the days flew past, I yearned to go back to the mountains and breathe in the cold mountainous air. Nevertheless, the weeks spent with my family were weeks filled with love and good food, enough to sustain me for the coming semester.

"I'm so glad you're home." My father said one evening as we looked at the horizon that painted a picturesque masterpiece before our eyes.

"I'm glad I'm back to be honest."

"Didn't you enjoy school?"

"I did, but it was tiring and I needed a break."

"You should take breaks when you're at school or you'll burn out."

"I know, I do, but everyone's really smart over there. I need to put in a little extra effort for me to stand out. To do well."

"You already make us proud; you can take a break every now and then."

I looked at him and saw the wrinkles that hid past experiences I could never comprehend, but beyond that I saw a resilient man, an inspiration to me and my brother.

“Don't worry, I'll give you something better to be proud of.”

The results of the final exams, which had taken place in November just before the break, were eagerly awaited. They were to be sent through the post, and each day brought with it a growing sense of excitement and anxiety. My parents, aware of the significance of these results, awaited the envelope that would carry the news of my performance.

Finally, the day arrived when the envelope bearing my exam results made its way into our home. The moment was both nerve-wracking and exhilarating.

“I did study hard this time.”

“We know, son.”

“Then why am I afraid?”

“Because you care.”

“But I don't want to be afraid. I don't ever want to be afraid in my life.”

“You don't have to be afraid now.” My father held my shoulder with a reassuring grip. “Open it now, you would have done well. I'm sure of it.”

With trembling hands, I carefully opened the envelope, revealing the contents that would determine the outcome of months of hard work and dedication.

As I pulled the white piece of parchment, my eyes scanned the paper only to see a line of straight A's. To my immense joy and relief, the results were better than I had hoped for.

I had not only performed well; I had secured the top position in my class. It was a moment of immense pride, not just for me but for my family as well. My parents beamed with happiness, knowing that their faith in me had been well-placed.

“I knew it. I knew you had it in you.” My father replied with a grin on his face. He was a man of few words and showed little to no emotion, so any act of emotion on his part towards us children was taken in with open arms.

As we celebrated this joyous occasion, there was an added layer of satisfaction. My brother, my steadfast companion on this academic journey, had also achieved the highest honours in his class. It was a testament to our shared commitment to excellence and the unwavering support we had provided each other.

The winter break became a time of celebration, of sharing our achievements with family and friends. It was a reminder that hard work, determination, and the pursuit of excellence could yield not only personal success but also shared moments of pride and happiness.

My journey at the boarding school continued for 7 years, and with each passing grade, my commitment to academic excellence remained unwavering. Year after year, I proudly held the position of the top-ranked student in my class. My dedication to my studies had become a defining characteristic of my school life.

Even when the school encouraged participation in extracurricular activities and allocated time for play and recreation during the late afternoon and early evening, I remained steadfast in my pursuit of knowledge. While my peers engaged in games and social interactions, I often chose to immerse myself in the world of books and study materials.

The playground, a place meant for laughter and camaraderie, often saw me seated on a bench, engrossed in my books. While others played, I continued to expand my knowledge and deepen my understanding of the subjects I was passionate about. The allure of learning held a greater fascination for me than any game or social gathering.

“Shakeel, come play with us.” A boy from my class cried out.

I looked up from my Biology book and smiled an awkward smile refusing the offer.

“Come on man! We are short of one player.”

“Sorry no. I need to go through this lesson. There is much to learn and remember.”

“Tsk. I’ll find someone else.” and he muttered something under his breath. Then I had assumed he had something along the lines of, “useless fellow,” but I’ll never know. And to this date, I often wonder if I should have agreed to that game of soccer. Sometimes I think back to my years in school and wonder if I should have taken it easier, maybe

even played the fool and made more memories, for report cards never etch

My participation in extracurricular activities was minimal. While the school offered a plethora of opportunities to explore interests beyond the classroom, my singular focus remained on academics. It was not that I didn't enjoy downtime among my friends, but the drive within me was a fire that kept burning, serving as a constant reminder that I was made for more. I often found solace in the quiet corridors of the library rather than the bustling activities of clubs and teams.

For me, each day was an opportunity to learn, to grow, and to inch closer to the academic goals I had set for myself. While others enjoyed the joy of play and social interaction, I revelled in the acquisition of knowledge. It was a choice I had made, one that defined my school years and ultimately paved the way for my continued success in academics.

Looking back, my school years were marked not only by my academic achievements but also by the unwavering determination that fueled my journey. The path I had chosen was one of rigorous study and relentless pursuit of excellence, and it was a path that I walked with pride and purpose.

Every word of inspiration and encouragement that my father told me echoed deep inside me and that made me look onwards and upwards aspiring to greatness. I was soon

embracing new beginnings and paving the way for future achievements.

My journey through the school years had moulded me into a highly competitive student, fueled by an unyielding desire to maintain my position as the top-ranked student in the class. The atmosphere around me was charged with academic competition, and I thrived in this environment, pushing myself to excel further with each passing day.

Studying late into the night became a routine—the pursuit of knowledge knew no bounds, and I often found myself burning the midnight oil, pouring over textbooks and notes long after the rest of the world had retired to their beds. The darkness that enveloped me while I studied and the snoring of my friends served as a reminder that success doesn't come easy, it wasn't for the faint of heart. Only for those who put in the extra work. I remember very clearly not grasping concepts in math and I would stare at the symbols in my book, lost for words, my train of thought disrupted and my bed beckoning for me. We weren't fortunate to have Google or YouTube to solve problems we didn't understand, so it was either teachers or a big, old book from the library that could help us through. But at one in the morning, it wasn't easy to access these two resources and so, I'd mark the chapter with a red gel pen and wait till the sun took its time to rise and the cockerel crowed and it was time to head off.

But it wasn't just the late-night study sessions that defined my commitment. I was willing to go to extreme lengths to

secure my position. There was a particular science exam that stands out vividly in my memory. On the eve of the exam, I made the decision to stay awake throughout the night, studying relentlessly. I didn't allow a single wink of sleep to claim me, determined to absorb every bit of knowledge that could give me an edge.

As the night wore on, and my classmates fell asleep, I remained seated at my desk, fuelled by sheer willpower and a burning desire to succeed. The clock seemed to tick slower, and the darkness outside gave way to the first rays of dawn. With each passing moment, I delved deeper into the subject matter, determined not to leave any stone unturned.

"Students put your pens down, the time is up!" The invigilator bellowed.

I continued writing and the invigilator continued to pull papers from children's tables as they let out sighs of defeat. No one would be granted a morsel of extra time. But I continued to write, and every second flew by until the invigilator towered at my table.

"Hand over the paper."

"Sir, please just one minute."

"Hand it over now."

"B-But I'm not done."

“I don’t care.” With that he pulled the paper that was pinned to the table with my blue pen and as he pulled the paper, a blue trail of ink branded it.

It wasn't until the evening after the exam that exhaustion finally caught up with me. I had pushed my physical and mental limits to the extreme, and it was only when the pressure was lifted that my body allowed itself the luxury of sleep.

This moment, the night of relentless studying and the subsequent exam, remains etched in my memory as a testament to the extraordinary amount of work and dedication I had put into my studies. It was a symbol of the sacrifices I was willing to make to achieve my goals, and a reminder that success often requires an unwavering commitment to excellence.

But this relentless pursuit of academic excellence had exacted a toll on both my physical health and psychological well-being. It was a journey marked not only by sleepless nights and tireless studying but also by periods of illness and silent suffering.

There were moments when I found myself battling fever and colds during crucial exams, and yet, the fear of falling behind or missing an opportunity to learn compelled me to hide my ailments. The school had a customary practice of admitting sick students to the hospital for recovery before they could return to classes. However, the fear of missing lectures, falling behind in my studies, and the

pressure to excel meant that I often resisted seeking medical attention.

I vividly remember pushing myself to attend exams even when I was clearly unwell. The determination to succeed, to maintain my top position, was so ingrained that I was willing to endure physical discomfort and pain. It was a choice I made, driven by the relentless pursuit of my goals.

I remember one moment in particular, when I was down with a fever and had attended an English class so as to not miss my lesson. My eyes were red and my skin burned with a fever so high that even the sweater that I wore on top did little-to-no work of keeping me warm. Then, I didn't know I wasn't supposed to cover up- I was but a child and my sole focus was to get all the knowledge I needed for the exam. It was not until my friend who looked at me in dismay and tapped my shoulder as I wrote down the notes with my head on the table so as to rest it from the sheer exhaustion of the lack of sleep, that I realised I was too sick to continue.

"Syed, you need to go get some medicine for your flu."

"It's not a flu, just a slight temperature. I took some paracetamol I had with me. I'll be fine."

"Well, you don't look fine."

"I am fine. Trust me."

"How am I supposed to trust you when you're wearing two sweaters and your eyes are red? You never put your head

down in class. You answer almost all the questions and you are slow.”

“Thanks for being so observant.” I said sarcastically and rolled my eyes. “I am fine. Just do your work.” And with that I continued with my studies despite my body crying for help. My parents would remain unaware of my minor illnesses. There were no mobile phones those days and I can remember that I never even had a telephonic conversation with them on the landline phone. Once in a while, I would receive a postcard from my father enquiring about my studies more than wellbeing. The letter would be short and so would be my reply - ‘I am well and my studies are going fine’ and a few more sentences on weather and my upcoming exams.

As the toll on my health persisted, it began to manifest in visible ways. I lost weight, and the strain on my body was mirrored in the deterioration of my eyesight. For a significant period, I kept my struggles with my eyesight hidden, unwilling to admit that my dedication to my studies had taken a toll on my physical well-being.

The impact on my eyesight became increasingly evident, as reading and focusing on study materials became a challenge. It was a silent battle I fought, refusing to acknowledge the toll my relentless pursuit of academic success had taken on my body.

It was not until the midst of my eighth-grade year that my vision troubles finally came to light. A few observant

teachers had noticed my persistent squinting during class, and they urged me to undergo a vision test.

"Syed, can you see the board?" My Physics teacher asked, as I squinted at the graph on the board. I couldn't see where the two points intersected to draw my graph.

"Umm, y-yes sir." I didn't want anyone knowing of this. I didn't want to accept that I was having trouble with my vision.

"Then tell me, what are the two points that intersect to draw the graph?"

"Umm, according to my calculations—" but before I could finish, he cut me off.

"I'm not asking for your calculations. I know full well your calculations are right and you would have gotten the answer. I want to know if you can see."

"Well..." I trailed on, afraid to tell a lie, that the teacher would sniff it out.

"That's it, your parents will know of this." And with that he walked out of the class and into what I presumed to be the Head teacher's office.

The school, recognising the need for further examination, wrote to my father, advising him to have my eyes checked.

During that year's holiday break, my father took me to an optician for a comprehensive eye examination. What I learned during that visit was both surprising and revealing.

The optician informed me that I had a significant refractive error, and my prescription called for rather thick corrective lenses. To be precise, my vision required lenses with a prescription of -4 or -5, a revelation that astounded me.

The optician's assessment shed light on a reality I had been oblivious to for years. In hindsight, it became clear that my vision troubles had likely plagued me for an extended period, but I had simply chosen to ignore them. The relentless focus on my studies had blinded me, quite literally, to the fact that my eyesight was deteriorating.

The day I received my new glasses marked a turning point in my life. As I put the thick pair of glasses on for the first time, the world came into sharper focus, revealing details and clarity I had been missing for years. It was a transformative experience, as if a veil had been lifted from my eyes, allowing me to see the world anew.

This revelation was not only a lesson in the importance of self-care but also a reminder that sometimes, in our pursuit of excellence, we overlook crucial aspects of our well-being. My journey through school had taught me the value of hard work and determination, but it was the discovery of my vision troubles that underscored the importance of balance, self-awareness, and taking care of one's physical health.

Looking back, I realise that the drive for excellence had come at a cost—one that affected both my physical and psychological health. The pressure to succeed, the fear of falling behind, and the relentless work ethic had led me

down a path of silent suffering. It was a lesson learned in retrospect, a reminder that true success encompasses not only academic achievement but also the well-being of the mind and body. But was I doing these for myself or for my father ? This question lingered on with me every time. But I wanted the question to remain unanswered as I moved on in my life.

Academic life had become an integral part of my identity, and my dedication to my studies had consistently borne fruit. I consistently ranked at the top of my class in most subjects.

In my linguistic pursuits, I had Hindi as my second language and Nepali as my third language. Each subject, whether it was mathematics, science, or literature, became a canvas for me to paint my dedication and determination, striving to excel in every aspect of my academic journey.

One of the memorable events during my school years was the "Speech Day," a special occasion that held a place of honour in the school's calendar. It was a day when all the subject toppers, including myself, were recognised and celebrated for their exceptional performance. The prizes awarded on this day were not mere tokens; they were beautifully bound books, treasures of knowledge that further fueled my love for learning.

What made this day even more special was the way the prizes were announced. The school would call out the

names of the subject toppers, starting with the junior school and progressing to the middle school and senior school. It was a tradition that allowed us to follow in each other's footsteps, my brother Tufail and I, as we took turns ascending the stage to collect our well-deserved prizes.

The announcement would ring out, "First prize for English, Junior school, SMS Raza," and I would step forward with a sense of pride and accomplishment. The same announcement would follow for the middle school, "First prize for English, Middle school, SMT Raza," and Tufail would take his turn. I've heard plenty of people say kids will never remember their grades at school once they leave, but I disagree, it was because of these grades that I received prizes and the Speech Day was one that I will never forget. I just wished my father was present there to witness the glory of my achievements. I missed him so much on these occasions of triumph.

These prizes were more than just accolades; they were a testament to the hard work and dedication that had become a way of life for us. They served as a reminder that with perseverance and a love for learning, we could achieve great heights in our academic pursuits.

As we stood on that stage, year after year, collecting our prizes, we shared not only in the recognition of our achievements but also in the bond of brotherhood and the values instilled in us by our parents—the values of hard work, dedication, and the pursuit of excellence.

The pursuit of academic excellence was a journey that often-brought moments of great satisfaction and pride. Among the many milestones in my academic career, there were a few that stood out vividly, etched in my memory as symbols of my dedication and commitment.

One such moment was when I received a perfect score, 100 out of 100, on a chemistry test. It was an achievement that left both me and my teacher beaming with pride. The sense of accomplishment was palpable in the classroom as my teacher congratulated me on my exceptional performance. To commemorate this achievement, my teacher presented me with a special gift—an exquisite science book that would further nurture my love for the subject. “Now children quieten down. I have something to announce.” The chattering in the class lowered and the teacher had the classes undivided attention. “Since Syed has done extremely well in this last test, I’d like to present him with a gift to acknowledge his hard work. I also want everyone to know that all of you have potential and that each and every one of you can do as well as Syed and probably receive a book just like this.” He lifted a thick chemistry book, its beautiful binding, my eyes sparkled at the copy. “Syed, why don’t you come up and collect it?” The class erupted into claps as I hung my head low and stifled a shy smile. The teacher shook my hand and presented the somewhat heavy book, followed by a pat on my back. When I look back it was the simplest moments and interactions

with people that fuelled my drive to do well and for that I am very grateful.

Another remarkable moment occurred in my English class, where I once again achieved a perfect score on a test. This time, it was Mr. T. Das who stood as a witness to my dedication and proficiency. He recognised the significance of this accomplishment and chose to reward me with a book that held a special place in the world of English grammar and composition—a book by Wren and Martin.

These instances were more than just academic achievements; they were affirmations of my relentless pursuit of excellence. They served as tokens of recognition, awarded by teachers who saw my potential and were proud to guide me on my educational journey. These books, with their wealth of knowledge, became treasured possessions, reminding me of the heights I could reach with determination and dedication.

The pride of my teachers and the sense of accomplishment I felt during these moments of academic excellence fueled my passion for learning. They were reminders that hard work, diligence, and a thirst for knowledge could lead to not only success but also moments of recognition and celebration on the path of education.

My father always encouraged me to write. He would always mention that the good thoughts and ideas should not just stay confined and rust within the four walls of your brain

but they should be penned and painted so that they can reach people around you and beyond.

My passion for writing extended beyond the confines of the classroom. It was a creative outlet that allowed me to explore my thoughts and express myself in multiple languages. Writing became an art form I cherished, and I immersed myself in it with zeal and enthusiasm.

Participating in essay writing competitions was a natural progression for me. These competitions provided a platform to showcase my writing skills and share my perspective on various topics. It was an opportunity to challenge myself, to craft persuasive arguments, and to articulate my thoughts with clarity.

My involvement as the editor of the school magazine was a significant milestone in my writing journey. It was a role that allowed me to shape the narrative of our school's literary endeavours. I dabbled in writing in four languages—English, Hindi, Bengali, and Nepali—but my primary medium was English. It was through this role that I honed my editorial skills, working tirelessly to ensure that the magazine showcased the best of our school's literary talent.

In addition to the school magazine, I also had the privilege of overseeing the "WALL" magazine, another avenue for creative expression within the school community. This experience broadened my understanding of the editorial process and reinforced my commitment to the written word.

Beyond essays and articles, I ventured into the realm of poetry. Writing poetry allowed me to delve into the depths of my emotions and capture the nuances of life in verses and I accumulated a collection of my own poetry.

“Syed, why don’t you publish your poems?” My teacher looked up from the paper that held a short poem of mine.

“Ha! I don’t know. It never crossed my mind.” I rubbed the back of my head in embarrassment.

“You should try. They are really good. Do you have more than the few you have already shown me?”

“Yeah I do, but I haven’t really shown it to anyone.”

“And why is that?”

“Some of it is personal. I don’t really like anyone reading my thoughts.”

“So why do you write?”

“For an escape. For peace.”

“Poets carry everyone’s secrets but never their own.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Promise me. You have a lot of talent, Syed. You just don’t see it.”

“I promise.”

The process seemed daunting, and I was uncertain about how to navigate the world of publishing. As a result, my

collection remained a personal treasure, a reflection of my creative journey.

Writing, in all its forms, had become an integral part of my identity. It was a means of self-expression, a tool for intellectual exploration, and a source of immense satisfaction. Whether in essays, articles, poetry, or editorial work, writing was the lens through which I viewed the world, a journey of self-discovery that continued to shape my academic and creative endeavours.

While my primary focus was always on academics, I understood the value of a well-rounded education, which included participation in extracurricular activities. Games may not have been my favourite pastime, but I still took part to maintain a balanced school life. However, it was in the realm of drama that I found my true passion and purpose.

Drama became my primary extracurricular activity, and it was a pursuit that brought me immense joy and fulfilment. I had the privilege of being guided by a remarkable mentor, Mr. A. Banerjee, who was not only an actor in Bengali films but also my Geography teacher. His passion for the art of drama was infectious, and under his guidance, I delved into the world of theatrical expression.

It was not just Mr. Banerjee who played a pivotal role in nurturing my love for drama. His wife, Mrs. S. Banerjee, who had been my class teacher during my formative years in class 4 and 5, as well as my house teacher, was another influential figure. Though she passed away a few years ago,

her impact on my life remains profound. May her soul rest in peace. Both Mr. and Mrs. Banerjee shared a common goal: to encourage and inspire students to embrace the world of drama.

Their guidance and support created a nurturing environment where students were encouraged to explore their talents and express themselves through the medium of drama. It was a space where I could unleash my creativity, step into different roles, and experience the magic of storytelling firsthand.

Drama not only allowed me to develop my acting skills but also honed my abilities in communication, teamwork, and self-expression. It was a medium through which I could convey complex emotions, messages, and connect with audiences on a deeper level.

My involvement in drama enriched my school experience, adding a dimension of creativity and personal growth to my academic pursuits. It was a reminder that education extended beyond textbooks and classrooms, and that the lessons learned on the stage were just as valuable in shaping my character and perspective on life.

As my involvement in drama deepened, so did my passion for the art of storytelling. In the pursuit of creativity, I took a bold step during my eighth or ninth year by writing a play. It was a transformative experience, as I ventured beyond acting to become the playwright, crafting the narrative and characters that would come to life on the stage.

I stayed up late into the night and used every free moment to cut or rewrite dialogue, think about the set, talk to others who were immersed in drama and read plenty of dramatist's work.

The process of writing a play allowed me to explore the intricacies of storytelling in a new light. I had the opportunity to shape the dialogue, the plot, and the emotions of the characters, infusing my own creativity into every scene. Seeing my words come to life through the talented actors and actresses was a source of immense pride and satisfaction.

But my creative endeavours didn't stop at playwriting. I also delved into the world of music and songwriting. Alongside like-minded peers, I became part of a small musical group known as "Ripples." Our group was a harmonious blend of diverse talents, featuring a drummer, guitarist, singer, and a bongo player.

Together, we embarked on musical journeys, crafting melodies and lyrics that resonated with our shared experiences and emotions. It was a fusion of creativity and friendship, with each member contributing their unique talents to create beautiful harmonies and rhythms.

These creative pursuits—writing plays and songs, and being part of a musical group—added layers of artistic expression to my school years. They were outlets for my imagination and allowed me to connect with others through the universal language of art and music. These experiences

enriched my understanding of storytelling and the power of music to evoke emotions and convey messages.

Mr.A. Banerjee's influence extended beyond the realm of drama; he played a pivotal role in introducing me to the world of singing. I had never considered myself a singer, and my initial response was one of doubt. I remember telling him, "I can't sing," but he saw potential where I did not.

With unwavering encouragement, he insisted, "No, I think you've got a good voice. Try it." He was determined to help me explore this new avenue of creativity. To facilitate my journey into singing, he brought in an old cassette player and played a haunting Ghazal song.

Under his guidance and with his belief in my abilities, I mustered the courage to sing that song at a concert. It was a moment of vulnerability and growth, stepping into uncharted territory with my voice. The response from the audience was overwhelming—I received praise and recognition for my singing.

From that day onward, a newfound passion for singing blossomed within me. It was a passion that transcended the confines of the stage and became a part of my everyday life. I began singing Bollywood songs, exploring melodies and lyrics that resonated with my emotions.

Singing became more than just a creative pursuit; it became a source of joy, a means of self-expression, and a way to connect with the world around me.

To this day, I continue to sing Bollywood songs, carrying with me the memories of that transformative moment when Mr. A. Banerjee ignited a passion within me. It serves as a reminder that sometimes; all it takes is a guiding hand and a leap of faith to unlock the potential that lies within us.

As I look back on those formative years, I cherish the memories of the creative endeavours that filled my days, reminding me that education is not just about academic excellence but also about nurturing the spirit of creativity and the joy of self-expression.

Chapter 5

In 1985, after I finished school the important question on my mind was where I would go to college. I had a list of few colleges in Delhi and Bangalore and I was weighing the pros and the cons of each. The more I thought about this, the more confused I became. When there was not enough clarity and when I felt I needed directions, I approached my saviour - my father for advice. Without another thought, my father told me 'son, pursue your rest of academic journey in Aligarh. This will also open doors for you to study Medicine'. His advice which was without hesitation seemed to make sense but I also then realised that he wanted me to pursue Medicine and become a doctor like him. 'Well, Doctor?' I was not too sure then. I soon also realized the second reason he wanted me to study in Aligarh - he himself graduated from Aligarh Muslim University in the 1950s and always boasted to be a proud alumnus of AMU. That evening at the dinner table, he told me a lot of good things about AMU and gave me names of several starlets of national and international fame

including the third President of India, Dr Zakir Hussain who had studied here.

Nevertheless, soon I embarked on a transformative journey, leaving behind the serene hills of Darjeeling for the bustling hub of Aligarh in Uttar Pradesh, home to the esteemed Aligarh Muslim University. The transition from the familiarity of my school life to the daunting realm of college was almost like I was stepping into an entirely new world.

Aligarh was starkly different from Darjeeling in every conceivable way - the environment, the cuisine, and most notably, the weather. My discomfort in this new setting was palpable. I had bid farewell to the cool, scenic hills of Darjeeling, where every breath was a refreshing respite. In contrast, Aligarh was an ancient city, with an atmosphere steeped in history, mystery, and urban allure.

My academic journey commenced in the first week of September, precisely on the 5th day of the month. Unfortunately, this was the peak of summer in Aligarh. I found myself yearning for the comfort of those cool hills, the green landscapes that had cradled my childhood, and the scenic beauty that had been my constant companion.

Darjeeling had always been a place filled with freedom—a lively community where individuality blossomed and everyone was encouraged to be unapologetically themselves. It was a place where people were close-knit and celebrated diversity, embracing each other's unique quirks and stories.

In contrast, life at the Muslim University was different. The university had a clear sense of structure, aiming to build character and discipline in its students. It was a place where Islamic values were at the heart of everything, but this was woven together with a forward-looking, adaptable mindset. Here, students weren't just learning in the classroom—they were being shaped into people who balanced tradition with modern thinking, striving to become responsible and thoughtful citizens.

Yes, the strictness at the university could feel confining at times, but it showed their dedication to nurturing a generation rooted in Islamic values, ready to face the world confidently and ethically. This contrast between Darjeeling's openness and the university's discipline made my college experience richer, pushing me to blend my personal freedom with a sense of moral purpose.

My first week at university was one of the most eventful weeks I have had in my life. One of the common and dreaded traditions in our college was the introduction process, commonly known as ragging. It was a practice where the junior students were expected to do whatever the seniors instructed them to do. This tradition was met with a mix of emotions among the newcomers, most of whom feared for their lives and made all possible plans to escape the ordeal.

With Friday being a holiday, the seniors turned Thursday evenings into a night of initiation rituals, and the buzz

around it would hang over campus all day. Some juniors tried to avoid it by hiding out in their dorm rooms, hoping to slip under the radar. But the seniors had a knack for finding them, determined to bring everyone into the fold. No matter where they hid, the freshmen were soon pulled into the night's chaotic fun, part of a tradition they couldn't escape and one they'd remember for years to come.

The initiation process often unfolded under the cover of night, with a chill in the air adding to the nervous energy among the juniors. For some, it was a harmless rite of passage; for others, it could be uncomfortable, even unsettling. This mix of excitement and apprehension was woven into the college experience, creating a shared memory that connected students across different years and helped bridge the gap between the newcomers and their seniors.

"Get up! Get up! Come and stand in a line here." A senior commanded that night. I had been instructed to obey and not question, not to draw attention to myself, that it would be easier to escape their terrible pranks.

"Not there men, don't you understand a straight line?" They shouted at a couple of freshmen who were shivering. That was another thing, don't ever show them you were afraid, they'd capitalise on it like hungry hyenas.

"Ahh good. Perfect! Now all of you take scissors from this box and find a partner." I did as I was told. I found a boy

from my dorm and stood opposite him, both of us held scissors in our hands.

“Now what?” He whispered to me.

“I really don’t know. Just follow what they’re saying and we can get out of here soon.” He nodded at me, I could see the fear in his eyes.

“All have scissors, no? Okay now give each other a haircut.” There were groans that echoed.

“What? Have a problem?! I’ll be happy to give you all a haircut.” And out of his pocket he pulled out a giant pair of scissors. Everyone knew they’d look patchy the next day, but it was better having a friend cut their hair than a senior who seemed like he wanted to chop your ears off.

“Are you going first or should I?” I asked the boy.

“You go. Don’t cut it too short or I’ll look funny and try to keep it all the same length.”

“I’ll try but no promises, okay? This is the first time I’m cutting hair.”

Snippets of hair fell near his ankles and the next day we went to class with patchy heads.

The Sherwani held a special place in the heart of university life. At the Muslim University, this classic, traditional attire was more than just clothing—it was a symbol of respect, pride, and belonging. Almost like an unofficial uniform, the Sherwani connected students across generations,

embodying the legacy of those who had walked the university's halls long before. For each student, wearing it was like stepping into a rich history, carrying forward the values and spirit that defined the university.

My father, during his time here, wore the Sherwani with pride, and over the years, it had become a treasured family tradition. Wearing it felt like a bridge between past and present, honouring the continuity of the university's legacy.

Donning the Sherwani was a ritual, reserved for the most meaningful occasions. On Founder's Day, steeped in tradition and celebration, the Sherwani was worn with pride to honour the institution's beginnings. During debate competitions, it was a symbol of the commitment to intellectual growth, and when welcoming esteemed guests, it became a gesture of respect and warmth, showcasing the university's deeply held values.

This attire had become much more than just fabric and stitching. It was a badge of honour, a reminder of the past, and a symbol of the university's enduring customs, carrying forward the timeless spirit of the Muslim University.

During my time at the university, I had the opportunity to explore not only the confines of the classroom but also the diverse culinary offerings on the sprawling campus. Hostel food, while far from gourmet, was passable. It typically consisted of bread, mutton, and a variety of fruits, offering the nourishment needed to fuel our academic endeavours.

One of the most fascinating aspects of campus life was the presence of the vibrant *Dhabas*. These small, local eateries became synonymous with the university experience. They opened their doors as early as 7 in the morning and sometimes continued serving until midnight. The rattle and ding of metal trays and utensils as they called out orders for students to come pick up will still remain fresh in my inward eye. The *Dhabas* offered a delightful array of dishes, from steaming cups of tea to hearty meals that catered to every palate.

The university had gained fame for its *Dhaba* culture, and some critics claimed that students frittered away their time indulging in idle chatter. Yet, I found these experiences to be an integral part of my time at the university. The lively discussions and casual interactions at the *Dhabas* provided a unique sense of community. It was here that friendships were forged, debates were kindled, and memories were created.

“Pass me the Gulab jamuns.”

“They’re over.”

“Why didn’t you say so? Can we have another portion of Gulab jamuns Bachcha!”

The Gulab jamuns sizzled in the oil and were tossed in the syrup before being served at their table. Before anyone realised, the bowl was empty and happy chatter continued for the rest of the evening.

In addition to the campus *Dhabas*, students also had the option to venture into the city for their meals. One particular place that gained notoriety among us was the *Amin Nisha* market. What made this market stand out was its proximity to the girls' hostel, which sparked quite a bit of excitement among the male students.

It was the hub of activity on Fridays, for that was the day the girls were granted an outing. Naturally, the young lads, driven by curiosity and the timeless allure of the opposite gender, flocked like crows to this market on Fridays. It became a tradition of sorts, a day to 'look' at the girls.

Friday held a unique charm, not only for the prospect of catching a glimpse of the girls but also because it marked the beginning of the weekend. The weekend, spanning Friday and Saturday was a welcome break from the rigours of academic life. It was a time to relax, unwind, and create cherished memories with friends.

The adventures in *Amin Nisha* market, the excitement of Fridays, and the leisurely weekends all added vibrant strokes to the canvas of our college life, making it a chapter to be fondly remembered.

In addition to the *Amin Nisha* market, the most awaited fair of the year, *Numaish*, a lively spectacle that unfolded from late January to early February, painted the city with a diverse array of colours and pulsating energy. The air was thick with the scent of excitement and the myriad aromas wafting from stalls. Traders from distant corners of the

country set up shop, creating a bustling marketplace where the air was alive with the cadence of haggling and the hum of animated conversations.

The fairgrounds were a visual feast, adorned with vibrant stalls showcasing clothing, ornaments, and handicrafts. The explosion of colours from traditional textiles and intricate jewellery contrasted with the earthy tones of handmade crafts. The lively chatter of traders touting their wares blended seamlessly with the eclectic music that filled the air.

My father often talked about the *Numaish* during our casual conversations and that it was the most awaited event every year.

Jhanda and Nazeer Hotels, two culinary havens within the fair, were more than just eateries. They were aromatic hubs where the rich scent of spices mingled with the tantalising aroma of sizzling delights. The centrepiece of gastronomic delight was the renowned "halwa paratha" – a savoury symphony of chicken curry and naan, tempting taste buds and leaving a lasting imprint on the fairgoers' memories. The oil dripped from our fingers as we tore big chunks of the paratha and dipped it in the thick chicken curry. To say it was delicious would be an understatement, even now as I write this, I am transported back to those hours, where a paratha and a chicken curry, as simple as they are, could take you away from the mundane and dreary world.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, the fair transformed into a vibrant wonderland illuminated by myriad lights.

The bustling crowds, a mosaic of diverse faces, added to the overall beauty of the fair. Laughter, music, and the hustle and bustle of the fair formed a harmonious symphony, echoing through the streets.

On the allocated days for hostel visits, the atmosphere became charged with anticipation. The uni-sponsored trips created a carnival-like vibe, with students eager to explore the wonders of *Numaish*. The fairgrounds became a stage where youth dressed in their finest, each outfit a canvas of self-expression. The boys, in particular, seized the opportunity to impress as they flocked to the fair on the days designated for the girls' hostel.

And like that our lives slipped past.

We hardly noticed.

The aromas and sounds blended into a palette of colours—

I now cling onto and look for in the fragments of my memory.

The food in the hostel mess was just enough to fill our stomach but not enough to satisfy our tastebuds. Most of the time, it was simple food, heavy on the oil, and left an aftertaste that lingered. The menu was pretty predictable: lamb or buffalo meat as the mainstay, occasionally paired with a few vegetables and always served with bread or naan. It was enough to keep us going through long days of lectures and studies, but it was far from a satisfying meal.

But Fridays were special—a day to look forward to all week. On Fridays, the mess would surprise us with a feast that broke the usual monotony. Out came the Biryani, rich and flavourful, tender meat dishes, and, as a sweet touch, Gulab Jamun for dessert. This special dinner felt like a reward, a much-needed change from the daily meals, and a little taste of home.

Being a food lover, I didn't stop at the mess menu. After dinner, I'd head out with friends to explore the local restaurants, and together, we made a tradition of sampling every eatery we could find. Over time, I became a bit of an expert on the city's culinary landscape, always searching for new flavours and hidden gems. Each restaurant added a fresh chapter to my food journey, and the joy of sharing those meals with friends made every outing memorable. Not a single spot went unvisited, and every discovery became a part of my culinary adventure.

One of the most memorable events on campus was Sir Syed Day, a grand celebration honouring the university's founder. This wasn't just any day—it was an event of pageantry and pride, marked by festivities that drew in students, faculty, and even distinguished guests. The centrepiece of Sir Syed Day was the special dinner, where everyone gathered in a festive atmosphere to celebrate together. The occasion mixed academic respect with cultural vibrance, often stretching over two or three days, filling the university with a sense of tradition and excitement.

Beyond Sir Syed Day, the university had a lively lineup of competitions and events, from poetry and essay contests to debates and dramas. These events offered students the chance to express themselves, showcase their skills, and connect with others who shared their passions. I threw myself into these activities, participating eagerly and finding a thrill in the spirit of competition and the friendships that came with it. These events quickly became a huge part of my college experience, adding colour and excitement to my days.

My passion and commitment to these activities eventually led to my appointment as the Cultural and Literary Secretary of my hall of residence—a role that was both an honour and a chance to give back to the university's cultural life. In this position, I helped organize events that fostered creativity and intellectual growth, which not only enriched my college journey but also helped me discover the importance of balancing academics with cultural expression.

The pursuit of a medical degree was not an easy path, and my journey through the rigorous program had its fair share of challenges. It began with my 10+2 studies, where I had chosen to specialise in science, particularly biology, chemistry, and physics. This choice was driven by my unwavering determination to become a medical professional and that's what my father always wished for. How could I let him down, I always thought. But at times,

the nervousness deep inside me was well palpable - ‘what if I could not make it?’

As the big entrance exams for medical school crept closer, I went into full-on study mode. In the last six weeks, I took a pretty extreme approach: I moved into an empty room that belonged to a senior who’d gone on vacation, turning it into my own private study hideout. It was like a self-imposed exile, a way to shut out the world so I could focus completely on one thing—acing those exams.

I pretty much vanished from everyone’s radar. No one knew where I was, and I made sure it stayed that way. That room became my whole world, with everything I needed set up inside. I even ate my breakfast and lunch there, refusing to leave for anything that might break my focus. The only time I’d step out was in the dead of night, when campus was quiet and empty, so I could avoid running into anyone.

My days fell into a steady rhythm of intense study sessions, broken up by short naps to recharge. I pushed myself harder than I thought I could, going over my books and notes late into the night until I’d see the first light of dawn creeping in. Those six weeks were a blur of exhaustion and determination, driven by my dream of becoming a doctor. It was a marathon of pure focus, and looking back, it was one of the most challenging—and defining—times of my life.

Preparing for the medical entrance exam was a monumental task, and like many aspiring students, I decided to seek some additional guidance through coaching classes. However, I quickly realised that leaving

the sanctity of my self-imposed study chamber to attend these classes was disrupting my focused routine. After just a couple of days, I discontinued the coaching, trusting my own rigorous self-study approach.

The evening our results were released, I had been in my room before a close friend of mine came to me with the news that the results were up on the notice board in the Dean's office.

"I think I saw your name." My friend burst into my room with the news.

"What?! You did?"

"I'm not sure, I think I did. It's best you go see for yourself."

"Where are the results?"

"At the Dean's office as usual." And with that I decided I needed to see for myself. I didn't want to get my hopes too high, for my friend's name was on the list and in the excitement may have misread my name. It was a battle between hope and fear- would I be on that list or not?

To quell the fear and hope, I decided against going to the Dean's office right then, for it was crowded as my friend had mentioned and instead decided to go out for dinner. As the night crept in and enfolded all the buildings with a dark blanket, I hopped onto my bike and whizzed past several buildings to get a meal at the *Dhaba*. But as much as I hate to admit that I couldn't control my emotions, I took a sharp turn and rode off towards the Dean's office.

In a frenzied state, I searched for my name on noticeboards my name wouldn't have been on, the simple act of finding the right notice board in itself was a difficult task- not when you've put in so much effort to get selected. When I did finally find the right board, my eyes searched for my name and beads of sweat lined my neck and forehead- it was the stress that had gotten on me.

And there it was, my name, in perfect black letters. I had been selected.

In my flurry of excitement and hope, I knew the first person I had to tell was my father.

I eventually called my father on the phone from a nearby paid phone booth to let them know of the good news. The news he had been waiting for. While my own excitement was palpable, it was eclipsed by the overwhelming joy and pride that radiated from my father. He had long harboured the dream of seeing me become a doctor, and my success was a realisation of his deepest aspirations. The moment was one of shared triumph, not just for me but for my family, as we embraced the realisation that I was one step closer to fulfilling a lifelong dream.

When I look back on my youth, I'd say my friends were the ones who brought a smile to my face. They were the ones who brought colour into my life. My friend group consisted of five- Abid, Sajid, Faiyaz, Abbas and myself.

Abid was an enigma among our group of friends. Despite not being particularly dedicated to studying, he managed to excel in exams effortlessly. His calm and collected demeanour in the face of pressure became a topic of discussion among us. We often found ourselves marvelling at his ability to remain cool and composed when the rest of us were grappling with the stress of exams and assignments.

In moments of intense pressure, Abid's tranquillity stood out. We would share puzzled glances, wondering how he maintained such a calm exterior amidst the academic chaos. The mystery of his unruffled nature became even more apparent during the viva exams. While the rest of us battled nerves and anxiety, Abid sailed through, seemingly unaffected by the pressure.

His unflappable calmness became a source of inspiration and curiosity for us. We couldn't help but wonder about the secret to his serene approach to academic challenges. Abid's presence in our group added a unique dynamic, a reminder that success could be achieved not only through intense study sessions but also through a measured and composed mindset.

Abid and I shared a friendship that went way beyond textbooks and exam halls—it was built on countless rides through the narrow streets of our college town, with my old, trusty bicycle at the center of it all.

Every time we set off on one of our two-wheeled adventures, we had an unspoken tradition: Abid would hop onto the front seat, and I'd take charge of the pedals. Together, we'd

weave through the bustling lanes, feeling the cool rush of wind on our faces and the gentle creak of the bike beneath us. Those sounds became like our own little soundtrack, a rhythm that captured the easy camaraderie we shared.

But our rides weren't just about getting from point A to point B. Every so often, I'd suggest that maybe he should take a turn pedalling, just to switch things up. That's when Abid's sly smile would appear, followed by his favourite excuse: "Ah, my doctor says my heart isn't quite up to it and should stay away from physical exertion like this one ." It was a complete invention, of course, a playful excuse he knew would get us both laughing. His "heart condition" was as real as the tooth fairy, but somehow, it became part of the fun.

That bicycle was more than a way to get around; it was a vessel for laughter, banter, and quiet moments of understanding. Riding through the winding streets, hair tousled by the breeze and the familiar clink of pedals beneath us, I felt lucky for these simple moments. They were filled with freedom, friendship, and a joy that needed no words.

Among our group of friends, Sajid was the one who truly embodied the spirit of hard work and academic excellence. His dedication to his studies was something to be admired, and it showed in the way he breezed through entrance exams, earning spots in both the medicine and engineering programs. While we all had our own dreams and paths, Sajid's ambitions were on another level—he was pursuing not one, but two different worlds of knowledge. In our

circle, he became the gold standard of focus and determination, always setting the bar higher for all of us.

The shift from 10+2 to college didn't weaken the bond we had built over the years—those late-night study sessions, endless laughter, and the camaraderie that defined our friendship. What made this new chapter even more memorable was that all five of us, including Saajid, made it into the field of medicine. It was a proud moment for us all, a symbol of our hard work and the unbreakable ties that had carried us from high school into the exciting unknown of college life. Our collective achievement felt like a seamless continuation of everything we had shared, a beautiful reminder that no matter where life took us, we were in it together.

As we embarked on this new chapter together, Sajid's studious nature continued to inspire us. His ability to balance the demands of both medicine and engineering entrance exams spoke volumes about his dedication and intellect. Despite the rigours of our respective academic pursuits, our bond endured, weaving the threads of friendship into the fabric of our college experiences. The journey from 10+2 to college was not just a progression of academics; it was a continuation of the shared narrative that defined our close-knit group.

Faiyaz and Abbas hailed from affluent business families in the bustling city of Kolkata. Growing up in the lap of luxury, their educational journey began in reputable schools within the city. While both were studious and

academically inclined, Faiyaz infused a playful element into their dynamic with his mischievous sense of humour.

Faiyaz, with his penchant for cracking jokes, added a light-hearted touch to the otherwise serious academic pursuits. His mischievous nature earned him the title of being slightly naughty, a quality that brought a smile to the faces of their peers.

“We’ve got a lot to cover for the anatomy quiz tomorrow. Let’s not get distracted, okay?” Abbas adjusted his glasses, his tone serious.

“Yeah,” Abid chimed in, “we can’t all rely on just breezing through like Abbas.”

“You’re right,” Faiyaz said, leaning forward with a mischievous grin. “We can’t all be Abbas. Some of us have to be... well, *better*.”

Abbas rolled his eyes. “Oh, very original, Faiyaz. Your comedy is as sharp as a butter knife.”

“Oh, come on!” Faiyaz leaned back, clearly enjoying himself. “You’re just jealous because you can memorize bones, but you can’t tickle funny bones.”

“Okay, I’ll give you that one,” Sajid said with a laugh. “But can we focus now?”

“Sure, sure,” Faiyaz replied, holding up his hands in mock surrender. “But first, a serious question—why don’t skeletons fight each other?”

“Why?” Abid asked, a grin already forming.

“Because they don’t have the guts!”

The group burst into laughter, the tension from their studies dissolving for a moment.

“All right, you win this round,” Abbas said, smiling despite himself. “But if you keep this up, Faiyaz, I’m prescribing you a dose of silence.”

“Silence?” Faiyaz gasped in mock horror. “That’s not medicine, Abbas. That’s torture!”

Laughter rippled through the group again, their spirits lifted before diving back into their books.

Abbas, on the other hand, found himself at the centre of friendly banter within the friend group. His serious and focused demeanour often made him the target of good-natured teasing. The rest of the group would pull his leg, creating an atmosphere of camaraderie where each member played a unique role, and Abbas became the unwitting protagonist of their playful antics.

Despite their diverse personalities, Faiyaz and Abbas complemented each other within the group, forming a duo that blended studiousness with a touch of mischief. The backdrop of Kolkata's vibrant culture and their shared educational experiences in prestigious schools became the foundation on which their unique friendship flourished.

Abbas, among our circle of friends, stood out as the most distinct personality. With a mind brimming with

innovative ideas and a keen business acumen inherited from his affluent family in Kolkata, he viewed the pursuit of medicine through a unique lens. While the rest of us were immersed in the ideals of the medical field, Abbas saw it as a means to a business opportunity and financial gain.

His business-oriented mindset was evident in his candid declaration that, despite our shared journey in medicine, the ultimate goal was to earn money. For Abbas, the medical profession was not just a calling; it was a lucrative venture waiting to be explored. He'd often assert, "We're here to make money, not just to treat patients."

Abba's grand vision involved creating a hospital, a business empire that would transcend the confines of traditional medical practices. His aspirations extended beyond practicing medicine; he wanted to build an institution where others worked under his helm. With a wry smile, he would jest about offering jobs to me and the rest of our friends, envisioning a future where we were part of his financial empire.

However, the response from the rest of us was a unanimous rejection, laced with humour. "No, no, Abbas, we don't want to come work in your crap hospital," became a playful refrain among our friends. And we'd laugh not knowing what the future held in store for us.

Despite the differences in our aspirations and perspectives, the bond of friendship among us remained strong. We weren't just study companions; we were a tight-knit group

that relished each other's company. Our friendship extended beyond the walls of the classroom.

Frequent outings to cinemas and shared meals became a regular occurrence. Whether it was catching the latest blockbuster or savouring the flavours of Kolkata's diverse culinary scene, our friendship thrived on these simple pleasures. I don't think young adults, let alone any person realises what it means to be living in the moment. When you watch death saunter after you, you gain a new meaning of a small cup of chai shared in the night. The lights dim and the owls out for their meals. The words shared over that cup of chai will carry people through the darkest tunnels of their lives.

Our adventures extended beyond the city limits, with trips to nearby places becoming a cherished tradition. One such escapade took us to the enchanting Hill Station- Nainital.

The joy of success echoed through the air as we received the news that all of us had not only passed but were selected for the journey into the world of medicine. It was a momentous occasion that called for a celebration, and what better way to commemorate this achievement than a trip to Hill Station- Nainital.

Abbas, with his business-minded approach, chose to sit out on this particular adventure, perhaps preoccupied with his future schemes. However, the rest of us embarked on the journey, eager to savour the sweet taste of success before delving into the rigours of medical college.

The picturesque landscapes of Nainital became the backdrop for a week filled with laughter, shared stories, and the promise of a bright future. We revelled in the tranquillity of the hill station, immersing ourselves in the beauty of nature. Each day brought new adventures, from exploring hidden trails to indulging in local delicacies that tantalised our taste buds.

The scenic beauty and serenity of the hill station provided the backdrop for memories that would be etched in our hearts forever.

As the week unfolded, the bonds of friendship strengthened, and the memories we created together became a treasure trove that would sustain us through the challenges that awaited in medical college. The trip to Nainital served as a prelude to the next chapter of our lives, a chapter that held the promise of growth, learning, and the enduring camaraderie that had defined our journey thus far. It was a week well spent, a respite before the commencement of a new academic adventure.

Amidst the excitement of entering the world of medicine, a subtle pang of sadness lingered at the back of my mind. It was a sentiment tethered to my brother, Tufail, whose aspirations to pursue medicine had remained unfulfilled as he met with a road traffic accident that shattered his dreams of pursuing Medicine as he missed the opportunity to sit for the medical entrance exam. Despite his stoic demeanour and the practised art of concealing emotions, I

could sense that deep down, Tufail harboured a tinge of disappointment.

Tufail, resilient in the face of unmet dreams, opted to forge a different path. He continued his academic journey with a BSc in Chemistry, demonstrating a steadfast determination to carve his own narrative. Yet, as time unfolded, so did his plans. An unwavering resolve settled within him, guiding him toward a new horizon.

With the vision of an MBA in the United States on the horizon, Tufail paved the way for a different academic pursuit. The allure of an MBA in the U.S., with its accessible pathways, captured his imagination. Despite the challenges and uncertainties that lay ahead, Tufail embraced the idea of international education, carving a new trajectory for himself.

While I delved into the complexities of medical studies, Tufail, in his pursuit of an MBA across the seas, showcased a resilience that echoed the silent strength of our familial bond.

Unfortunately, his dreams of pursuing a medical career had been ruined by an accident, and the lingering disappointment cast a shadow over his aspirations. As he engaged in heartfelt discussions with our father, the desire to transcend the borders of India and pursue an MBA in the United States emerged as his newfound goal.

“You’re still thinking about this MBA?” Father’s voice was calm but carried an edge of scepticism as he set his cup of tea down on the table.

Tufail nodded, his expression firm yet respectful. “Yes, Abba. I’ve thought about it a lot. Medicine isn’t in the cards for me anymore. The accident—” He hesitated, the weight of unspoken disappointment hanging between them. “It changed everything. I need to move forward.”

Father leaned back in his chair; arms crossed. “Forward, you say. And the U.S.? An MBA? Tufail, that’s not exactly a plan. MBA is what people do when they’re lost, unsure of where to go.”

Tufail’s jaw tightened, but he kept his voice steady. “I’m not lost, Abba. I know what I want. An MBA isn’t just a fallback—it’s a way to build a new future. The opportunities there are endless. Business is where I see myself growing now.”

“You had a future here,” Father countered, his tone firm but not unkind. “Medicine is a noble profession. A career of stability and respect. You could still reconsider.”

“Reconsider?” Tufail’s voice rose slightly, but he quickly reined in his emotions. “Abba, I’ve spent sleepless nights thinking about this. Medicine was my dream, but it’s not possible anymore. I need to focus on what is possible.”

“And you think running away to another country is the answer?” Father asked, his brows furrowing. “You’ll leave your home, your family, for something so uncertain?”

“I’m not running away,” Tufail said firmly. “I’m making a choice. A choice to stand on my own feet, to create something for myself. Yes, it’s far, and yes, it’s a risk, but it’s a risk worth taking. Staying here and dwelling on what I’ve lost won’t help anyone.”

Father sighed, the lines on his face deepening. “Tufail, I only want what’s best for you. It’s hard for me to see this as anything more than—” He paused, searching for the words. “As a gamble.”

“It’s not a gamble if I’m willing to put in the work,” Tufail said softly. “I need you to trust me, Abba. I need you to believe that I’m not giving up—I’m just finding a different way.”

For a moment, silence filled the room, the tension thick but not unkind. Finally, Father nodded slowly, though the worry in his eyes remained. “You’ve always been stubborn,” he said with a faint smile. “If this is the path you’ve chosen, then go. But remember, the world out there is not as forgiving as a father’s love.”

Tufail smiled, a small but grateful curve of his lips. “I’ll remember. And I won’t let you down, Abba. I promise.”

In the confinements of those conversations, Tufail revealed the depth of his yearning for a different path, one that would take him beyond the familiar landscapes of our homeland. The untrodden territories of the U.S. beckoned him, promising a fresh start and an avenue to fulfil aspirations that had been momentarily derailed.

However, amidst the expression of his dreams, Tufail encountered a challenging response from our father. An opinion, though perhaps well-intentioned, bore the weight of disapproval. The notion that pursuing an MBA was for those who lacked direction in their lives emerged as a discouraging sentiment. It was a viewpoint steeped in traditional perspectives, and while it may have been offered with paternal concern, it carried a dismissive undertone.

Despite our father's suggestion to reconsider medicine, Tufail remained resolute in his decision. The allure of pursuing an MBA in the U.S. had captured his imagination, and he was determined to forge a path of his own. The clash of dreams and expectations within the familial sphere became a testament to the complexities that often accompany divergent aspirations. Tufail's journey toward his MBA in the U.S. was a pursuit of independence and the realisation of dreams that transcended the boundaries set by circumstances.

As the culmination of meticulous preparations drew near, Tufail found himself on the precipice of a new chapter in the United States. Upon arrival, the initial step involved an enlightening counselling session where his aspirations for an MBA shifted gears toward a different trajectory—engineering.

The counsellor outlined a pivotal step in this transition—an examination delving deep into the realm of mathematics, with a primary focus on calculus. For Tufail, who had been a proficient math student since his early years, the challenge

posed by the exam seemed more like a familiar puzzle. He approached the test with confidence, manoeuvring through the complexities of calculus effortlessly.

The results were a testament to Tufail's mathematical prowess, and a smile etched across his face as the counsellor announced his exceptional performance. The offer of a spot in the engineering program came like a beacon of accomplishment, and without hesitation, Tufail gleefully opted for the chemical engineering course.

The news of this academic pivot reached our father, who, much to Tufail's satisfaction, greeted the revelation with joy. The prospect of chemical engineering resonated with a sense of fulfilment, dispelling any lingering doubts or reservations. In that moment, Tufail's decision to pursue a different path than the initially envisioned MBA was met with paternal approval and genuine happiness. The unfolding journey in the United States marked the beginning of a new educational odyssey—one that aligned more closely with Tufail's inherent strengths and aspirations.

I began my five-year journey into medicine, a path that would shape not just my career but also who I was becoming.

From 1987 to 1992, I immersed myself into studies. Every lecture, every late-night study session, and every exam brought me closer to understanding the complexities of the human body.

Chapter 6

The soft glow of dawn slipped into the room, nudging me gently from sleep. Outside, the world was beginning to stir, but my mornings always started the same way—with a quiet ritual that set the tone for my day.

I'd settle by the window, where the first rays of sunlight cast a golden hue on the still world outside. The newspaper lay on the table, its crisp pages waiting to unfold stories of the world. For the next thirty minutes, I'd lose myself in its columns, my eyes savouring the elegance of written English. Each headline, each article, was a window into the broader tapestry of society—politics, culture, and global events weaving a narrative far beyond my immediate life. When I finally folded the paper, I shifted my focus from the chaos of the world to the intricacies of medicine. For the next hour, the pages of my medical books became my universe. Each word was like a puzzle piece, slowly coming together to reveal the bigger picture of healing and care. It was a quiet yet determined rhythm, bridging the gap between the

knowledge I sought and the practice I was preparing to embrace.

Each morning, I found myself drawn into the quiet world of my books, where the mysteries of anatomy, pharmacology, and the ever-changing landscape of medical science waited to be unravelled. The gentle rustle of pages turning became a soothing rhythm, a reminder of the journey I had chosen—a journey that bridged the present with the boundless depths of knowledge.

Studying wasn't just about passing exams or fulfilling a routine. It felt like a sacred ritual, a daily pilgrimage to the wellspring of understanding. Each page held the promise of growth, each paragraph a step closer to mastering the art of healing.

The books weren't just tools; they were my companions, each one a mentor in its own right. From the timeless classics to the newest discoveries, they carried the wisdom of those who came before, their words lighting the way through the intricacies of medicine. In their company, I wasn't just a student—I was a seeker, committed to honing the skills that would one day define me as a healer.

As the sun climbed over the horizon, casting a warm glow on the waking world, I wrapped up my morning ritual with a refreshing shower. The steady stream of water felt like a gentle reset, washing away the stillness of the early hours and preparing me for the day ahead.

Breakfast, though simple, was the comforting finale to my morning routine before I stepped into the world of medicine. It was a quiet pause, a moment to refuel before the day's challenges began. Two slices of bread, generously buttered, paired with a bowl of creamy yogurt, and crowned by the occasional indulgence of three or four pieces of jalebi—this was my steadfast morning ritual throughout medical school. There was something grounding about the predictability of it all. In the midst of academic chaos and the unpredictable demands of my studies, this small act of consistency anchored me. The balance of flavours—the crisp sweetness of jalebi, the soft tang of yogurt, and the warmth of buttered bread—was more than sustenance. It was a symbol of my roots and my perseverance, a quiet reminder that even in pursuit of lofty goals, simplicity had its place.

Now, looking back, that modest meal feels like a gentle nudge to my ego, a reminder of where I began. It keeps me connected to the hard work and humility that shaped my journey, proof that every big dream is built on small, steady steps.

After the meal I'd wear my white coat, hung over my shoulders like a badge of purpose as I pedalled my bicycle to the storied grounds of Aligarh University. Each turn of the pedals matched the steady rhythm of my thoughts, a quiet anticipation carrying me to another day of discovery. Among the pathways and lecture halls, we medical students moved as a distinct group, marked by our coats—a symbol

not just of achievement, but of the commitment to the demanding path we had chosen.

At Aligarh, the campus buzzed with the energy of diverse pursuits. Engineering, business students, and countless others walked those same grounds, each chasing their own aspirations. Yet, there was a subtle recognition, almost unspoken, that surrounded the medical students. The weight of our studies—memorizing the intricacies of anatomy, mastering pharmacology, and unravelling the complexities of medical science—set us apart. It wasn't arrogance, but a quiet respect that seemed to echo in the way others acknowledged our journey.

Hanging my white coat apron as I stepped into the academic halls, I felt a sense of belonging to a tradition where the coat symbolized more than just a uniform—it was a badge of dedication and pride. The corridors around me buzzed with a shared purpose, echoing with the footsteps of students from diverse fields. Here, medicine intertwined with engineering, business, and countless other disciplines, creating a symphony of knowledge within the walls of Aligarh University.

The camaraderie that blossomed between us—students of vastly different callings—was a testament to the unity that higher learning fostered. We walked together, each carrying the weight of our unique challenges, yet united by a shared respect for one another's paths. Medicine brought its intricacies, engineering its precision, and business its

strategies, but we were bound by a common goal: to grow, to learn, and to contribute to the world in our own ways.

The hostel became my haven during the pivotal years of medical school—a place where aspirations from every corner converged, forming a unique sanctuary of ambition and camaraderie. Unlike most medical students who gravitated toward accommodations designed exclusively for their rigorous schedules, I chose differently. My residence wasn't limited to future doctors but was a bustling hub where the dreams of civil service aspirants filled the air. This choice wasn't accidental; it was intentional. I yearned for an environment that reached beyond the confines of anatomy charts and pharmacology notes. Within these walls, I found a melting pot of ideas, a place where conversations weren't just about medicine but spanned the complexities of governance, history, and public service.

The beauty of this unconventional decision was in the diversity it offered. Civil service aspirants carried with them stories of resilience, ambitions shaped by their unique journeys, and a broader worldview that enriched our interactions. Together, in the shared spaces of the hostel, we exchanged more than just study tips—we shared hopes, perspectives, and the boundless energy of youth determined to make its mark.

The common room of the hostel was our sanctuary, a place where the day's worries dissolved into the warmth of shared laughter and endless conversations. I remember one

evening vividly, when we had all gathered, as usual, around the mismatched furniture and the worn carpet. The air was thick with the aroma of chai and the faint hum of a distant radio.

One of my friends looked up from a stack of books, pushing his glasses up his nose. "Syed," he asked, his tone both teasing and curious, "how do you not lose your mind with all those medical terms crammed in your head? Anatomy, pharmacology... doesn't it ever get too much?"

I couldn't help but grin. "It absolutely does," I replied, leaning back against the wall. "That's why I'm here with you all. Talking about policies and philosophers is my escape. It keeps me sane."

Laughter rippled through the room. Someone else chimed in, "We're probably a bad influence, you know. You'll end up quoting Aristotle during your rounds instead of medical protocols."

"Imagine that!" another added, animatedly. "A doctor prescribed *The Republic* instead of rest and fluids. 'Read two chapters and call me in the morning!'"

The group roared with laughter. I shook my head, laughing along. "Honestly, philosophy might not cure a fever, but it could help a frazzled med student now and then."

The laughter subsided into a comfortable quiet before another voice cut through, more thoughtful this time. "Do you ever feel disconnected, though? Like, we're here

studying to fix systems, to shape policies, and you're training to fix people. It feels... worlds apart sometimes."

I straightened up, meeting their eyes. "Not as much as you'd think. The way I see it, we're all trying to help people—just in different ways. You're working to change society from the top down, and I'm doing it from the bottom up. It's the same goal at the core."

For a moment, there was silence. The weight of shared understanding hung in the air, unspoken but deeply felt. Then, breaking the silence, someone quipped, "Well said, Doctor Philosopher. Maybe you should write a book about this someday."

I chuckled, shaking my head. "Let me get through medical school first, will you?"

"Fair enough," another replied, smirking. "But seriously, what keeps you going? Don't tell me it's just bread, yogurt, and jalebis getting you through the madness."

The room erupted in laughter again, and I couldn't help but laugh along. "You're not wrong," I said. "But honestly? Nights like these. Conversations like this. They remind me there's more to life than medical charts and hospital corridors."

One of them raised their cup of chai, grinning. "To that," they said, and we all raised our cups in agreement.

The evening stretched on, filled with more jokes, debates, and shared dreams. In that space, surrounded by friends

from different walks of life, I felt an unshakable sense of belonging—a reminder that even in the most demanding times, connection is what truly sustains us.

Amidst the relentless demands of my medical studies, there existed a pocket of warmth and connection, a treasured space where laughter and friendship wove together to form a tapestry of unforgettable memories. Aftab bhai, a dear friend and confidant, was one of the brightest threads in this fabric of camaraderie, a presence that made the journey through Aligarh University feel less like a solitary pursuit and more like a shared adventure.

Aftab's path was unique. A senior when I first met him, his journey into medicine had taken an unexpected turn. While many of us were deeply entrenched in the clinical intricacies of healthcare, Aftab had veered into the realm of biology with a focus on fisheries. It was a fascinating divergence from my world of anatomy and pharmacology, but that difference only deepened the bond between us. His passion for the intricacies of aquatic life brought a fresh perspective to my medical studies, reminding me that knowledge didn't have to fit into neatly defined boxes.

Our friendship was not confined to lectures and textbooks. Outside the walls of the university, we found comfort and joy in the simple things. Movie outings became our escape, a chance to forget about the endless pages of study material and simply enjoy the magic of cinema. The laughter and discussions that followed each film were always lively, and often, they drifted into playful debates over which film had

the most thought-provoking message or the most entertaining plot twist.

Food also became a central part of our bond. Together with a few other friends, we explored the vibrant culinary scene outside the university, savouring the flavours of various cuisines, from the spicy tang of street food to the rich, comforting meals served in local restaurants. These shared meals were more than just sustenance; they were moments of connection, where the world of academia temporarily faded, and we could focus on the joy of being together, of sharing stories and experiences.

The vehicle that carried us through these carefree adventures was my trusty moped—a small, but reliable companion that seemed to glide effortlessly through the streets of Aligarh. The familiar whirr of its engine became the backdrop to our spontaneous journeys, each ride an opportunity for laughter, storytelling, and those little moments of joy that make life feel like a grand adventure. As the wind tousled our hair, we would speed down the narrow lanes, racing the clock and savouring the simplicity of the moment. The moped, though modest in design, became much more than just a means of getting from one place to another. It was our ticket to freedom, a two-wheeled chariot that took us wherever we wished, whether it was a quiet corner of the city to grab a cup of chai or a distant spot to unwind after a long day of lectures.

I remember one such evening, the air was warm, with a soft breeze brushing against our faces as we cruised through the

winding streets of Aligarh. The sound of the moped's engine hummed beneath us, a steady companion to our conversation.

Aftab leaned back slightly, adjusting his seat as he glanced over at me. "You know," he began, his voice casual, "sometimes I think about how fast these years are going. Feels like we just got here, and now... we're already halfway through."

I smiled, a little wistful. "Yeah, time does fly. But then, when you're in the thick of it—papers, exams, endless lectures—it kind of feels like it's dragging, you know?"

Aftab laughed, shaking his head. "Only you could see the silver lining in stress. But, you're right. We get so caught up in the rush that we forget to enjoy the moments in between. Like this," he gestured to the streets around us. "It's peaceful. Just the two of us, the moped, and no place to be."

I nodded, slowing down slightly to soak in the calm of the quiet evening. "Exactly. You don't always need a plan, or somewhere to go. Sometimes, the best moments are the unplanned ones."

Aftab grinned. "I'll drink that." He paused, a thoughtful look crossing his face. "You ever wonder what's next for us? After this whole medical school thing? I mean, we've been so focused on getting through it, but have you thought about what happens once we graduate?"

I felt a brief silence between us as I mulled over his question. The future had always seemed distant, something I'd push to the back of my mind. But now, with Aftab asking, I felt that familiar flutter of uncertainty.

"Honestly? I don't know," I admitted, glancing at him. "I've been so busy with everything here that I haven't really thought about what comes after. I guess... I just want to make sure I'm ready when the time comes."

Aftab nodded thoughtfully. "Same here. We're so focused on the grind, sometimes we forget to look up. But whatever happens, I know this—I'm glad we're in this together. It's easy to get lost in the chaos, but having someone who gets it... that makes all the difference."

I couldn't help but smile at that. "Yeah. You're right. No matter where we end up, we've got this bond, this shared experience. That's something no one can take away from us."

We rode on, the streets of Aligarh unfolding before us, each turn marking another small chapter in our journey. As the evening drew to a close, and we made our way back to the hostel, the streets of Aligarh seemed a little less familiar, but still as comforting. The rhythm of the moped's engine was a steady reminder that the moments we shared, the bonds we forged, were what truly defined our time at university.

After a long day navigating the bustling corridors of medical school, stepping into the quiet of my room always felt like a deep exhale. It was a chance to let the noise of the day settle and prepare for the hours ahead.

The first thing I'd do was kick off my shoes, shrug off the weight of my bag, and sink into my bed for a nap. Just 40 minutes—that was my sweet spot. Enough time to let the exhaustion melt away without slipping into that groggy, post-nap haze. The room was always cool and still, a welcome contrast to the chaos outside. I'd close my eyes, and for a while, the world faded into a gentle blur. When I woke up, it was like hitting the reset button. The soft glow of the evening sun would spill into the room, casting warm streaks on the walls. It always felt like a quiet promise—a fresh start for the rest of the day. Refreshed and recharged, I'd sit at my desk, ready to dive back into the books. This little routine of mine wasn't just about rest or work; it was a rhythm that kept me grounded. That nap was a small but powerful pause, a moment to catch my breath before the whirlwind of medical studies swept me up again. In its simplicity, it became one of the most comforting parts of my day—a reminder that even in the busiest seasons of life, there's always room for a little stillness.

As the haze of sleep lifted, my room shifted into a quiet haven of focus. For two solid hours, the notes and lessons from the day's lectures held my full attention. Each page felt like a puzzle piece clicking into place, and under the steady glow of my desk lamp, the complicated language of medicine slowly started to make sense. When my mind

began to wander, I knew it was time for a break. Dinner was more than just a meal—it was a moment to pause, to step away from the books and let the day's work settle. Sitting at the table, the warmth of the food and the casual rhythm of reflection gave me a chance to reset before diving back in. The next session was all about preparation. For an hour, I leaned into what lay ahead, skimming through the upcoming lectures to give myself a head start. There was something satisfying about turning those unfamiliar topics into something just a little more familiar—a glimpse of confidence before the next day arrived. And then came the final stretch of the night. In those quiet moments before bed, I'd zero in on the things that needed to stick. Mnemonics and memory tricks turned complex ideas into something easier to hold onto. The hum of the day would quiet down, leaving only the steady rhythm of thought as I prepared for both sleep and the challenges waiting on the other side of it.

By 11 PM, the day's mental marathon slowed, and sleep became a welcome refuge. The buzz of study—pages turning, ideas forming, and facts sticking—quietly faded into the background, carrying me to dreams that seemed to prepare me for the challenges of another day. It was the nightly rhythm of effort and rest, a delicate balance that kept me going. But even in the relentless grind of medical school, there were moments to breathe—pockets of time when the weight of textbooks gave way to the simple pleasures of life. Weekends held a different energy, a softer pace that let the world outside academia take centre stage.

Mornings on these cherished days began without urgency. Sometimes, I'd slip outside into the early hours, the quiet streets welcoming me for a jog or a slow, meandering walk. The cool air carried the scent of dawn, and the soft light painted everything in gold and pink. For thirty minutes or an hour, I moved to the rhythm of my steps, finding a peaceful escape in the steady beat of my sneakers against the pavement. Nature greeted me with its own subtle symphony—the rustling leaves, the gentle chatter of birds shaking off the night. The simplicity of it all felt like a reset, a moment to reconnect with the world beyond the confines of lecture halls and study rooms.

These mornings weren't just about staying active; they were about finding balance. Each step was a small act of self-care, a reminder that amidst the chaos of exams and deadlines, there was still space for calm. The weekend sunlight warmed my face and my spirit, and for that little stretch of time, the world felt slower, softer, and infinitely more manageable.

Stepping from the structured halls of medical school into the broader, more challenging realm of university life was like trading a well-trodden path for an unpredictable mountain trail. At first, the steep climb felt daunting, the peaks shrouded in uncertainty. Yet, it was in the face of these trials that a transformation began to take shape—proof of resilience and the human capacity to adapt.

The early days were a whirlwind of unfamiliar concepts and heightened expectations. The coursework seemed overwhelming, like being thrown into deep waters without a clear sense of direction. But with each obstacle, I learned to navigate the currents, discovering a strength I hadn't fully realized I possessed. As time passed, the chaos began to make sense. What once felt like an impossible rhythm gradually became second nature. I found my footing, adjusting to the demands of the curriculum. The complexity that once intimidated me turned into a challenge I was eager to tackle, each hurdle an opportunity to learn and grow.

As the weeks passed, a sense of progress began to emerge—a journey of growth, adjustment, and triumph over academic hurdles. The once-distant summit of understanding, hidden in the fog of uncertainty, slowly became visible. Each step forward was marked by a quiet sense of accomplishment, turning the climb into a deeply rewarding experience. Along the way, the words of encouragement from mentors and teachers became invaluable. Their recognition of my efforts felt like guiding stars, illuminating the path ahead. Each nod of approval, each word of praise, was a reminder that the hard work was paying off. These moments of acknowledgment became a powerful motivator, energizing my resolve to push even further.

Inspired by this support and driven by a deep desire to keep improving, I found a rhythm in the journey. Success wasn't just about academic achievement; it was about embracing the process of learning itself. The joy of discovery and the

satisfaction of overcoming obstacles became central to my experience. With each passing semester, the story shifted—from one of merely adapting to one of thriving. What once seemed like an intimidating challenge became a stage for growth, a place where obstacles turned into opportunities. The university, which had initially felt overwhelming, transformed into a space of exploration and possibility. It became clear that resilience and determination could turn any challenge into a stepping stone on the path to success.

In the opening chapter of my medical journey, the First Professional examination loomed large—a deep dive into the intricate worlds of anatomy, physiology, and biochemistry. But what truly defined this era wasn't just the subject matter; it was the extraordinary teacher who brought anatomy to life in ways I never thought possible—Professor Dr Mahdi Hasan.

This remarkable professor wasn't just a teacher; he was a legend. His reputation extended far beyond the lecture halls, with accolades and contributions recognized across the globe. He was more than an educator—he was an inspiration, a trailblazer who turned learning into an art form. His dedication was unparalleled. Teaching wasn't just a job to him; it was his passion. He went beyond textbooks, beyond diagrams, to ensure his students truly grasped the beauty and complexity of the human body. His

methods were as unorthodox as they were effective, often leaving us in awe.

In one unforgettable lesson, he climbed onto the table, using his own body as a living, breathing demonstration of anatomical concepts. His dynamic explanations turned the classroom into a stage, and we, his students, were captivated. Through his innovative approach, even the most complex ideas seemed to click effortlessly, as though he was unlocking doors in our minds. His influence didn't stop at the classroom door. The lessons he imparted took root within us, shaping not only our understanding but also our appreciation for the intricacies of the human form. He didn't just teach anatomy; he made us feel it, live it, and remember it. As time passed, his brilliance was rightfully recognized, and he rose to become the Dean of the medical school. Yet, his legacy wasn't confined to his title. It lived in the hearts of his students, in the wisdom he shared, and in the passion he ignited for the pursuit of knowledge. To this day, his voice echoes in my memory, a constant reminder of the transformative power of an extraordinary teacher. He didn't just teach us anatomy; he taught us to think, to explore, and to never settle for mediocrity. For that, I remain eternally grateful.

The second chapter of my medical journey unfolded with the Second Professional examination, a pivotal phase that brought the intricate worlds of pharmacology, pathology, microbiology, and forensic medicine to life. It was here that my understanding of medicine deepened, as the theoretical knowledge I had built transformed into a more practical

and interconnected web of insights. Each subject added new strokes to the canvas of my education. Pharmacology introduced me to the delicate interplay of drugs and the human body, while pathology unravelled the mysteries of disease. Microbiology became a window into the unseen world of microorganisms, and forensic medicine bridged the gap between science and law, offering a glimpse into the investigative side of medicine. Together, they painted a rich picture of the human condition, preparing me for the challenges ahead.

The final chapter, the Third Professional examination, marked the crescendo of this academic symphony. This phase was a blend of clinical expertise and theoretical understanding, immersing me in obstetrics, gynaecology, surgery, and general medicine. Here, the classroom gave way to hospital wards, and textbooks were replaced with patient charts.

With a stethoscope draped around my neck, I stepped into the clinical realm, where knowledge met practice. It was no longer just about understanding; it was about application—listening to the rhythm of a heartbeat, deciphering a patient's symptoms, and making decisions that could alter lives. This climactic act wasn't just an examination of skills but a transformation. The corridors of academia became clinical hallways, and I grew into the role of a medical practitioner. As the chapters of my academic journey closed, they opened the door to a new beginning—a journey dedicated to healing, learning, and the lifelong pursuit of excellence in medicine.

Amid the demanding rhythm of medical school, the annual college festivals stood out as bursts of colour and life—a welcome break from the relentless grind of studies and exams. These vibrant celebrations brought the campus alive, offering moments of joy, camaraderie, and creativity that transcended the usual routines of textbooks and hospital rounds. For me, these festivals were more than just an escape; they were an opportunity to explore a different side of myself. The debates, literary competitions, and captivating allure of the stage called to me, and I answered eagerly. Driven by a natural curiosity and a love for words, I stepped out of the lecture halls and into the world of intellectual exchange and creative expression.

What started as simple participation soon grew into something more meaningful. I embraced the role of a representative for my college, proudly carrying its name to inter-college competitions. It was both a challenge and a privilege—standing on stages, engaging in debates, and competing in literary events, all while balancing the rigors of medical studies.

The arena of elocution became my sanctuary—a domain where words wielded power, transforming into instruments of persuasion and impact. My oratory skills, honed through passion and practice, transcended the boundaries of my college auditorium, resonating across the broader stage of inter-collegiate competitions. Each carefully chosen word and deliberate enunciation became a brushstroke on the

vivid canvas of public speaking, showcasing my intellectual depth and expressive finesse.

But my artistic journey wasn't confined to the spoken word. The stage, vibrant and dynamic, became a realm where I explored the craft of mono-acting. Here, I donned multiple personas with thespian grace, using my voice, gestures, and expressions to breathe life into diverse characters. Each performance became a tapestry of emotion and storytelling, captivating audiences and challenging me to push creative boundaries.

Singing offered yet another dimension to my artistic pursuits. The harmonies I crafted and the melodies I shared were a profound departure from the precision of medical terminology. In auditoriums filled with eager listeners, my voice carried the essence of self-expression, offering a soulful counterpoint to the structured demands of my academic life.

The third year of medical school marked the zenith of my involvement in literary and artistic endeavors. Annual festivals became the vibrant playground where my passions flourished—a convergence of intellect and creativity. Yet, as my academic journey progressed into the rigorous realms of clinical practice and hands-on learning, these pursuits gradually gave way to the pressing demands of medical education. The stethoscope and clinical notes began to occupy the space once shared with the microphone, the stage, and the debating podium.

Though the intensity of my literary and artistic engagements waned, the memories of those formative years remain vivid. They are enduring reminders of a phase when the pursuit of knowledge was harmonized with a deep connection to creativity. These experiences, rich and multifaceted, continue to resonate as a melodic undertone in the grand symphony of my medical odyssey, enriching both its rhythm and its depth.

The night before exams always brought a familiar routine: moving into the hostel for medical students. It wasn't just about changing where I slept—it was about stepping into an atmosphere buzzing with the shared nerves, hopes, and determination of everyone preparing for the big day. My little room became home to not just me but also two wonderful companions, Princy Jain and Musa Ali. Princy wasn't just a roommate; she was my partner in all things study-related, a kindred spirit in the marathon of medical school. Musa added his own energy to our group, and together, we turned that small, single-bedded room into our fortress of learning.

The room itself was plain—a desk, a chair, and not much else. But that simplicity became the backdrop for something special. Since there wasn't enough space for all of us to sleep properly, I came up with a quick fix. I piled blankets and sheets on the floor, creating a makeshift bed. It wasn't fancy, but it worked. Those nights on my humble little pallet became a mix of studying, dreaming, and

sometimes just lying there listening to the sounds of the night. And then there were *them*—our uninvited study buddies. Cockroaches darted across the floor, and rats occasionally made themselves known in ways you couldn't ignore. I'll never forget the chilly winter nights when I'd feel the soft brush of a rat scurrying under my blankets. It was gross, it was creepy, and yes, I'd kick and shoo them away while trying not to lose my mind.

But for all its quirks, there was something oddly magical about that time. We weren't just fighting off pests or pulling all-nighters—we were building something bigger. The laughter, the whispered pep talks, the clatter of pencils against notebooks—it all wove together into memories that still make me smile.

That tiny room, with all its imperfections, wasn't just a place to cram for exams. It was where we found resilience, built friendships, and kept each other going. It wasn't always easy, but looking back, it was one of the most oddly beautiful parts of my journey through medical school.

Transitioning from the early days of college to medical school was more than just moving forward—it was stepping into an entirely different world. Starting medicine wasn't just flipping a page in my story; it was diving into a whole new book, one that demanded relentless effort, deep focus, and an ability to adapt like never before. The curriculum felt like an intricate maze, with each subject—human anatomy, physiology, and

more—posing its own unique challenges. Every lecture came at us like a tidal wave of information, and the pace was unrelenting. It wasn't just about memorizing facts; it was about truly understanding and applying them to meet the sky-high expectations of the medical program.

The atmosphere in the medical college was electric, charged with a sense of purpose and intensity that was worlds away from the laid-back vibe of my earlier college days. Suddenly, I was surrounded by incredibly smart, driven students, each bringing their own unique perspectives from different corners of the country. This melting pot of talent and ideas created a blend of inspiring camaraderie and healthy competition, pushing all of us to aim higher and work harder. Those early days were overwhelming, no doubt. But amidst the whirlwind of new experiences, I began to realize that this wasn't just a challenge—it was an opportunity to grow into the kind of person and professional I had always dreamed of becoming.

Competition wasn't just a part of life in medical school—it was the very air we breathed. It drove late-night study marathons, fuelled endless coffee runs, and pushed each of us to aim higher than we ever thought possible. The bar wasn't just high; it felt like it was constantly being raised, and every student was determined not just to reach it but to soar past it. Resilience, grit, and an unwavering dedication to the craft of medicine were non-negotiable in this world. The pulse of medical school beat to the rhythm of exams and the ever-present drive for excellence. The MBBS spanned five long years, and while every moment was demanding, the real turning point came in the third year. It was then that the ivory

towers of theory gave way to the vibrant, unpredictable reality of patient care.

In the beginning, medicine was an abstract world—one confined to the black-and-white pages of textbooks and the low hum of lecture halls. The academic grind was heavy, and I often found myself yearning for something more tangible—a connection to the heart of what healing truly meant. Then, almost like a sunrise after a long night, the clinical phase arrived. Suddenly, the quiet sterility of our learning environment transformed into a living, breathing mosaic of human stories. Theoretical knowledge gained color and depth, and the reality of medicine unfolded before me in ways that no textbook could ever capture.

The hospitals, with their pristine white lights and the rhythmic hum of bustling activity, became the canvas upon which my medical journey unfolded. The scent of antiseptic mingled with the soft rustling of paperwork, creating a symphony that echoed the heartbeat of healthcare. As I stepped into the realm of patient care, a different energy permeated the air, transcending the confines of textbooks and lectures.

Interacting with patients brought a breath of fresh air to my medical odyssey. The once-abstract concepts crystallised into living, breathing individuals with stories etched across their health charts. Their histories unfolded like well-worn novels, each chapter revealing a unique medical narrative waiting to be unravelled.

The hospital room was bathed in a soft, sterile light, the kind that seemed to blur time. I adjusted my stethoscope nervously as I stepped inside, clipboard in hand, trying to mask the slight tremor in my voice. “Good morning, Mrs. Begum,” I said, offering what I hoped was a confident smile. “My name is Syed Raza. I’m a medical student working with Dr. Rabbani today. How are you feeling?”

She looked up from the blanket she was carefully folding over her lap, her warm, lined face breaking into a small, kind smile. “Good morning, doctor,” she said, though the title felt far too heavy for me. “Well, I’ve been better, but I suppose that’s why I’m here.”

I pulled up a stool next to her bed, setting the clipboard on my lap. “I’m not a doctor just yet,” I said, chuckling softly, “but I’m here to learn from you, if you don’t mind. I’d like to ask you a few questions about your health and maybe get to know your story.”

Her smile deepened, though there was a shadow of fatigue in her eyes. “Of course, dear,” she said. “I’ve always believed everyone has a story worth sharing. Mine just happens to have a little too much sugar and spice in it, I’m afraid.”

I laughed with her, feeling some of my initial nerves ease. “That’s exactly why I’m here—to understand how life’s little indulgences play into health. Let’s start with what brought you here today.”

She let out a slow sigh, her gaze drifting toward the window. “It started as just a little ache in my chest,” she began. “At

first, I thought it was nothing. Maybe the weather or the stress of keeping up with everyone at home. But it didn't go away. My daughter—bless her heart—dragged me here. Now the doctors are talking about angina, but I'm sure you know more about that than I do."

I nodded, scribbling notes on the page in front of me. "It's good that your daughter convinced you to come in," I said. "Catching these things early makes a big difference. Have you noticed anything like this before?"

She tilted her head, her fingers idly tracing the blanket's edge. "Not really, no. I've always been... well, a bit rounder than I should be. My doctor's been after me for years to watch my diet, but you know how it is. Life gets busy. It's easier to fry some samosas than worry about calories."

I couldn't help but smile at her honesty, though her words carried a weight I didn't take lightly. As she spoke, I realized something profound. She wasn't just a case study or a list of symptoms; she was a person, with memories and habits, worries and joys, all woven into the narrative of her health.

Every word she shared pulled the concepts I'd learned from lectures and textbooks into sharp focus. This wasn't abstract anymore. This was real. Mrs. Begum was real, and her story was teaching me more about medicine—and humanity—than any textbook ever could.

Filling in charts became more than a clerical task; it became a delicate dance of translating the intricate details of a patient's journey onto paper. The hospital, once a mere

backdrop, transformed into a stage where the drama of life, illness, and recovery played out in vivid hues. The fluorescent lights cast shadows on the linoleum floors, creating a chiaroscuro that mirrored the complexities of medical practice.

Working alongside consultants felt like stepping into a seasoned cast of experts, where every conversation was a scene filled with shared knowledge and purpose. They didn't just teach from textbooks; they passed down lessons shaped by years of experience, sharing stories that carried the weight of both triumph and loss. These exchanges weren't just about learning how to treat diseases—they were about understanding the human stories behind them. The hands-on side of medicine changed everything for me. Suddenly, the theories I'd poured over late at night in my cramped room came alive. I wasn't just studying symptoms and treatment plans anymore—I was standing face-to-face with real people. Each patient brought with them a mix of hope and fear, their stories adding colour and meaning to the science I'd been studying. They weren't just cases; they were individuals who trusted us with their health, their worries, and their dreams of getting better.

It was in these moments that I realized what truly drew me to medicine. It wasn't just about curing illnesses or memorising facts—it was about the connection. I wanted to be someone who listened, someone who cared, and someone who could bridge the gap between science and the human heart. Medical school wasn't easy, though. It was a constant test of endurance, like being in a forge where the

pressure and heat shaped me into something stronger. The competition was fierce, and the expectations felt heavy, but they pushed me to keep going. By the end of it all, I wasn't just a student anymore—I was becoming someone ready to take on the responsibility of healing, someone who understood that being a doctor was as much about people as it was about medicine.

The sun had barely disappeared behind the city skyline, leaving the sky awash with hues of orange and pink, when I sat on the edge of my bed and dialled my father's number. The quiet hum of the hospital still lingered in my ears, but the familiar sound of his voice brought an immediate sense of calm.

"Hello, beta," he answered, his voice warm and steady. "Long day?"

I let out a tired laugh. "You could say that. I had a patient today—an elderly woman with chronic chest pain. We ran every test we could think of, and still, nothing definitive. She kept clutching my hand, looking at me like I should have all the answers."

My father chuckled softly. "That look never changes, no matter how many years you've been practicing. But sometimes, it's not just about finding the answer; it's about being there for them. What did you do?"

"I sat with her," I said, leaning back against the wall. "I tried to explain the tests, but I think what helped more was just

listening to her talk about her life. She told me about her grandchildren and how she's afraid she won't see them grow up. It hit me harder than I expected."

There was a pause, the kind that felt more like reflection than hesitation. "You did right," my father said finally. "Patients don't just come to us for treatment; they come for connection. Sometimes, sitting with them and giving them your time can be the best medicine."

I nodded, even though he couldn't see me. "I never realised how much weight people carry with them when they walk through those hospital doors. It's overwhelming at times."

"It will be," he said gently. "But remember, you're not alone in this. Every doctor feels it. I still do. The trick is to let their stories make you better, not break you. Did you tell her you'll keep looking for answers?"

"I did," I said, my voice firmer now. "She smiled and said she trusts me. It was... humbling."

"Good," he said, a note of pride in his tone. "Trust is the foundation of what we do. And don't forget, it's okay to lean on your team. Medicine is never a solo journey."

As he spoke, I could almost smell the familiar evening tea back home, the memories of sitting at the dining table with him flooding my mind. "Thank you," I said, feeling a surge of gratitude. "Talking to you makes all of this feel manageable."

“That’s what I’m here for,” he said with a soft laugh. “You’re carrying forward something bigger than either of us, but remember to take care of yourself too. The best doctor is a healthy one.”

I smiled, the weight of the day easing just a little. “I’ll try. I promise.”

“Good,” he said. “Now go have dinner. And call again tomorrow—I want to hear more stories.”

“I will,” I replied, hanging up with a lighter heart. The hospital walls felt less imposing now, and the quiet of my room seemed to hold echoes of his words, grounding me for the days ahead.

In those evenings, amidst the symphony of hospital sounds and the distant echoes of home, the phone conversations with my father became not just a recounting of the day's events but a ritual that reinforced the essence of why I had embarked on this medical odyssey—a commitment to healing and the enduring connection that transcended the boundaries of time and profession.

Trips back home were more than just a chance to escape the rigours of medical school; they were a return to a familiar rhythm, a soothing balm for my restless spirit. The smell of home—warm spices from the kitchen, the faint scent of old books in the living room—welcomed me like an old friend. But it was the time spent in my father’s clinic that I cherished most.

“Come to the clinic tomorrow,” he said one time when I was home, his tone light yet encouraging. It wasn’t an order, more of an open invitation, as if he knew that I needed to see it for myself—the other side of medicine. The clinic was modest, its walls lined with shelves holding jars and bottles of various medications, neatly labelled. The waiting room buzzed with quiet chatter, the occasional sound of a child crying, and the faint rustle of paper as patients filled out forms. The air smelled of antiseptic and eucalyptus, a scent that felt strangely comforting. My father moved through the space with a quiet authority, greeting patients with a warm smile and a calm that seemed to put everyone at ease. Watching him was like watching a conductor lead an orchestra; every movement purposeful, every word measured yet kind.

One afternoon, he gestured for me to join him in the consultation room. I stepped inside, feeling the weight of the moment.

“Sit with me,” he said, pulling up a chair. “Observe, and when you’re ready, you can take the lead.”

I nodded, unsure if I was more nervous or excited. The first patient was a middle-aged man complaining of persistent headaches. My father listened intently, his pen gliding across the notepad as the man spoke. When the patient paused, my father turned to me.

“What do you think?” he asked, his voice steady but inviting.

I hesitated, piecing together what I had learned in school. “Could it be tension headaches? Maybe stress-related?”

My father smiled, his eyes twinkling with pride. “A good start. Let’s dig a little deeper.” He turned back to the patient and asked a series of questions, each one peeling back another layer of the man’s story until the picture became clearer.

As the day went on, I found myself growing more confident, even chiming in with questions of my own. My father never corrected me outright; instead, he guided me, gently nudging me in the right direction when I veered off course. By the end of the day, I was exhausted but exhilarated. Sitting in the quiet of his office, sipping chai from the chipped mugs he always kept at the clinic, I felt a new kind of respect for him.

“This,” he said, gesturing around the room, “is where medicine truly comes alive. It’s not just about curing illnesses; it’s about understanding people, their stories, their fears. Never forget that.”

I nodded, the words sinking deep into my mind. These moments in his clinic weren’t just lessons in medicine; they were lessons in humanity, in what it meant to be a doctor in the fullest sense. And as I watched him finish his notes for the day, I realized that this wasn’t just his legacy—it was becoming mine too.

The clinic felt like stepping into another world—a smaller, simpler one compared to the towering, high-tech hospitals

I'd grown used to. Nestled in the heart of our community, it was a modest space with worn chairs in the waiting area and shelves stacked neatly with supplies. There were no flashing monitors or beeping machines here, just the steady rhythm of life unfolding in its purest form. Watching my father work in this intimate setting was nothing short of mesmerizing. He didn't have state-of-the-art tools or endless test results to rely on. Instead, he leaned on something far more profound—his intuition, experience, and an unwavering connection to his patients.

The air buzzed softly with quiet conversations, punctuated by the occasional laugh or a child's cry. The sharp, sterile scent of antiseptic was replaced by something warmer, more human—the mingling of everyday life and shared stories. Patients came here not just for treatment but for reassurance, a kind word, or simply to feel heard. I watched as my father moved from patient to patient with an ease that belied the depth of his focus. His hands became instruments of healing, gently prodding and pressing, searching for answers in a way no machine ever could. He listened with the kind of attention that made people feel like their concerns were the most important thing in the world.

There was something remarkable about the way he bridged the gap between science and humanity. Diagnoses weren't just about symptoms; they were about the person behind them—their lives, fears, and hopes. In a way, his clinic felt less like a doctor's office and more like a sanctuary, a place where people came to feel cared for, not just cured. During those visits home, I began to see medicine in a new light. It

wasn't about the complexity of the tools or the grandeur of the facilities. It was about the human connection, the art of truly seeing and understanding someone.

In that small, unassuming clinic, I learned lessons no textbook could teach. I saw the power of empathy, the importance of presence, and the quiet strength it took to heal without the crutch of modern technology. My father's work wasn't just medicine—it was a kind of artistry, and it left me in awe. Those moments spent in his world didn't just give me a break from the grind of medical school. They reminded me why I started this journey in the first place—to help, to connect, to heal. And as I watched him in action, I couldn't help but hope that one day, I'd carry even a fraction of his grace into my own practice.

The wisdom my father passed down wasn't just about medicine—it became the foundation of how I would approach life and my future career. "Don't make patients waste their money on unnecessary tests," he would often say. "Only do the tests that will help you." His words echoed in the quiet moments of my own practice, reminding me to stay grounded in what truly mattered. They became a mantra I carried with me, shaping the way I viewed the healing process and my role in it.

In an era where technology is often the first answer, my father's advice stood as a powerful reminder. He always said, "A good clinician is one who doesn't use the help of too many investigative tests but rather makes a judgement

based off his or her experience" It wasn't that he rejected modern tools or technology; rather, he understood the importance of sharpening one's clinical skills, using intuition and insight as the primary tools of diagnosis. His belief was simple but profound: true healing begins with a connection between doctor and patient, not a machine.

In his clinic, there was an almost sacred quietness. The buzz of machines was replaced with the soft murmur of conversations, the rustle of papers, the scent of antiseptic mingling with the more human scents of tea and coffee. It was a place where technology didn't overpower the human connection—it was all about the patient, the person sitting across from you, and how well you understood their story. My father's approach wasn't just about minimizing tests; it was about connecting with the patient at a deeper level, listening not only to their symptoms but to their fears, hopes, and life stories. He taught me that being a good clinician meant being present with your patient, seeing them as more than just a diagnosis or a set of symptoms. The art of healing, he believed, was about understanding the whole person.

As I reflected on his teachings, I began to see that medicine wasn't just about having the right tools at your disposal. It was about seeing the nuances, understanding the context, and trusting in the years of experience and knowledge you had accumulated. My father's philosophy was a reminder that the best tool a doctor could have is their own hands, their own eyes, and their own heart. In the years that followed, I held onto his advice, letting it guide me through

medical school and into the practice of medicine. I realised that the art of healing was not found in the sterile walls of a laboratory or in the click of a button on a machine. It was found in the conversations with patients, in the careful observation of their symptoms, and in the trust, they placed in you to guide them through their most vulnerable moments. My father had taught me that the true art of medicine was never about the latest test or technology. It was about people—and how we, as doctors, choose to see them.

In 1992, I was in the thick of my final year of MBBS, immersed in the rigorous demands of medical school. Our shared room, a humble refuge from the chaos of academics, was quiet save for the faint scratching of my pen and the steady hum of the ceiling fan. It was nearing midnight, and my friend, unable to fight off exhaustion any longer, had drifted into a nap. His soft snores blended with the low buzz of the night, and the glow of our small desk lamp illuminated the scattered pages of our books. As I buried myself in my books, the air carried a strange, restless energy. Calm before the storm. A midnight celebration was on the horizon, a fleeting break from the grind, but my focus was firmly on the lines in front of me.

Then, the stillness shattered.

Distant noises, sharp and dissonant, filtered through the corridor. They started faintly, a ripple of disruption, but grew louder and more insistent, pulling me out of my

concentration. I glanced over at my friend, who remained blissfully unaware, his head buried in his arms. The muffled voices outside began to crescendo, accompanied by hurried footsteps that seemed to vibrate through the walls. The tranquillity of our room now felt fragile, like a bubble on the verge of bursting. My pulse quickened, curiosity and unease swirling in my chest.

I set my pen down and moved towards the door, the creak of its hinges joining the growing chaos. The hallway was alive with movement, students stepping out of their rooms, their faces painted with a mix of confusion and intrigue. Whispers and hurried exchanges passed between them, fragments of speculation adding to the mysterious tension in the air. I hesitated for a moment, the pull of the unknown tugging at me. Then, with a steadying breath, I stepped out into the hallway, leaving the relative calm of our room behind. Whatever was happening, it was enough to break the rhythm of our demanding routines—and I was determined to uncover it.

What greeted me outside was a scene that sent a shiver down my spine. The once-familiar corridors were alive with frantic whispers, wide eyes, and hurried steps. Chaos had taken hold, an unease rippling through the air like a storm on the horizon. My heart thudded heavily in my chest, instinct urging me to move. Together, we—the students—decided to climb to the rooftop, desperate for answers, hoping the elevation would bring clarity to the mystery unravelling around us. The journey up the dimly lit stairwell was tense, our footsteps a nervous rhythm against

the cold stone steps. Each step seemed to deepen the sense of foreboding until we finally emerged into the open night. The rooftop stretched before us, its usual tranquillity replaced by an eerie stillness. But it was the view beyond that stole our breaths.

In the distance, a ghostly glow pulsed against the dark sky. Billows of thick, grey smoke curled upward, veiling the horizon like an ominous shroud. Fires flickered beneath the haze, their orange light casting a strange, haunting glow over the city below. The bustling backdrop of our lives—the city that had cradled us with its everyday rhythm—was now a canvas of turmoil, painted with strokes of fire and unrest. Tension hung in the air like the oppressive heat before a thunderstorm. It didn't take long for the grim truth to unfold. Whispers turned to grim confirmations: a riot had broken out, a violent clash between two religious communities.

Later it would come to be known as “The partition,” and will be uttered for years to come, with pain in their voices, with the guilty knowledge of the nation's death written in the millions of dead bodies. Violence consumed the streets below, and the gravity of it left us silent. I felt my friend approach, his presence grounding me. He was Hindu, one of the few among our predominantly Muslim student body. As he stood beside us, the weight of communal identities seemed to dissolve in that shared moment of fear and helplessness. We weren't divided by religion or beliefs; we were united in our worry for the people caught in the chaos. The rooftop became more than an observation

point—it became a space of reckoning. Together, we watched history unfold, our youthful idealism grappling with the raw, unsettling truth of human conflict. We couldn't look away. We couldn't pretend it wasn't happening. And though we stood high above it all, the violence below reached us, carving a place in our memories that would linger long after the smoke cleared.

The night unravelled like a fever dream, the air heavy with panic and uncertainty. Sleep was a distant memory as the city outside seemed to gasp for breath, its pulse quickened by fear. When dawn finally crept over the horizon, it brought no solace—only the stark reality of chaos. From the fourth-floor window, I watched as families fled their homes, clutching bundles of belongings, their hurried steps driven by the primal need for safety. The streets, once vibrant with life, now bore the weight of despair. The corridors of the hostel, typically buzzing with laughter and footsteps, had turned into a haunting emptiness. Every room seemed to echo with the absence of those who had left, their departure a silent acknowledgment of the turmoil. When darkness descended again, it came with an unsettling stillness. The power cut that followed plunged the building into an oppressive void, where every creak and whisper of the wind felt amplified.

My roommate, anxious and restless, made the difficult choice to leave for Delhi. His hurried departure was both practical and heartbreaking, leaving the room and its adjoining corridor eerily quiet. The emptiness magnified my own fear, the walls closing in as I sat alone with my

thoughts. Outside, the barking of stray dogs pierced the damp night, their cries unsettling against the steady rhythm of rain. The downpour painted the world in muted grays, casting long shadows across the walls. The weather, like the events around me, felt heavy with foreboding. The world I knew had become unfamiliar, and the weight of the unknown pressed down on my chest.

Fear, no longer a fleeting emotion, settled like an unwelcome guest. The vulnerability gnawed at me, each minute feeling longer than the last. Finally, unable to bear the oppressive atmosphere, I made a choice—to seek shelter in Aftab Hall, a place where others had found safety.

The walk through the deserted corridors was surreal, each step echoing in the emptiness. The rain soaked through my clothes, chilling me to the bone, but I pushed forward. The journey wasn't just physical; it was a passage through the collective anxiety of a city on edge. Each shadow felt alive, and every sound carried the weight of uncertainty. But the promise of refuge pulled me onward, a small sliver of hope in an otherwise dark night.

In the hushed corridors of Aftab Hall, a fragile sanctuary amidst the chaos, a peculiar stillness took hold. The relentless rhythm of university life had faltered, replaced by an eerie calm that was anything but peaceful. It wasn't the soothing quiet of safety but the charged silence of anticipation, like the breath held before a storm. The city's curfew, imposed in the wake of the riots, confined us within the university's walls. This enforced stillness bore

down on us, a heavy shroud of tension that seemed to deepen with each passing day. Evenings, once animated by laughter, were now marked by sombre gatherings in the dimly lit halls. The warden's updates delivered grim snapshots of a city ravaged by violence—stories of stabbings and killings that painted the unrest in stark, unflinching hues.

Uncertainty became a constant companion. The simple question of whether we would live to see another day loomed large. Fear crept into every corner of my being. Men in our society are conditioned to embody strength, to mask their vulnerabilities, but in those days, I lived in a state of unrelenting fear. There was no comfort, no voice to reassure me that everything would be okay. As the nights dragged on, a system of makeshift vigilance emerged. Senior students took shifts, patrolling the halls with a quiet resolve that belied their own apprehensions. These corridors, once alive with the energy of youthful ambition, now echoed with whispered conversations and the subdued murmurs of uncertainty. Nights stretched endlessly, punctuated by the sparse meals that sustained us—rice, lentils, bread, and butter became the humble constants in an otherwise unpredictable existence.

After a month of this tenuous routine, the announcement came—a directive to leave. Special trains awaited, arranged to evacuate us to safety. The weight of this decision underscored the severity of our situation. Boarding those trains was a surreal experience, the journey home fraught with an unease that mirrored the turmoil we were leaving

behind. It wasn't until we had travelled several kilometres away from Aligarh that a fragile sense of relief began to settle. The collective exhale of our fellow passengers was palpable, a cautious acknowledgment that we had escaped the immediate danger.

The return to normalcy was slow, a careful unravelling of tension that took nearly a month. This chapter of my life remains etched in memory, a stark reminder of the fragility of the world we navigate. For the first time, I faced fear in its rawest form, a confrontation with the unknown that left an indelible mark on my understanding of resilience and vulnerability. The events that unfolded during this point in my life was not just a story of survival but a profound lesson in the human spirit's capacity to endure, even in the face of overwhelming uncertainty.

Chapter 7

Like all stories require a jump in the narrative flow, my story does too. Reminiscing is quite an arduous task and the task of the writer is to remember in detail and write it down. Whether the act of writing or remembering is tiring, I do not want to comment on, but what I do know is that the act of remembering, feeling the very emotions of that memory, not letting the effects of age hinder the event, and the accurate reporting of it makes the writing of a memoir a feat in itself.

Delving back several years, my post-graduate training in India was the next stage in my life that left an inelible mark and changed me for the better. I completed my MBBS in the month of October 1992 and then my internship which went on for exactly one year. How one year can be transformative, I still am unsure, but this one year has changed me for the better. Starting my post-grad was intentional and for me to specialise and get hands-on knowledge I'd have to work on the frontlines. Up till then, I had only known knowledge from books and my

professors, but there is only so much knowledge from books that can carry you before you eventually stop learning. On the front lines, you continue to learn, and new cases keep presenting themselves, making you question all you've learned, and if all the years you've invested into getting you MBBS was all a waste of time. But I also like to think of being a doctor as an investigative officer or detective. You need to look at each case individually, from all angles and try to crack the case open from the inside out. The gratification from being able to give a patient a diagnosis and see them improve is why I wake up every single day with a renewed motivation for life.

But before I can speak about how practising as a doctor is, I needed to pass the competitive medical entrance exam which is then followed by an internship. The major challenge is then to get a postgraduate training seat. I'd characterise it to be much like a bottleneck process which makes it extremely competitive and difficult to get into the program you want. The most preferred speciality was general medicine and surgery, and naturally, it was more difficult to get selected. The next preferred speciality was orthopaedics. I knew surgical specialities were paid quite well. I wasn't inclined towards surgery though since it involved cutting through multiple layers of skin and messing around with blood. I did have a liking for General Medicine, mainly because I believed a physician was more of an intellectual who had to go through a deductive thought process before making a conclusive diagnosis. You need to be intelligent and apply your skills judiciously. The

final push that convinced me to go down the lane of General Medicine was my father.

“I know what I want to do, but the thought that I can make more in another field is making me doubt my decision,” I said to my father over a call one day. He didn’t reply, instead, I was met with a prolonged silence, save for the occasional chirp of a bird in the background.

“And a lot of my batchmates seem to be choosing specialties based on the earning capacity in the future.” I continued.

“But what interests you?” He replied after a few seconds passed.

“A lot actually, but General Medicine is what is calling out to me.”

“And why is that? If you can answer the ‘why’ it’ll make it easier.”

“The ‘why’, ahh, that is difficult I must say.”

“Son, choose a field where you can make a name for yourself. As much as money is important, knowing what to prioritise to ensure you have a steady flow of income is equally important. Wherever you create a name, money will surely follow.”

Those words stuck with me. The amount of wisdom my father had amazed me and it was something I heavily relied on. There were times I wanted to go down the route of

Orthopaedics, but backtracked, my father's words echoing in my head as I reaffirmed what I wanted to do.

The final year of medical school was brutal. The weight of the upcoming exams pressed down on me like a constant, invisible force. The long nights of studying blurred into early mornings, the scent of ink and old textbooks permanently ingrained in the air around me. I wasn't just preparing to pass—I was fighting for a postgraduate seat, the real prize. Without it, an MBBS felt incomplete, just a stepping stone.

My study group and I became a fixture in the halls, heads bent over thick medical books, diagrams scrawled on loose sheets of paper. We debated cases and tested each other's knowledge, and when exhaustion took over, we leaned back in our chairs, staring blankly at the ceiling before diving back into work. The sight of patients on rounds reminded us of what was at stake. This wasn't just about scoring well—it was about becoming the kind of doctor we had dreamed of being.

The day the results were announced, my heart pounded in my chest like a drum. I scanned the board, my eyes desperately searching for my roll number. And then—I saw it. I passed. Not just the exam, but the interview and the dreaded viva. My knees nearly buckled. My breath caught in my throat. MD Medicine—I had secured my seat. I didn't wait. I sprinted out of the building, my pulse racing. The streets of the university were alive with students reacting to their results—some cheering, some silent with

disappointment. The cold winter air hit my face as I made my way to the nearest telephone booth, a small, dimly lit space with peeling posters and a scratched-up receiver. I shoved a coin into the slot, my fingers trembling as I dialled my father's number.

Each ring stretched time unbearably, and then finally, his voice came through, steady and familiar.

"I got the seat!" I burst out, gripping the phone so tightly my knuckles turned white.

There was a pause. A deep inhale. And then, in a calm yet unmistakably proud voice, he said, "That's wonderful news. And I have something to share with you as well." I frowned, momentarily forgetting my own excitement.

"I've been awarded a fellowship by the Royal College of Physicians, Edinburgh."

I closed my eyes for a moment, overwhelmed. The tiny booth, the chaos outside, the fatigue from weeks of stress—it all faded. My father, a man I had always looked up to, had reached a new milestone just as I had reached mine. A lump formed in my throat, but I swallowed it down.

"This is perfect," I finally managed, my voice quieter now, filled with something deeper than just excitement. It was more than just a victory. It was a shared moment of triumph—one I would carry with me forever.

Postgraduate training was a different world—one that I thrived in. Unlike the endless pages of theory that had drained me during my MBBS, this was real. It was hands-on, practical, and immersive. I was no longer just a student memorizing symptoms and diagnoses from textbooks—I was in the thick of it, dealing with real patients, and making real decisions. If I practised, if I honed my skills, I knew I would only get better.

At Jawaharlal Nehru Medical College, where I was interning, the scale of work was staggering. The hospital had over a thousand beds, and an ocean of patients from every walk of life, each case different from the last. It was a government hospital, which meant that the patient load was relentless. From the moment my shift started, there was barely a second to breathe. Yet, despite the exhaustion, despite the seemingly endless 36-hour shifts that left me drained to my core, I was happy.

Every case was a lesson. I teamed up with my colleagues, discussing patients in hurried conversations in hallways, debating diagnoses over quick meals, and exchanging knowledge like currency. We were young, eager, and determined. We learned from each other, from the senior doctors, and from the patients themselves. The hospital was our battleground, and every day, we sharpened our skills a little more.

Some nights, after finishing rounds, I would step outside for a brief moment, feeling the cool night air against my tired face. My body ached, my mind was worn out, but deep

inside, I felt something unshakable—*purpose*. These long hours, these countless cases, these intense moments of decision-making—they were shaping me into the doctor I had always wanted to become. Looking back, those years were some of the toughest of my life. But they were also the most fulfilling. They pushed me forward, gave me the experience I needed, and prepared me for everything that lay ahead.

Medical school was demanding, but I always believed life shouldn't be just about textbooks and hospital rounds. I needed something more—something to keep me sane. Extra-curricular activities had always been my escape, a way to breathe amidst the never-ending studies. But what truly made those years memorable was the company of two remarkable friends.

There was Aftab Bhai—not a doctor, but a research scientist in zoology. He was from Lucknow, a few years older, and carried himself with a quiet wisdom that I admired. He had a way of speaking—calm, measured, insightful. I called him 'Bhai' out of respect, and he lived up to the title, always looking out for me. Then there was Abidur Rahman, my classmate from MBBS and one of my closest confidants. While I had chosen medicine for my postgrad, he had taken a different path—radiology.

Our friendship wasn't built on grand moments but on small, meaningful ones—the kind that stay with you forever.

The weekends were sacred. After exhausting shifts and relentless study sessions, those two days felt like stolen time. We'd escape the suffocating walls of the hostel, letting the night air hit our faces as we wandered through the city streets.

Most weekends, we'd end up at a small restaurant tucked away in a crowded lane, where the waiters recognised us by face, if not by name. The air inside was thick with the scent of sizzling kebabs and freshly baked naan. The clatter of plates, the murmur of conversations, the occasional burst of laughter from another table—it all felt alive, a stark contrast to the sterile, white-walled hospital wards. We'd sit for hours over hot chai, dipping crisp samosas into spicy chutney, talking about everything—from medicine to politics, from our dreams to our frustrations. Sometimes, we'd fall into comfortable silence, the kind only true friends can share.

Some nights, when we weren't too drained, we'd go for a late-night movie. The cinema was an old one, the kind with rickety seats and a projector that flickered slightly. But none of that mattered. It wasn't about the film—it was about the escape. The darkness of the theatre, the hum of anticipation in the crowd, the occasional whistle from the back row when a hero delivered a punchline—it was all part of the experience.

These moments, as simple as they were, kept me going. They reminded me that life wasn't just about surviving medical school—it was about living it too.

To add to all these experiences, food has always been a passion of mine—something that brought joy no matter how exhausting the day had been. Back in my university days, exploring different eateries wasn't just about eating; it was an experience, a little adventure beyond the monotonous routine of medical school. During my MBBS years, I had nothing but a bicycle, pedalling through the streets of Aligarh, hunting for the best street food stalls and small restaurants hidden away in bustling alleys. But things changed when I started my internship. With my own earnings, I upgraded to a moped—a humble yet reliable ride that gave me a bit more freedom.

By the time I began my postgrad, I had saved enough to buy something better—a Vespa from Bajaj. That scooter wasn't just a vehicle; it was my companion. For three years, it carried me through the winding streets of Aligarh, past the towering university gates, into the heart of the city where the real magic lay.

I can still recall the late-night rides, the cool wind rushing past as I navigated through dimly lit roads, the city slowing down but never fully sleeping. My friends and I would hop on our scooters, heading straight to our favourite food spots. The scent of freshly fried samosas and sizzling kebabs would hit us before we even stepped inside. We had our go-to places for everything—rich, creamy rabri from a tiny sweet shop, spicy chaat from a roadside stall, and of course, the legendary Aligarh biryani that no high-end restaurant could ever replicate.

Even now, years later, I still miss that Vespa. It wasn't just a ride—it was freedom. It was laughter. It was the taste of youth.

I've always had a deep love for extracurricular activities. They were my escape, my way of expressing myself beyond the medical books and long hospital shifts.

Music was my first passion. I loved singing—both English and Bollywood songs. Even now, I still hum old Bollywood tunes when I'm alone, the nostalgia of those melodies taking me back to my college days. Back then, I would perform at university events, sometimes in small informal gatherings, other times on bigger stages. The rush of standing in front of an audience, feeling the rhythm of the music, and seeing people sway to my voice—it was exhilarating.

Drama was another world I immersed myself in. I was an active member of the college drama club, and performing on stage gave me a different kind of thrill. We put on plays for inter-college competitions, and I took on various roles, slipping into different characters and living different lives, if only for a few hours. The lights, the applause, the rehearsals that stretched late into the night—it was all an experience I cherished deeply.

But perhaps one of the most defining aspects of my college life was my involvement in literary events. I had a passion for public speaking, which led me to participate in

elocution contests and debates. The challenge of crafting an argument, of standing before an audience and delivering a speech with confidence, was something I enjoyed immensely. I won several prizes, but more than the trophies, it was the experience of engaging in intellectual discussions that mattered to me.

During my time in medical school, one of my hostel mates, Ishrath Jameel, was also a part of it. Unlike me, though, he wasn't in medicine—his true passion was theatre. He took drama seriously, participating in state-level competitions and eventually making a name for himself in television and radio. We lost touch over the years, but one day, out of the blue, he called me.

"Syed, I have a small role for you in a TV film," he said, his voice filled with excitement.

I laughed. "Me? In a TV film? You know I have patients to see, right?"

"Come on, it's just a small role! You'll play the mischievous son of a respectable family. The father is a well-known actor," he insisted. "Think about it."

I was hesitant, but my curiosity got the better of me. Eventually, I agreed.

We shot in one of the grand villas in the city, a place I had often seen from the outside but never imagined stepping into. The moment I entered, I was taken aback by its sheer elegance—high ceilings, marble floors, and antique furniture that told stories of another era. It was a different

world, far from the hospital wards and patient consultations I was used to.

On set, people quickly found out I was a medical doctor. During the break, they rushed me to the lead actress, who was unwell with a terrible stomach ache. I checked on her and prescribed some medication, and within a few hours, she was feeling better. The crew was grateful, and the shoot resumed smoothly.

By the time the film wrapped up, I had gained a whole new appreciation for the entertainment industry. It was an unforgettable experience. But I hadn't told Shama, my wife, about it.

When she finally found out, she was unimpressed.

"This is the first and last time you're doing something like this," she said firmly. "You need to focus on your career."

I just smiled, knowing she was right. Medicine was my path, and while the experience had been fun, I had no intention of making a career switch.

To my surprise, I was paid 7,000 INR for my role. Later, I found out that many first-time actors don't get paid at all, so I was lucky.

These were some of the best years of my life—full of adventure, learning, and moments that I would cherish forever.

The first time I met Shama was during an Iftar gathering in the first year of my post-grad studies. It was a warm evening, the scent of fried fritters and dates filling the air, the soft murmur of conversations blending with the distant call to prayer. I remember scanning the room, knowing she would be there. My friends had made sure of that. But she had no idea.

She sat at the far end of the room, dressed modestly in a light blue salwar kameez, her dupatta neatly draped over her shoulder. She wasn't loud or trying to be the centre of attention—she simply existed in her own quiet space, occasionally smiling at the people around her. That was the first thing I noticed about her—the way she carried herself with a kind of effortless grace.

A friend nudged me, whispering, "Go talk to her." I hesitated, then finally walked over and sat down across from her. She looked up, surprised but polite.

"Assalamu Alaikum," I greeted, trying not to sound too nervous.

"Wa Alaikum Assalam," she replied, her voice gentle.

For a moment, we just sat there. I could feel the weight of the moment, of the unspoken expectations in the air. But Shama didn't seem to be aware of any of it.

"Did you know you'd be meeting me today?" I finally asked.

She smiled, shaking her head. “No, I was just invited for Iftar. I didn’t know I was part of some secret plan.” There was a teasing lilt in her voice, which made me chuckle.

“My friends aren’t very subtle,” I admitted.

She raised an eyebrow playfully. “Neither are mine. One of them whispered something about my ‘future’ when I walked in.”

The conversation flowed naturally after that. We talked about our families, our hometown, and our lives at university. She was soft-spoken but had a quiet confidence. And the more we spoke, the more I admired her. When I went back to my hostel that night, I couldn’t stop thinking about her. The simplicity, the sincerity—there was no pretence with her. And that was rare.

I had already started considering her my life partner. However, I didn’t know how to break this subject with my parents. I didn’t know how my father would react but perhaps I had some hope to confide with my mother. I had just some idea that they saw their future daughter in law as ‘a doctor’ like myself. The fear of rejection and losing Shama gripped me. There were already few proposals on the table from prospective brides who were pursuing Medicine as their career. But I wanted a life outside Medicine. I didn’t want to continue heavy discussions on medical topics when I returned home after a heavy and busy medical shift. I needed lighter moments with my life partner that would give me solace, peace and pleasure. Hence, I calmly rejected all proposals only with an excuse

that I was yet not ready for marriage and first wanted to build my career on a strong foundation.

During the next vacation, after much thought, I spoke to my mother. My mother heard me with all patience and eagerness and also got excited to see her photo which I promised to arrange soon through common friends.

My mother discussed this with my father when he was having a late-night dinner alone returning from a patient home call. I was then just pretending to sleep in the adjoining room. The discussion was not clear but the conversation was short. While my heart was beating faster, yet I managed to doze off into deep slumber. The next morning my father didn't say a word on this topic and he silently left for his clinic after a quick breakfast. But the same evening as he settled into his kurta pyjama, he called me and let me sit by his side. He continued, 'Look son, choosing the right bride is a huge responsibility and this responsibility lingers on for the rest of your life with your life partner. However, we would be most happy in what makes and keeps you happy'. If you want to go this route, then it is absolutely fine with me and it is 'yes' from my side.' I was indeed happy and I just nodded in affirmation to what my father had just said without me uttering a single word. Our families agreed to meet and finalize the dates etc and everything moved forward smoothly. The only challenge was timing. I was still in the middle of my MD, and I knew that marriage wasn't something I could balance alongside my demanding schedule.

When I told Shama about this, I expected disappointment, but she simply nodded. “I don’t mind waiting,” she said. “I know how important this is for you.” I felt a weight lift off my chest. “It won’t be too long,” I promised. “Just until I finish my MD.” And so, we waited.

We got married on the 3rd of January, 1996. It was a simple but beautiful ceremony. But because my final year of post-graduation was overwhelming—with research, thesis submissions, and sleepless nights at the hospital—Shama stayed back in our hometown, visiting whenever she could. Being apart and away from each other felt like a sacrifice we both agreed for and a few phone calls on the land line felt like the most awaited, the most joyous and fulfilling moments. Of course, we did not have any mobile phones then.

It wasn’t the ideal start, but she never complained.

By November of that year, when I finally completed my MD, I knew I had not only earned my degree but also a life partner who truly understood me.

I was also satisfied as our parents were in agreement and happily approved this alliance. My father though said, ‘son now you have double responsibility but for now keep your career in the forefront as its success also rests on your married and personal lives. And with that, a new phase of my life had truly begun.

Chapter 8

I spent a couple of years in Delhi working at private and other corporate hospitals. I had plenty to learn and I really worked very hard and for long hours to get as much hands-on and practical experiences under my belt as I could. The stipend was enough to sustain the lives of two but not enough to secure a future. Hence, I decided to move to Saudi Arabia. My father supported my decision not for my financial gain but this route would be easier to get me to the UK. Whilst I was leaving India for the very first time for a job opportunity across the sea my father warned me - 'son, don't get stuck in Saudi for too long .Be focussed on moving to the UK for higher training at your earliest opportunity.'

All my attention and energy apart from my clinical duties in Saudi Arabia were spent on studying for UK higher medical exams and communicating with friends in the UK to guide me as to how to get there.

It was not easy finding a job. People talk of the West with a fantastical tone—go to the West and all your dreams will

come true—but the reality was far from it. I had a substantial amount of experience and sufficient qualifications to back me up, but it was difficult. I did eventually find a job and received my medical registration from two bodies—The British Council and Senior Doctors Route—before finally making my way to the UK. I clearly remember the day I arrived in the UK, it was the 29th of September, year 2000, when I landed at Heathrow Airport. Dreary and bleak, the sky held no promises of a bright future and I was quick to judge. A grey drizzle hung in the air like a tired curtain, the sky was overcast and thick with clouds. A gust of cold wind across my face welcomed me as I stepped off the plane and into the arrival hall, clutching the handles of my heavy suitcase. The air was cold—damp, unfamiliar. I felt it immediately: that creeping sense of displacement.

At that moment, I thought of my father. He had always spoken of the UK with such admiration—about its systems, the discipline, the dignity of the profession, and the opportunities it held. I had grown up hearing stories about England as a land of civility and grandeur. However, very little he warned me of the English weather. I arrived in a simple t-shirt, thinking the end of September couldn't possibly be that cold. Back home, we were still sweating through the late monsoon. But here in England, the air cut through me like a blade. It wasn't just cold—it was *biting*. A grey, persistent drizzle hung in the air, soaking the fabric of my clothes and chilling me to the bone. The wind whipped through the narrow streets, curling around corners and stinging my ears. It was unforgiving. I had never

experienced this kind of cold before. There was a dampness in the air that clung to everything, and I felt underprepared—underdressed, certainly—but also slightly underwhelmed.

Finding a decent hotel was another challenge. I was new, unsure of where to go or whom to ask. The first few lodgings I came across were small, outdated, and charged extra for everything—breakfast, heating, even basic toiletries. “Bed and breakfast” were more of a suggestion than a promise, and prices fluctuated depending on location and room size. I remember walking into a place that claimed to be ‘budget friendly’, only to be handed a rate card by a short lady who smelled like she hadn’t showered in ages that nearly made me laugh—£65 a night for a creaky bed, shared bathroom, and a slice of toast with cold beans.

Eventually, I found what looked like a modest bed and breakfast tucked between two terraced buildings. It was the only one still lit, and I remember dragging my bags up the narrow, dimly lit staircase—no lift, of course. I had two large, heavy suitcases with me—full of books, clothes, and the essentials I thought I’d need to settle into this new chapter of life. By the time I reached the top, I was profusely sweating, despite the cold. The contrast between the freezing wind outside and the suffocating warmth of physical exertion made me dizzy. My hands were raw, my back ached, and the weight of everything—not just the bags, but the moment itself—settled heavily on my shoulders.

But what choice did I have? I needed rest, a roof over my head, and time to figure out my next steps.

That first night, I sat on the edge of the small single bed, rubbing my hands together to bring back some warmth. The radiator sputtered weakly in the corner of the room, making more noise than heat. I remember thinking, *"This can't be it. This is just the beginning. Surely it gets better from here."*

The room was barely a room. Just a small bed pressed against one wall, a window that barely opened, and a corner sink. There wasn't even enough space to fully open my suitcase. I had to shift it in awkward angles, unpacking bit by bit, nudging my way through the narrow gaps just to move around.

Still, I thought, *"At least I can eat something warm now, get a cup of tea, maybe find a takeaway place."*

I stepped out into the cold once more, jacketless but hopeful. To my shock, every shop, every eatery, every tiny cafe I passed by was closed. Lights off. Doors locked. Streets completely empty. It was barely 8 PM.

Eventually, I found a small corner shop still open. The options were limited. I bought a small bag of chips and a bottle of Coke. That was my first dinner in the UK—salted crisps and cold soda, eaten cross-legged on the narrow bed of a hotel room barely big enough to contain me.

I remember laughing to myself as I sat there, tired, aching, and wondering, *“Is this really what I came here for?”*

But beneath the exhaustion, beneath the culture shock and the unexpected loneliness, I felt something else stir. *Resilience*. The quiet voice that said, *“You’ve made it this far. Don’t judge the beginning too harshly. Tomorrow will be different.”*

That first night lingered in my memory like a scene out of a film—dim, damp, and strangely quiet. I remember waking up the next morning to a sky that looked almost identical to the night before: grey, overcast, with a constant drizzle tapping against the small windowpane. I hadn’t packed an umbrella—why would I? It was late September, and back in Saudi, September still felt like summer. But here, it was bone-deep cold and wet.

I stepped out that morning, clutching my coat tighter and squinting up at the clouds, wondering if they ever cleared. Within an hour, I’d walked into a corner shop and picked up the most basic umbrella I could find. Ten pounds. A simple black umbrella with a wooden handle. When I mentally converted that to Saudi Riyal and then into Indian Rupees—like many of us migrants instinctively did back then—I felt a jolt. *Ten pounds for an umbrella?* It was a stark reminder that life here would not come cheap.

And I felt that again when I walked into a red telephone booth later that day. I had bought a prepaid international

calling card—one of those scratch cards with a long number you dial in before placing a call. I inserted it, followed the instructions. The only conversation I could have with my wife was ‘where have you been the whole night ? I said what do you mean? Why didn't you call last night after you arrived in the UK. We all were too worried, my wife continued. And just a few minutes into my call home, the balance vanished. Gone! I stood there stunned, the receiver in my hand, listening to the beep of the disconnected line. It felt like I had just paid a premium to hear my wife say nothing meaningful or comforting.

Everything in the UK came with a cost—literal and emotional.

After hearing my father speak of the UK so fondly, I had painted images in my mind of wide streets, elegant homes, and open spaces. I have never been more wrong in my life.

When I finally began work, another reality hit hard—*tax*. In the Middle East, my salary came without deductions. I could spend and save, but in the UK, I remember looking at my first payslip and thinking there had been a mistake. The deductions were staggering. Between income tax, national insurance, and the cost of living, I realised very quickly that financial comfort would not come easily here.

And perhaps more than all of this, what I struggled with most was the people.

They weren't unkind—but they were distant. Reserved. Polite, yes, but not open. Small talk never turned into

conversations. You worked with people five days a week, and yet never knew a thing about their personal lives. In the Middle East and back home, friendships blossomed in hospital corridors and over shared meals. Here, there was a wall. A quiet, polite wall that didn't let you in.

It was lonely, in a way that wasn't obvious. Not crushing or dramatic, but lingering—a slow ache that settled in the background of each day.

Still, I had chosen this. I reminded myself of that often. I was here to grow, to specialise, to stand on my own two feet—and I wasn't about to give up just because the sky didn't know how to shine.

As far as work was concerned, I had to start from the bottom—regardless of the years of experience I brought from Saudi or India. The system here had its structure, and I had to respect it. I started at the junior-most level, as a Senior House Officer. It didn't matter that I had been managing wards independently and saw patients in clinics with very little supervision from consultants; here, I was expected to prove myself all over again. From Senior House Officer, I gradually climbed—step by step, year after year—towards the top. But that climb wasn't easy. Every rung demanded effort, sacrifice, and long hours. I had to move around for training—hospital to hospital, city to city—following opportunities like breadcrumbs, hoping each move would inch me closer to my goals. With every transfer came the challenge of uprooting my family, settling into new routines, adapting to new supervisors and colleagues.

Two months later, I saw several missed calls on my mobile phone - a crude old fashioned Nokia and my very first mobile phone that I bought. I got worried and called back immediately - my shaky hands and voice were obvious. I was however greeted with a cheerful and loud voice of my father 'congratulations, you have become a dad of a lovely son'- he cried out in joy. I froze there for a while with mixed emotions - I thanked God for this blessing but I was also sad that I was not with my family at this joyous occasion. Almost 11 months later my wife joined me with our first son—barely a year old at the time. Four years later, our second son was born when I was working in Liverpool. He was delivered via caesarean section. That period, though marked by joy, was also one of the hardest in my life. I was at the peak of my career in the UK. I had a very busy job in a large teaching hospital. Medical research commitment in addition to clinical work compounded my stress to a much higher level.

My wife needed time to heal, and our older son was still young and full of energy. Between hospital shifts, I had to come home, care for our toddler, cook, clean, and try to be the steady pillar my family needed. There was no help—no family nearby, no friends to lean on, no nanny to step in. It was just us, navigating each exhausting day, praying for strength, and making it work. I remember coming home after night shifts, exhausted, only to find that I needed to prepare lunch, bathe the child, and change diapers. Then, with barely any rest, I'd head back into the hospital for another long shift. It was physically and mentally draining,

and yet—I look back now and realise—it taught me endurance in a way nothing else ever had.

The training in the UK was rigorous, no doubt, but it taught you the *basics*—the real fundamentals of medicine. There was no room for cutting corners. Everything had to be done right, by the book, and with precision. That sort of discipline shaped me. When I would return to India to help my father with his clinic, he started to notice the difference. He began letting me take on more responsibilities. He trusted my judgement more. And I knew it was the training in the UK—and my years in Saudi—that gave him that confidence in me.

I remember sitting in my father's clinic in my home town, the same place where I'd spent so many afternoons as a boy, watching him work with quiet precision. The ceiling fans overhead groaned as they turned, pushing around the hot, stale air. Outside, I could hear the faint clatter of cycle rickshaws, the occasional honk from a scooter, and the hum of life that always seemed to pulse through the narrow lanes of our town. It was a busy day—like most days at the clinic. I had just finished examining a middle-aged man with a wheezy chest. Classic asthma, though he'd been managing it poorly. I'd adjusted his medication, explained the importance of inhaler technique, and wrote down everything in his file—clear, thorough, and legible. I didn't realise until after the patient had left that my father had been watching me the whole time.

“You handled that case well,” he said from his desk, without lifting his eyes from the papers in front of him.

I looked up and smiled. “We saw a lot of cases like that during night shifts. In the UK, the protocol is very strict—everything has to be done properly. No shortcuts. Even something as simple as an inhaler, they make sure you teach it the right way.”

He finally looked up at me then. His eyes lingered on mine—not in a critical way, but studying me, as if trying to see what had changed.

“There's confidence in you now,” he said quietly. “I noticed it yesterday too. You're more grounded. You don't hesitate.”

I leaned back slightly in my chair, the wood creaking under me. “I think the training in the UK really made me sharpen my basics. There was no room to get things half-right. You either knew what you were doing, or you didn't. And if you didn't, you learned quickly.”

He nodded slowly, as though letting my words settle in his mind.

“When you first left,” he said, “I worried you might go there and forget how things work here. That you'd become too... foreign. Too far removed.”

“I worried about that too,” I admitted. “But it turns out, medicine doesn't really change. The human body is the same whether it's in India or the UK. What changes is how

deeply you understand it. How disciplined you are in treating it. And that—honestly—I learned from you first. All the training in the UK did was polish what was already there.”

He didn’t say anything for a while. He just looked at me, and then he gave a small nod, the kind that said more than words ever could.

“From now on,” he said, his voice calm but firm, “you take the evening patients. I’ll sit in with you for a while... but I want them to see your face first.”

At that moment, something shifted inside me. It wasn’t pride exactly—though I was proud—it was deeper than that. It was the quiet satisfaction of earning my father’s trust not just as a son, but as a doctor. That day, in the still heat of our small-town clinic, I felt like I had finally come full circle.

Those years were challenging in more ways than one, but they were also formative. They shaped not just the doctor I would become, but the father, the husband, the man I was learning to be.

Chapter 9

The idea of staying in the UK forever never sat easily with me. On paper, it made perfect sense—the stability, the opportunities, the prestige of being a doctor here. But every time I thought about it, something inside me twisted. It felt selfish. I hadn't worked this hard just to live comfortably in a foreign land while my own people back home struggled to find good doctors. My plan was always to return to India, though I admit...there were moments of hesitation.

I would often sit with friends late into the night, sipping weak tea in the doctors' lounge after a long shift. The room always smelled faintly of disinfectant and stale sandwiches, the radiator clanking in the corner as it fought the British chill. We'd slump into those old, tired armchairs, our white coats tossed over the backs, ties loosened, faces weary but still hungry for conversation.

One evening, my friend Khalid leaned forward, his brows furrowed, his voice carrying the sharp edge of conviction. "Syed, you'd be mad to go back," he said. "Look at what we have here—structured training, state-of-the-art hospitals,

security for our families. Do you think India can give you this? Be realistic.”

I sat back, rubbing my palms together for warmth, watching the steam rise from my cup. “Maybe not,” I admitted. “But do you know what India can give me? A purpose. A sense that I’m needed. Here, I’m just another cog in the machine. Back home, I can actually make a difference.”

Khalid scoffed, shaking his head, his lips pressing into a thin line. “Purpose doesn’t pay bills. The purpose doesn’t educate your children in good schools. Purpose doesn’t guarantee your wife is safe when she steps outside.” His words came quickly, almost rehearsed, as though he had told himself the same thing a hundred times.

Across the room, Imran, another colleague from Pakistan, chimed in, his tone gentler. “I see both sides. Honestly, I struggle with the same question. When I call home, my mother asks me when I’ll return. But when I look at my daughters here, settled and thriving... how do I uproot them?”

The room fell quiet for a moment, each of us lost in our own thoughts. The ticking clock on the wall seemed louder than usual, counting down the seconds of our indecision. I looked around at their faces—Khalid with his sharp features and restless eyes, Imran with his lined forehead and tired smile—and I realised we were all fighting the same battle, just from different angles.

I leaned forward, my voice softer now. “You know what I think? If all of us stay here, who is left there? Who takes care of the sick in our towns and villages? Who makes sure the next generation of doctors in India is properly trained?” My voice cracked slightly, more emotion in it than I intended.

Khalid sighed and ran a hand through his hair, his jaw tight. “Syed, you’re too idealistic. Noble, yes—but idealistic.”

“Maybe,” I said, staring into my tea, now cold and bitter. “But sometimes being idealistic is the only way to keep moving. Otherwise, what’s the point of all this sacrifice?”

For a moment, nobody said anything. Imran gave me a small, knowing smile, his eyes soft with understanding. Khalid looked away, his jaw still tense, though I sensed a flicker of doubt behind his words.

I went back to my room that night with my mind still unsettled. The narrow streets outside were slick with rain, the yellow glow of the streetlights reflecting off the wet pavement. I could hear the faint hum of cars on the motorway in the distance, and somewhere, a lone siren wailed through the night. London was alive, thriving, indifferent.

I pulled my coat tighter around me as I walked, my breath misting in the cold air. The thought kept echoing in my head: *Was I being foolish? Or was I being true to myself?*

Every time I pictured home—my father’s clinic, the crowded wards of Aligarh, the familiar voices and languages, the eager eyes of young patients who looked at you with hope—I felt a pull stronger than any argument colleagues could make. I knew one thing for certain: the decision would not come easy. It would gnaw at me for years.

I had reached the top of the ladder in the UK - ‘Consultant’. The very word carried a weight of respect and responsibility, the position every doctor aspired to, and I had it. Years of sleepless nights, endless relocations, exams that tested not just knowledge but endurance—it had all led me here. For several years, I lived that life, respected in the hospital, trusted by patients, comfortable in my role.

And yet... comfort has a way of making you restless.

It was during a trip back to India, attending my cousin’s wedding, that life threw me a curve I hadn’t expected. The air was thick with the smell of marigold garlands, incense, and the sound of dhol beating in the distance. My relatives filled the courtyard, women in bright saris laughing together, children running barefoot across the mosaic tiles, the whole house glowing with celebration.

Somewhere in the middle of all that noise, I checked my email on a small laptop. That’s when I saw it—a job offer from Dr. Sulaiman Al-Habib Hospital in Saudi Arabia. I remember staring at the screen for a long moment, reading the words over and over. A senior consultant position. Tax free. Generous allowances. Free schooling for the children.

Housing and travel perks. On paper, it was everything a man like me could want.

That night, after the wedding festivities quieted down, I sat with my father on the veranda. The air was cool, the faint sound of distant firecrackers still echoing through the neighbourhood. My father, wrapped in his shawl, listened intently as I told him about the offer. “Three hours from Delhi,” I said, leaning forward. “That’s all it is. Not the seven-hour flight from London. Not the oceans and continents away. Just three hours. I could be closer to you, closer to home, while still working in a world-class hospital.”

My father nodded slowly, his eyes narrowing in thought. “It sounds... like a middle path,” he murmured. “Not too far, not too close. And you know what that means, Syed? It means you can serve your family without giving up your career.”

At the wedding house, my uncles and cousins joined in the discussion too. Some were enthusiastic— “Saudi is good, Syed bhai! The money, the perks, the lifestyle. And closer to us!” Others were more cautious— “But will you be satisfied there? After the UK, after all that you have achieved?” I sat quietly, listening, weighing their words against the storm of thoughts inside me. I could almost hear Khalid’s voice from years ago in the UK, warning me about “idealism.” But this felt different. This wasn’t just idealism—it was practical, too.

That night, as the house grew silent and everyone went to bed, I lay awake on a charpoy, staring at the ceiling fan spinning lazily above. Shama lay beside me, half-asleep, her hand resting lightly on mine.

“What do you think?” I whispered.

She opened her eyes slightly, her voice drowsy but steady. “I think... if it brings you closer to home, closer to your parents, then it’s worth trying. Two years is not forever. If it doesn’t feel right, we can always move back to the UK or India.”

Her words, simple and calm, settled something inside me.

By the time the wedding festivities ended, I had made my decision. I would take the offer. Two years in Saudi. A middle path. A chance to balance the life I had built abroad with the ties that would always anchor me back to India.

It was, in many ways, the start of a new chapter.

I had accepted the offer from Saudi and returned to the UK after my vacation in India, determined to begin the paperwork. Most of my days were consumed with applications, medical checks, attestations, and the endless bureaucratic circles one must go through for a work visa. It felt like a full-time job in itself.

One chilly afternoon, I was in a hospital car park, fumbling with my coat as the wind cut sharp against my face, when

my phone rang. The reception was poor, the line crackling in and out. I pressed the phone tightly to my ear, straining to hear.

“Dr. Syed... we would like to interview you for a position...” the voice said, faint and broken by static. I could barely make out the words, only fragments.

“For which hospital?” I asked, stepping between parked cars, trying to catch a better signal.

The woman’s voice flickered in and out. “... Bahrain... interview tomorrow...” That was all I caught.

I didn’t even know which hospital it was, but I agreed anyway. I thought to myself, *what’s the harm?*

The very next day, I attended a telephonic interview. To my surprise, it went smoothly, and before long I was informed, I had been selected. The terms and conditions came through, and I could hardly believe my eyes. The package was even better than Saudi’s—excellent pay, lucrative perks, and most importantly, far better schools for my children.

That night, I sat down with Shama at the kitchen table. Papers were spread out before us, contracts and notes scribbled on the margins.

“This,” I said, pointing at the Bahrain contract, “is better than Saudi. No doubt. The schools alone make it worth it.”

Shama leaned forward, scanning the papers carefully. “And it’s still close to India,” she added softly. “Closer than the UK. That matters.”

I nodded, but inside me the decision still felt unsettled. I called a couple of relatives, seeking their advice. Some encouraged me— “Bahrain is good, Syed. Take it.” Others were more cautious—“But think carefully. Look at what’s happening in the region.”

This was 2010, edging into 2011. The Arab Spring was unfolding like a storm across the Middle East, and Bahrain was not spared. Protests, clashes, instability—it was all over the news. I remember sitting late one night, the TV flickering images of demonstrations, Shama sitting quietly beside me. My eldest son was asleep upstairs, and the younger one was only a toddler then. I looked at their faces in my mind, and the decision became clear.

“It’s not safe,” I said at last, turning to Shama. “We can’t take the children into this. We’ll stay with Saudi Arabia.”

She nodded in agreement, relief softening her expression.

And so I stuck with Saudi, though in the back of my mind I often wondered what Bahrain might have been like. Still, I believed it was the right decision at the time. By the end of that contract period, another question arose—where next? Shama and I had long discussions about returning to India. But every time, we circled back to the same concern: *would the children adjust? Would we?* I had seen families try, only to find themselves lost in the transition, neither here nor there. Children who had grown up abroad struggled with language, with systems, with an entirely different way of life. Parents who thought they would settle found themselves restless, nostalgic for the order and pace they

had left behind. India, at that stage, was not on the table. The choice narrowed to Saudi or the UK. After years of moving, of chasing opportunities, the thought of going back to the UK—with all its familiarity, its systems, its stability—seemed the most practical, even if not the most emotionally satisfying.

It wasn't an easy decision, but then again, few of mine ever were.

As I was completing my two years in Saudi, the fires of the Arab Spring slowly began to cool. The news reports grew less frantic, and Bahrain, once so uncertain, seemed to be finding its balance again. It was around this time that my phone began to ring again—calls from Bahrain. The same hospital that had once interviewed me, the same position that I thought had long since been given to someone else.

“Dr. Syed,” the voice on the other end said warmly, “things are stable now. We'd love for you to reconsider. The offer is still on the table.”

I was genuinely surprised. “I thought you would have already filled the post by now,” I admitted. “It's been nearly two years.”

“No,” came the reply. “We wanted you. We kept it open.”

I sat with the phone pressed to my ear, feeling an unexpected sense of gratitude. To think that they valued me enough to keep the role vacant through such turbulent times—it was humbling.

That evening, I told Shama. “They’ve called again. They want me to join them in Bahrain.”

Her eyebrows lifted slightly. “After all this time?”

“Yes. They’ve kept the position open.” I paused, weighing the thought in silence before saying, “Maybe this is how we should do it—finish out the two years here in Saudi, then go to Bahrain for a short while. Six months, perhaps. And after that, we return to the UK for good.”

Shama leaned back in her chair, considering. “Six months will give us enough time to experience it without committing fully. And the children will manage—they’re young enough to adapt.”

The plan began to take shape. Saudi Arabia had been steady, a place of stability during uncertain years. Bahrain, now recovering, could be a bridge—an interlude before finally returning to the UK, the place that had always been our anchor. I felt lighter with this decision, as though the path ahead was finally clear: close the Saudi chapter, taste Bahrain for a season, and then, at last, go home.

When we finally moved to Bahrain, I didn’t expect to feel so at ease. The country was open, warm, and full of good people. There was an energy in the air—modern yet rooted in tradition—that immediately drew me in. The streets were clean, the food rich with flavor, and the community welcoming in a way that felt familiar. The hospital itself was unlike anything I had seen outside of the UK. They

followed British standards almost to the letter, which gave me a strange sense of continuity. Even though I was in the Middle East, I didn't feel far from London or Manchester. Many of the consultants were from Europe or the West, and working alongside them gave me a professional satisfaction I hadn't felt in years. For once, I wasn't weighed down by uncertainty; I was thriving.

A few months later, Shama and the children joined me, and our lives shifted again when our youngest daughter was born here, in Bahrain. I remember holding her for the first time in the hospital room—her tiny frame wrapped in white, her cries thin but determined—and feeling the weight of responsibility and joy all at once.

This time, though, everything was different from when my second son was born in the UK. Back then, I was juggling too much—cooking, cleaning, looking after our eldest, and bringing food to the hospital. It had nearly broken me. In Bahrain, we had help. A few distant relatives visited, always offering their support, and we could finally afford domestic help. Raising our baby girl became a shared joy instead of a lonely burden. Shama was happier, lighter, and so was I.

We had agreed—almost casually—that once our daughter grew a little older, and no longer needed constant attention, we would return to the UK. That was the plan. But the longer we stayed, the more comfortable we became. The Middle East had its own rhythm, and it suited us perfectly.

I often found myself saying, half in jest but half in truth: “*Not East, not West—Middle East is the best.*” Because it really was. It blended the best of both worlds: the discipline and standards I admired in the West, with the warmth, closeness, and comfort I had always cherished in the East. Slowly, without realising it, Bahrain became home—my second home.

My original aim, the dream of returning to India to serve my people, began to fade. I told myself it was selfish, but I could not deny it. Life was easier here, and my family was thriving. Still, fate has its way of pulling you back to reality.

Around this time, my father’s health began to decline. With passage of time, he became weaker and weaker. His voice on the phone became softer and at times fumbled. I made several trips from Bahrain whenever I could to see him. I watched his eyes as if signalling me to be close to him and be with him forever. His usual personality showed in his subtle emotions but never in words to impose. His absence already started to haunt me and loom me for fear of losing him and one day in 2015, he was gone.

His passing left me shaken. As if I had lost a part of myself. I felt hollow and broken from within. It was not just the loss of a father, but the death of an era. The man who had been my compass, who had built the path I was walking on, was no longer there. And with his absence, the guilt of having drifted from my original purpose weighed heavier than ever.

Chapter 10

My father's presence in my life was undeniable. So much so that I dedicate this entire book to him. This chapter, in particular, is a small nod of appreciation for everything he did for me—for the love, the guidance, the sacrifices, and the unwavering faith he had in me.

He was not only my father but also my greatest teacher and guiding light. From a very young age, I saw in him a man of immense discipline and quiet strength. His work ethic, his patience with people, and his deep sense of responsibility shaped the way I approached both my personal and professional life. Whatever little success I have achieved, I owe largely to the foundation he laid and the values he instilled in me.

He taught me to never shy away from hard work, to remain humble no matter the position I held, and to treat people with kindness. I carry these lessons with me even today, and they continue to guide every decision I make.

My father made countless sacrifices for me and my siblings—sacrifices that, at the time, we didn't fully understand. He worked tirelessly to ensure that we had every opportunity he didn't. His sense of duty was unmatched, and even when he was tired or unwell, he never let it show. He was steadfast, consistent, and deeply committed to our wellbeing.

As I look back, I realise how much of who I am today stems from his influence. His calmness in times of chaos, his wisdom in times of doubt, and his compassion in times of conflict are things I continue to draw upon, even in his absence. Though he is no longer here, his voice, his teachings, and his presence remain with me every day.

This book, in its entirety, is a tribute to him—to his strength, to his humility, and to the light he shone on my path. Everything I have become, and everything I continue to strive for, began with him.

It was my father who guided me to choose medicine in the first place. I still remember those early conversations when I was unsure of what path to take. He spoke with such quiet conviction about the value of serving humanity, about the privilege and responsibility that come with healing others. It was his vision, not mine, that first planted the seed. Over time, that seed grew into a lifelong calling.

He didn't stop there. When the time came to choose a specialty, it was again his guidance that steered me in the right direction. He saw things in me I didn't yet recognise—my patience, my attention to detail, my empathy—and he

knew where those qualities would serve best. Even when it came to subspecialisation, he was there, helping me weigh the options, thinking through the long-term implications, and reminding me always to choose purpose over prestige.

But his influence went far beyond professional advice. He taught me how to be a good clinician—not just through textbooks or lectures, but through observation and example. From him, I learned the art of listening to patients, the importance of humility, and the quiet dignity in caring for others. There were lessons he imparted that no book could ever teach—the value of compassion, the strength in restraint, and the wisdom of experience.

He was my guide and my inspiration. Whenever I felt lost or uncertain about the next step, it was his voice I sought. Even after I became an established doctor myself, I would still find myself thinking, *what would Abba say about this?* That question became a compass for me, one that continues to guide me even now.

My father was, in every sense, a simple and humble man. He never cared for luxuries—never owned an expensive car or a grand clinic. His clinic was a modest two-room chamber, plain and practical, yet filled with a warmth that came from his presence. Patients trusted him not because of how his clinic looked, but because of who he was. I can still hear his words echoing in my mind: “*You have to be a good doctor, not a rich doctor.*” That was his philosophy—quiet, honest, and deeply human.

He wore simple clothes, ate simple food, and lived a life rooted in faith. He was deeply religious, never missing his prayers, five times a day, no matter how busy he was. But what I admired most was his compassion. He helped the poor selflessly, often treating those who couldn't afford to pay, never turning anyone away. Even in his final days, when he was bedridden with an IV drip in his arm, he continued to write prescriptions for patients who came to see him. I still remember watching him do this—his hand trembling slightly, yet steady enough to sign his name. His sense of duty never wavered.

He was endlessly dedicated to his patients—day or night, summer or winter. There were times he would travel miles to see someone who needed him, often staying overnight in another city, only to return early the next morning to continue his rounds. That was the kind of man he was—driven not by ambition, but by purpose. His work was his service, and his life was his message. Even now, when I think of what it truly means to be a doctor, it is his image that comes to mind: sitting in that humble chamber, in his simple clothes, serving humanity with a sincerity that words can never quite capture.

My father's guidance went far beyond medicine. He was deeply involved in every aspect of my life—my health, my finances, even the way I carried myself. He believed that discipline was not something to be practiced only in one's profession but in every part of life. I remember a time when I had put on quite a bit of weight, especially during my years in the UK. The long shifts, irregular hours, and easy access

to unhealthy food had taken their toll. My father noticed it immediately when I visited home.

He looked at me with concern and said, *"You can't advise patients on a healthy lifestyle if you can't take care of yourself. A doctor should not only heal others but also be an example of good health."* Those words struck me deeply. He was right, as always. It wasn't about appearance—it was about responsibility. If I couldn't discipline myself, how could I expect others to trust my advice on health? From that moment, I made a conscious effort to change. I started watching what I ate, incorporated exercise into my routine, and slowly began to feel better, both physically and mentally.

He often reminded me, *"A person should eat and sleep only as much as is required—no overindulgence."* That was his way of life: balance, moderation, and mindfulness. Whether it was food, money, or work, he believed excess in anything clouded one's judgment and weakened one's spirit. Looking back, I realize how much of my own discipline—my sense of restraint and purpose—came from him. His lessons were simple, but they shaped the way I lived, thought, and practiced medicine.

As I look back now, I realise that every milestone in my life—every success, every turning point—bears my father's quiet imprint. His words still echo in my mind, his values still guide my choices, and his humility still keeps me grounded. He never sought recognition, never demanded praise, yet his influence was visible all around.

My father was not just my role model; he was the moral compass that steered my life. His simplicity, his devotion to his work, and his unwavering faith continue to inspire me even today. Everything I have achieved, every patient I have helped, every challenge I have overcome—I owe, in some way, to him.

My father was always ready to help the poor and the needy even during the worst days of his ill health. Just six months before he left for the heavenly abode, he inaugurated the ‘Raza Foundation’- a charity organization to help the poor, the sick and people from the weaker sections of the community. He has left on my shoulder a great weight of responsibility to carry his legacy forward.

Though he is no longer here, I feel his presence around all my achievements, my life’s major milestones, in every decision I make. I also sometimes feel and say to myself ‘what would his thoughts or reaction be on this if he was around?’ His absence and yet his presence in my mind, heart and soul makes me feel sometimes strong and sometimes weak.

This book, and the journey it recounts, is as much his story as it is mine—a tribute to the man who taught me that greatness lies not in wealth or titles, but in service, sincerity, and compassion.