

# Echoes of Life

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# 1. A Child

Rudra Sinha, an eight-year-old boy, defies expectations. His name suggests an obedient child, but as his mother, I can attest to his mischievous nature. Returning from school, his bag lands carelessly on the sofa, shoes are launched into the air, often finding their mark on the dinner table or washing machine – each day a new target. He immediately settles in front of the television. A daily inspection of his bag inevitably reveals one or two snacks procured from the nearby grocery shop. "Mom told me to get these," he'd claim, despite my never granting such permission. My evening walks in the neighborhood include a regular conversation with the grocer, requesting he refuse Rudra's requests. The upcoming Diwali vacation offers a welcome respite.

"No, the painter hasn't arrived yet," I said to Vineet over the phone.

Just then, the doorbell rang. Rudra's face lights up at the sound; he always hopes it's Vineet returning from work. I ended the call as he raced to the door.

"Oh, no, it's not Papa," he'd usually say upon encountering a stranger.

I reached the door to find the painter, a cloth bag slung over his shoulder. He smiled gently at Rudra and offered him a candy. I hesitated to intervene.

"One more?" Rudra asked.

"Sorry, just one," the painter replied, still smiling.

I directed him to the storeroom where the painting supplies were kept. This Diwali would be our first away from our hometown, Patna. Vineet wanted to maintain our familiar traditions.

Rudra, instead of retreating to his cartoons, followed the painter.

"Would you like some tea?" I asked the painter.

"Certainly, if it's no trouble," he replied politely.

I went to the kitchen, Rudra trailing behind. "Who is he?" he asked.

"Your friend," I teased.

Rudra entered the storeroom, observing the painter in his work clothes: a checked shirt splattered with paint and a white cloth covering his head.

He rushed back to me. "Mom, the man has changed!"

I followed him back to the storeroom, carrying a cup of tea. "Rudra, he's here to paint our home."

I gave the tea to the painter. "Please start with Rudra's room."

After his tea, the painter entered Rudra's room. Rudra, surprisingly quiet, watched him work.

"What class are you in?" the painter asked.

"Second grade. I'm a big boy now," Rudra replied.

The painter offered him another candy. "Take it, but don't tell your mother."

Rudra smiled and pocketed the treat.

The next day, Rudra again flew to the door when the bell rang. "Mom, it's the painter uncle!" he exclaimed, his excitement palpable. This time, there was no disappointment.

The painter smiled warmly at Rudra and greeted me with a respectful "Namaste."

"Welcome" I said. "What's the plan for today?" Rudra watched intently.

"I applied the primer yesterday. Today, I'll start with the color" he explained.

"Understood." I went to the kitchen.

The painter discreetly gave a handful of candies to Rudra.

As I observed his work, I remarked, "Please ensure the color is applied evenly."

"Of course," he replied.

"Where are you from?" I asked.

"Nalanda" he said.

"We're also from Bihar, Patna," I replied.

I returned to the kitchen. Rudra remained with the painter, drawn to him perhaps by the promise of sweets.

"Do you play sports?" the painter asked.

"I play, but I don't enjoy it," Rudra confessed.

"Why not?" asked the painter.

"I always fail. I never win," he said sadly.

"What did I say?" the painter asked, gently pinching Rudra's cheek.

"You learn," Rudra repeated, smiling.

The painter then produced another handful of candies.

The following days unfolded similarly. Rudra greeted the painter with enthusiasm, receiving his daily candy. The painter worked diligently, and Rudra was his constant shadow, fascinated by the brushstrokes.

One day, I discovered a stash of candies hidden under Rudra's bed.

"Where did you get all these, Rudra?" I demanded. "That grocer! I've told him repeatedly not to give you anything." I moved towards him, but he tried to escape. I grabbed his ear.

The painter intervened, gently pulling Rudra away. "I gave him these," he admitted.

"Please, don't spoil him," I pleaded. "He's already quite indulged."

"I understand, but let him enjoy these little pleasures," the painter insisted.

I relented.

The next morning, Vineet was preparing for work. "Avantika, where's my wallet?"

"It should be in the drawer." I went to check.

"Here it is," I said, handing it to him.

As I closed the wardrobe, I noticed my savings, accumulated over the past year, were missing.

"Vineet, did you take the money from here?" I asked.

"No," he replied.

My mind raced. Who could have taken it? The painter!

"Maybe it was the painter!" I exclaimed.

"How can, you be sure?" Vineet questioned.

"He was in this room all day yesterday," I reasoned.

Just then, the doorbell rang. Rudra, as always, rushed to answer it. "Mom, it's the painter uncle!"

Vineet and I went to the living room. The painter stood there.

"Did you take the money from the room?" Vineet asked directly.

"No, sir. Why would I do that?" the painter defended himself.

"I don't want to argue," Vineet said firmly. "You can leave."

The painter didn't protest. He offered Rudra some candies, but Vineet stopped him.

In the following days, a series of robberies plagued the neighborhood. Many residents filed police reports. The investigation revealed that a gang of four was responsible, including the theft from our home. They confessed to the police.

Vineet and I felt a deep sense of guilt and tried to contact the painter, but we didn't have his number. We had only encountered him through his work in our locality.

Five years passed. We never saw the painter again. Rudra had blossomed into a responsible and studious young man, a top student and captain of his school's basketball team. This year, they won the inter-school championship.

The doorbell rang. Rudra, engrossed in his studies, was closer to the door. "Rudra, could you get that? I'm busy in the kitchen," I called.

Rudra opened the door to find a man with a white beard and a familiar cloth bag.

"Yes, who is it?" Rudra asked.

"Where is the child?" the man inquired.

"I'm not sure I understand," Rudra replied.

I came to the door. "Who is it, Rudra?"

Rudra looked at me, puzzled. "I don't know."

I recognized the man. The cloth bag... I'd seen it before. "Are you... the painter?" I asked.

"Yes, ma'am," he confirmed.

I invited him in. As he entered, he reached into his pocket and pulled out some candies. "Where is your child?"

I gestured towards Rudra. "He's right here."

"Oh, he's grown so much!" the painter exclaimed. "Did you finally start winning at sports?" he asked Rudra, offering him the candies. Rudra took them automatically.

"He doesn't seem to recognize you," I said gently.

The painter's gaze fell upon the living room wall, now adorned with Rudra's medals and certificates.

"All these medals?" he asked.

"They're all Rudra's," I said proudly.

"So, he finally started winning..." the painter smiled at Rudra.  
"Well, I should be going."

As he turned to leave, his wallet fell from his pocket.

"Your wallet!" I called.

I picked it up and checked inside. There was a photograph of a young boy. He turned back. "Oh, thank goodness!"

"Who is this child?" I asked.

"My son," he said affectionately. "I haven't seen him in five years."

"Why?" I asked.

"I can't afford to go back. The irregular work and low pay...." Tears welled up in his eyes. "And I can't bring my family here; it's too expensive," he added, his voice thick with emotion. .

"How do you manage?" I asked.

"I send most of my earnings home," he replied, tears now streaming down his face. "My son would be about Rudra's age now. When I first came here, I saw a reflection of him in Rudra."

"We're so sorry," I apologized, the guilt washing over me. "We wrongly accused you of the robbery."

"It doesn't matter," he said, a hint of weariness in his voice.

I went to my room, retrieved some money, and returned to him. "Please, take this," I said, pressing the bills into his hand.

He hesitated, then accepted, offering a warm, albeit sad, smile towards Rudra before turning to leave. As he walked away, I felt a profound mix of gratitude and sorrow for this man who had touched our lives in ways we hadn't fully understood.



## 2. Whispers of Path

Every morning after breakfast Akash and I used to take a walk around our locality to inhale the cool breeze into our lungs. Perhaps for the rest of the day we had to inhale air which is equivalent to smoking a pack of cigarettes. We reached the circle, now we had to decide which way to go.

Akash said “Lets go to that side”

I inquired “but why?”

“We have never been there, let's explore,” he suggested.

I had no option but to follow, we both crossed the circle, keeping our eyes alert all around since the vehicle crossed the road in a rash.

Our eyes caught the attention of the fascinating cafes on the left side of the road. There were plenty of them, I thought to come later though Akash insisted “Let's go in that Warm Brews, the third one.”

I resisted, “oh no I am not going.”

He said, “Will split, don't worry.”

I resisted again, “Yeah but in the middle of the month and you know how it goes.”

He was stubborn and said “I will pay, let's go, we did not have coffee today.”

Now as my friend was going to pay, I agreed otherwise I would have preferred “Ramesh ki 15 wali coffee.” We headed towards the cafe.

A little surprising for me as the cafe was quite crowded in the morning, we headed towards the counter, looking at the menu board, Akash reaction was very natural and evident.

I said, pulling his leg, “Shall we leave?”

He resisted, “No, not even in your dreams!”

I thought Akash could have gotten his pocket money, otherwise, he would never seem this resistive.

Akash said “Hey, I will have one Flat white...” he took a pause and turned towards me.

“What would you have?” he asked.

I am always a bit confused when it comes to selecting an item from a menu. In a while I said, “I will have Cold Brew.”

“So, one Flat white and a Cold Brew.” Akash said to the cashier.

A total sum of 400 bucks, he seemed to me more generous than ever.

I picked up the order and we went towards the last table placed in the last row beside the huge glass through which we could see outside.

“Done with the lab record” I asked.

“Still doing,” he said while taking a sip from his cup.

“What is there in life, is it meant to get stuck in this kind of traffic?” Akash asked.

I was looking outside, there was a huge traffic, a number of cars lined up in the queue not moving an inch, “look at them, we will also be like them in a few months.”

“Don’t know Akash, in a few months, we would be following the same route, everyday.” I spoke

“Life would be like the rat constantly running on the wheel.” Akash added.

We both finished our coffee and went outside the cafe; the traffic was still stuck as it was.

A black cat caught our eyes, it was staring at us in a strange way. It went into the narrow street beside the cafe. It jumped upon the dustbin and went into an opened window.

We saw a wooden door, quite dirty, covered with spider’s web. Akash insisted on opening it, but I resisted.

Being stubborn, Akash opened the door, held my hand and went inside. There was darkness, we were heading towards nothing.

As Akash and I stepped through the dark doorway, we found ourselves in a vast, open-air marketplace. The air is filled with a soft, calming fragrance—perhaps a mix of fresh flowers and a breeze that carries a melody instead of noise.

The people here were wearing flowing garments made of light, shimmering fabric, almost like woven stardust, that reflected their emotions. The kinder the person, the more their attire glows in soft hues of gold and pastel. Some had intricate patterns that shift and change, symbolizing their pure thoughts. Instead of hurried transactions and bargaining, everything in the market operated on mutual exchange and goodwill—people offer items not for profit but as gifts, expecting nothing in return.

The market was lined with idols of unknown deities, not of any familiar gods but of concepts—an idol for kindness, another for wisdom, one that represents laughter, and another carved from a single piece of crystal, exuding warmth. Instead of loud hawkers, there were melodious chimes announcing different stalls.

Instruments that play music on their own when touched with kindness—a harp that sings memories, a flute that whispers forgotten dreams.

Fruits that taste different depending on the eater's mood—sweet when happy, refreshing when tired, and comforting when sad.

Mirrors that don't reflect appearances but show a person's greatest moments of generosity.

Akash and I, accustomed to a world where survival often overpowers selflessness, we were mesmerized. Akash, ever the curious one, picked up an instrument and plucked a string—only to hear the sound of laughter from his childhood echoing through the air.

"What is this place?" he whispered.

A kind-eyed vendor smiled and replied, "A world where no one takes more than they need, and no one is left without."

The vendor handed us an hourglass.

We took the sandglass from the vendor; we were left with a sense of wonder and curiosity. The vendor's voice lingered in the air as he softly said, "When the sand runs out, you'll return to your world. Until then, explore and learn."

We both, captivated by the tranquility of the new world, set off to explore the market. The path ahead seemed simple at first—just a winding street lined with small stalls and colorful tents—but

there was something unusual about the place. The air was light and carried the scent of fresh fruit and flowers. People walked by, not hurried or distracted, but calm and purposeful, with smiles that didn't feel forced.

Akash, ever the inquisitive one, noticed a stall selling woven baskets. The vendor, an elderly woman with gray hair tied in a neat bun, greeted us warmly. She handed Akash a basket and said, "This basket will hold what you need, nothing more." Akash, puzzled, asked, "What do you mean?"

The woman smiled and gestured to the market. "The baskets here are for carrying only what is necessary. You'll find that if you take more than you need, they'll become heavier, harder to carry. But when you only take what you truly need, they will remain light and easy to hold."

Akash glanced at the basket and then back at the market, slowly beginning to understand. "So, it's about balance?"

The woman nodded, "Exactly. Take what you need, no more, no less. The weight of excess burdens us all."

Meanwhile, I was drawn to a small fountain in the corner of the market. A group of children gathered around it, laughing as water splashes playfully from the center. The fountain had no walls, no borders, yet the water flowed gently in perfect harmony, filling every crevice of the surrounding basin without ever spilling over. The sight was peaceful, almost meditative.

A child noticed me and offered a simple explanation: "The water always finds its way, just like we do. It doesn't force itself—it simply flows."

I said, "What a beautiful way to live... just flowing, without trying to control everything."

As the day progressed, we both moved deeper into the market, marveling at how the world operated in such harmony. There was a stall selling small wooden toys, but instead of being bought and sold, they were shared freely, passed from one person to the next as though the toys had no owner. Each time they picked up a new toy, the joy of discovery is reflected in the smile of the previous person who used it.

“What’s the story here?” Akash asked the vendor, an older man with a thick white beard.

“They’re not for sale” the man replied. “They’re for sharing. In this world, there is enough for everyone. If you need something, you don’t have to take it, you just use it and pass it along when you’re done. That’s how we learn to live with each other.”

The thought lingered in Akash’s mind as we walked. The entire market seemed to hum with an unspoken agreement—a quiet understanding that everyone had enough, and the idea of excess is alien to this place.

After a few hours, we decided to retrace our steps and return along the same path we came. As we walked, however, something seemed different. The sky had shifted colors, and where once there were plain walls and simple market stalls, they now seemed intricate murals on the buildings—vibrant images of people helping each other, working together to create something beautiful.

Akash stopped in his tracks. “Did these paintings exist before?”

“I don’t remember seeing them,” I replied, equally baffled.

We noticed that the market itself seems to have changed, more people are now walking by, laughing and conversing, their voices calm and pleasant. The baskets no longer felt like they carried

burdens—they seemed lighter, even empty. The toys were still being passed around, but now, the people were sharing stories as well.

I said, “It’s like we’ve changed, too. The more we see, the more we understand. It’s as if the world around us is shaped by how we choose to see it.”

Akash nodded slowly, understanding now that what we had discovered wasn’t just about the market or the people—it was about ourselves. The more we embraced the principle of balance, of sharing, and of taking only what was needed, the more the world seemed to shift in harmony with our actions.

As we reached the point where we first met the vendor, Akash looked down at the sandglass. The sand was flowing quickly, and we both realized that our time in this world is coming to an end. But before we left, we both turned one last time to look at the market—a place that had taught us not just how to live, but how to see the world differently.

### 3. Pause That Matters

Aarav, a fair boy with a surfer shag haircut, was darting his eyes through the round-framed spectacles all around the school corridor, searching for his new classroom. The corridor resembled a typical school, a lively chattering of the kids all around the space filling the air, all eyes were on Aarav as he was a new student to this school.

At last, Aarav found his classroom. He slipped inside quietly, hoping no one would notice. The room was already bustling with students, their chatter filling the air. Little did they know, Aarav was about to become one of them, blending into this new world. Though his facial expressions did not convey the same feeling of excitement to meet his new friends.

He walked slowly tapping his feet onto the floor towards the last bench of the last row.

The school bell rang indicating the start of the first class. Mr. Santosh, the class teacher, entered the classroom, his attire consisted of a blue shirt having a large horizontal and vertical white line pattern paired with a pair of cream trousers and a pair of black shoes.

“Who is the new boy?” He asked keeping his attendance register on the desk.

The bustling classroom suddenly fell into pin-drop silence. No one answered Mr. Santosh. He flipped open his register and called out, “Who is Aarav Saxena?” At the very back of the room, a hand slowly rose into the air.



"May I come in, sir?" a distant voice called from outside the classroom.

Mr. Santosh turned towards the door, while Aarav quickly put his hands down.

"Oh, Aayan! Late again!" Mr. Santosh exclaimed. "Go sit on the last bench," he continued.

Turning back to Aarav, Mr. Santosh said, "New admission, stand up."

"Introduce yourself, " he added.

Aarav's voice choked as he was about to speak. Meanwhile, Aayan reached the last bench and offered him a bottle of water. "Here, take this. No worries" Aayan said.

"Let it be. I'll introduce you to the class" Mr. Santosh said, placing the attendance record on the table.

"So, this is Aarav Saxena, our new admission. Be friends with him. I think he's quite shy—or maybe just pretending to be" he added with a slight smile.

Aayan noticed that Aarav seemed uncomfortable. Placing his bag on the floor, he leaned in and whispered, "Don't worry. Mr. Santosh is a nice teacher."

Aarav nodded in silence.

The canteen was crowded with students, their voices mixing with the sound of trays and plates. Aayan walked ahead with ease, while Aarav quietly followed, holding his lunch box tightly.

They found an empty table in the corner. Aayan sat down quickly and opened his lunch box. "Finally! I was so hungry," he said with a smile.

Aarav sat down across from him and slowly opened his own lunch.

Aayan took a big bite of his sandwich and asked, “So, Aarav, tell me something about yourself. Where are you from?”

Aarav hesitated for a moment before answering, “I’m from a small town.”

“Oh, nice! And what does your father do?” Aayan asked, taking another bite.

“He is a shopkeeper,” Aarav replied softly.

Aayan nodded. “That’s great. My father is in the Indian Navy.”

Aarav looked up for a second, then quickly looked down at his food. He didn’t know what to say, so he just nodded.

Aayan noticed his silence but didn’t mind. He smiled and said, “You know, the canteen samosas are really good. Want to try one?”

Aarav shook his head. “No, I’m okay.”

Aayan shrugged. “Alright, but you’re missing out!” he said cheerfully, taking a big bite.

Aarav watched him for a moment. He wasn’t used to talking much, but Aayan’s energy felt different—easy, friendly. Maybe, he thought, this new school wouldn’t be so bad after all.

As Aayan and Aarav ate their lunch, a group of boys from their class walked over to their table. They were laughing and joking, full of energy.

“Aayan! We’re going to play football. Come with us!” one of them said excitedly.

Aayan grinned. “Sounds great! Aarav, let’s go.”

The boys exchanged glances. One of them, Rohit, smirked. “Why are you asking him? He looks so boring. He won’t even talk, forget about playing!”

Another boy, Sameer, chuckled. “Yeah, and look at his face. Why does he always look so sad?”

Aarav stiffened. He lowered his eyes and focused on his lunch, pretending not to hear them.

Aayan’s smile faded. He placed his lunch box down and looked at the group. “That’s not cool, guys.”

“Come on, we’re just saying the truth,” Rohit said, shrugging.

Aayan shook his head. “You don’t even know him. Just because someone is quiet doesn’t mean they’re boring.” He turned to Aarav. “Come on, Aarav. Let’s show them.”

Aarav hesitated, unsure. He had never been part of such a group before. But Aayan’s words made something shift inside him.

Rohit rolled his eyes. “Fine, he can come, but don’t blame us if he just stands there like a statue.”

Aayan smiled at Aarav and patted his back. “Don’t worry. Just come and have fun.”

Aarav took a deep breath. Maybe, just maybe, it was time to try.

Aarav hesitated for a moment, glancing at the boys who were still smirking. He had always avoided crowds, preferring the quiet

comfort of books and his own thoughts. But Aayan's insistence made it hard to say no.

"Alright," Aarav said softly, standing up.

Aayan grinned. "That's the spirit! Let's go."

The group headed towards the school ground, where students were already scattered, kicking footballs, running around, and laughing. The boys quickly divided into two teams, and as expected, Aarav wasn't picked first—or even second.

"Fine, let him be on Aayan's team," Rohit muttered, "Not like he'll do much anyway."

Aayan put a hand on Aarav's shoulder, "Ignore them. Just do your best."

The game started, and as expected, Aarav stayed in the background, unsure of where to run or how to play. Every time the ball came near him, he hesitated, and someone else would take over.

Then, midway through the game, something changed.

Aayan, dribbling the ball skillfully past a defender, saw Aarav standing unguarded near the goal. Instead of taking the shot himself, he passed the ball straight to Aarav.

"Shoot!" Aayan shouted.

Aarav's heart pounded. He could feel everyone's eyes on him. His instincts screamed at him to step aside, but Aayan's voice pushed him forward. Summoning all his courage, he swung his foot and kicked the ball.

It wasn't a perfect shot, but the goalkeeper miscalculated, and the ball rolled into the net.

"YES!" Aayan cheered, running over to high-five him. "You did it!"

Aarav was still in shock. He had scored.

Rohit scoffed, "That was just luck."

But Aayan ignored him "See? I told you! You're not bad at all."

For the first time since joining the school, Aarav felt a little lighter. Maybe, just maybe, he wasn't as invisible as he thought.

The football game was just the beginning. After that day, Aayan made it a habit to sit with Aarav in class, walk with him during breaks, and even share lunch. At first, Aarav found it strange—he wasn't used to someone being so friendly. But slowly, he began to enjoy Aayan's company.

One afternoon, as they sat under a tree after lunch, Aayan tossed a pebble in the air and caught it, "You know, you should talk more. People will like you."

Aarav shrugged, "I just don't know what to say most of the time."

Aayan grinned, "Then just listen. That works too."

Aarav smiled a little. Aayan was different from others—he didn't force him to change, yet somehow, he made things feel easy.

One day, when it started raining after school, Aayan and Aarav got stuck in the classroom. Most students had already left, and it was just the two of them waiting.

Aayan leaned back in his chair, "Have you ever thought about what you wanna be when you grow up?"

Aarav hesitated “Not really. You?”

“Of course! I want to join the Indian Navy, just like my dad.” His eyes sparkled with excitement. “It’s kinda cool, right? Traveling, serving the country, all of that.”

Aarav nodded. He admired Aayan’s confidence. He had never thought about the future like that before.

A few months later, during recess, Aayan seemed quieter than usual. He poked at his food, lost in thought.

Aarav noticed, “Something wrong?”

Aayan sighed “Yeah... my dad’s getting transferred. We’re moving next month.”

Aarav’s fingers tightened around his spoon, “Where?”

“Mumbai.” Aayan forced a smile

Aarav felt a strange emptiness in his chest. He had never had a friend like Aayan before, and now he was leaving. But he didn’t know how to express it.

Aayan nudged him, “Don’t look so sad, man. We’ll stay in touch. And who knows? Maybe I’ll come back someday.”

Aarav just nodded. He wanted to say something, but words failed him.

As Aarav walked home that day, he realized something—Aayan had changed something in him. He wasn’t just the quiet kid in the class anymore. He had a friend, a real friend, even if distance separated them now.

Years had passed. Life had taken them in different directions.

Aayan, now a corporate employee, had done well for himself. He had lived in different cities, climbed the corporate ladder, and

built a stable career. Aarav, on the other hand, had stayed back, running his family's sweet shop, struggling to make a mark in a world where big brands dominated.

And yet, when Aayan returned to the city for work, he couldn't stop himself from looking up for Aarav.

It had been too long.

Maybe one day, their paths would cross again. But for now, all Aarav could do was hold onto the memories of a friendship that had made all the difference.

The small shop looked the same, though the fading signboard and empty counter spoke of the struggles Aarav had been facing. There were only a handful of customers. The aroma of fresh sweets lingered in the air, but Aayan could tell that the place wasn't thriving.

He stepped inside and, with a smirk, said, "You never told me you'd end up making sweets instead of eating them."

Aarav looked up, confusion flickering across his face before realization struck. His eyes widened "Aayan?"

Aayan grinned "Surprised?"

Aarav wiped his hands on a cloth, "It's been years."

"Yeah," Aayan nodded, looking around, "Looks like you've been busy."

Aarav gave a small shrug, "Trying to keep things running."

Aayan didn't miss the weight in those words. He exhaled, "Come on. Let's take a break."

Evening had settled when they reached their old school. The gates were locked, but that had never stopped them before.

“One last time?” Aayan smirked, pointing at the boundary wall.

Aarav shook his head, “You haven’t changed.”

Aarav sighed but followed. Just like old times, they climbed over the wall and landed softly on the other side. The school ground stretched before them, bathed in the dim glow of the setting sun.

Aarav walked to the center of the field and sat down on the damp green grass. Aayan, dressed in his crisp white shirt and neatly pressed trousers, hesitated.

“What’s wrong?” Aarav asked, raising an eyebrow.

Aayan looked at the ground, then at his trousers, brushing off invisible dust, “They’ll get dirty.”

Aarav chuckled, “Why are you so worried about your trousers?”

Aayan sighed and slowly lowered himself onto the grass, still careful about his clothes, “Corporate life makes you worry about such things.”

Aarav smirked “Oh yeah? What else does corporate life make you worry about?”

Aayan leaned back on his hands, looking at the darkening sky, “Everything.”

Aarav waited, sensing there was more.

Aayan exhaled, “You earn well, but there’s no one to spend it with. You live in a big apartment, but you return home to silence. Your phone rings all day, but no call actually matters. At the end of the day, you’re just... alone.”



Aarav looked at him, nodding slowly, “Loneliness is its own kind of struggle.”

Aayan turned to him, “And you? How’s business?”

Aarav chuckled dryly, “Not great.” He picked at the grass, “People prefer big sweet shops, branded packaging, discounts. I try, but it’s hard. Some days, I wonder if I’ll ever make this shop something more than just a place people pass by.”

Silence stretched between them, filled with unspoken thoughts.

Then Aayan said, “It’s funny, isn’t it?”

Aarav looked at him.

Aayan continued, “We always thought our lives would turn out different. I thought money would make things easier. You thought hard work would make your business flourish. And yet, here we are—both struggling in our own ways.”

Aarav nodded, “Maybe struggle is just... a part of life. No matter where you are, no matter how much you earn.”

Aayan plucked a blade of grass and twirled it between his fingers, “Yeah. Life isn’t static. You’re never stuck in one place—physically, financially, or mentally. It keeps changing, throwing new problems at you.”

Aarav smiled, “So what’s the point of worrying?”

Aayan let out a laugh, “Maybe it’s about moments like this. Where you stop thinking about what’s next, and just—be.”

Aarav looked at the sky, then at Aayan, “Like sitting here on the wet grass, without caring what’s going to happen next?”

Aayan smirked, “Exactly.”

They sat there in silence, listening to the rustling leaves, the distant sound of traffic, and the whispers of old memories.

For now, they weren't a struggling businessman or a lonely corporate employee.

They were just Aayan and Aarav—two childhood friends, sitting in their school ground, sharing a moment that made life a little easier to live.

And that was enough.

## 4. My Few Days with My Grandfather

I have been raised in a joint family, a house full of love, laughter, and shared responsibilities. At the very top of this beautiful structure stand my grandparents, pillars of wisdom and strength. Alongside them are my parents, my two elder sisters, and my uncle — my father's brother, whom I lovingly call Bade Papa — and his wife, my Badi Mummy. They, too, have been blessed with two sons, my cousins.

But this piece is not about me. It is not about my parents or my sisters, nor is it about Bade Papa and Badi Mummy.

This is about my grandfather — the man who has been the silent architect of the life we live, the steady heartbeat of our family, and the one whose presence has shaped us all in ways words often fail to capture.

My grandfather was of moderate height, I never saw him wearing anything else other than the light golden kurta which had a dark golden color adorned with horizontal line patterns paired with a white pajama. He had a very sharp nose which used to bear the weight of his light brownish squared rimmed spectacles. At the age of maybe between seventy to eighty he never seemed to me that elderly to be honest. He had a very quick walk as compared to other people of his age.

By the time I was growing up he was retired from his service. Though to keep him active and fit he used to do accountancy at a medical firm. I have really fond memories of accompanying him

along with my father on a scooter ride whenever I bunked my school. The timing at which my father used to leave for work was nearly the same as my grandfather. Maybe there was a difference of half an hour. I remember my father used to tell me, “Go ask if babuji is ready or not?” We fondly called him “babuji”. Babuji means father, though he was my grandfather I should have called him as my “dada” but from the starting itself I heard everyone calling him “babuji” and not only I but all the children of our family used to call him “babuji” irrespective of the fact that he might be someone’s nana or dada as per relation.

I used to rush all through my room to the dinning hall and I always found him having his breakfast. Everyday he used to have rice, dal, smashed potatoes with a vegetable curry. I don’t know but I used to find it fascinating how after his meal, he would take his medicine tablets. I know it is weird but I think a kid may find these things interesting as they won’t be doing all these things.

He also used to take care of the monthly ration of the entire household. Whenever the sack of ration used to come from the grocery shop, he would call aloud, “Tinni...” (Tinni is my nickname) I used to get the sense, now he would tell me to take out each and every item from the sack and match it with the list he had made earlier. Generally, I used to go with a cup of tea prepared by my mother. With every sip of the tea, he would engross himself into the list of items then he would take one more sip and mark a tick in front of that item on the list.

I used to accompany him during his evening walk, he would without a short of breath map the distance of the entire sabzi mandi, in this process I would get tired but he won’t. He literally had the best bargaining skills. He would very firmly bargain the price of the vegetable with the vendor and that used to be my awestruck moment. While returning we always used to encounter

a sweet shop named “pooja sweets” and he would always ask “will you have laddoo or peda?” and I would always smile.

I remember when I was in third standard, I got homework to talk to your elders and write down the world in which they used to thrive and compare it with the current world scenario. At first, I went to my mother though she insisted that I should go to my grandfather. I remember how vividly he described the time in which he grew up, how the world was altogether at his time and how it has changed over the time. It really did shape my perception of today’s world and also gave me a clear cut picturisation of the world of his time, with all curiosity I noted down all his points in my notebook.

These things kept repeating on a loop. Now the time came when I was in eighth standard, suddenly we got the news that he has oral cancer though he never took all those miserable things which might be the reason for such a consequence. We came to the conclusion that he had gone to a dental surgeon and had one of his teeth removed which later led to the development of a wound in his mouth.

We got to know this news at a very later stage, even if we would have tried to go through any therapy it would further make the things worse for him.

At the starting the physical changes were not visible on him though with each passing day he was losing his weight. He would not eat solid food as it used to spark an itching in his mouth due to the wound.

The solid food used to be grind in a mixer to convert it into a semi solid mixture and he used to have it, with each passing day he was getting physically weak. Though he used to pretend that he is absolutely fine.

One day, he was so stubborn that he wanted to shave. My cousin was busy with some other work and I got the duty to take him to the barber shop.

Now he was not as quick in his walk as compared to his earlier days. He needed the support of someone to walk properly. In the scorching heat I used to hold his hand and a black umbrella in my other hand to protect him from the bizarre heat.

After the shave he used to move his hand all over his face to check whether the barber had done his job properly. If his work was satisfactory, he did not say anything, with the help of the chair arm he used to get up and used to turn towards me with a smile, otherwise he used to scold the barber ineptly.

This used to be our daily affair, me taking him to the barber shop and he used to tell me all the things he has learnt in his life. I could grasp some of his teaching and some of them used to go over my head but I used to nod my head in total agreement with him.

One day after his shaving, we were standing outside the barber shop. I was busy in the process of making the judgement of when to cross the road. He tapped me on my shoulder, rummaged his pocket and gave me a ten rupee note.

“Go get yourself a cup of ice-cream” he kept the note on my palm and gently closed my fist.

I resisted, “there is no need for this.” He retarded, “go get it!”

I don’t know but with a little twinkle in my eyes I turned away from him, all the way to the ice-cream parlour I kept shedding tears like a three old kid. I got the ice-cream for his happiness but I did not want him to know that I was crying, so I cleared my tears before getting back to him. “No need to cry...” he murmured, “I

have lived so long, saw all of you growing” he continued in his barely audible voice.

The same night his condition deteriorated; we rushed him to the nearby hospital. Next day I had exams in my school. I had no option but to leave his side. I was quite optimistic that he will be stable till I reach home.

I got off my bus, and as I walked down the familiar lane, I could see my house in the distance — the place that always made me feel safe, no matter what. But something felt different today. As I got closer, I noticed the huge caramel-colored gate creaking open. It was strange — he always used the smaller gate to enter and leave. The large gate was usually kept shut, as though guarding the world inside. A strange uneasiness settled in my chest.

Stepping inside, the house felt heavy, like it was holding its breath. There was a pin-drop silence, a stillness that could be compared to a lake untouched by wind, where not even a ripple dared to disturb the surface.

I made my way to my room, and before I could even sit down, my father walked in. His eyes were swollen, and there was a kind of emptiness in them I had never seen before. He sat beside me, placed a trembling hand on my shoulder, and in a voice softer than a whisper, said,

"Beta, babuji nahi rahe..." (babuji is no more)

For a moment, I couldn't move. His words hung in the air, and it felt like the walls of the house leaned in closer, as if they, too, were grieving. My heart felt like it had shattered into pieces I couldn't gather. The man who had been the pillar of our home, the quiet strength behind us all, was no more.

As I sat there, numb and broken, I could still hear his faint voice in my memories, still see him sitting on the veranda, watching us with gentle eyes. And though he was gone, I knew his presence would forever linger in every corner of that house, in every breath we took.

That day, I realized — some goodbyes are never really spoken aloud, and some people never truly leave.



## 5. Lost In the Hustle

Amidst the crowd of employees who are constantly working as a robot on a daily basis, the same transfer of files from one desk to another, the same scrum meetings, code reviews and what not, entered the managing director of this giant software company.

The exhausted employees greeted their boss as if some alarm clock triggered inside them and made them say “Good Morning sir” though this morning was as usual, as tiring for them after a relaxing weekend.

If they saw him coming towards them, they used to get frightened as if they would be punished if he didn't like their work.

“What about the backend code?” asked Bipul.

“Oh, good morning, sir, the work is going on” answered the employee.

“Oh no Mr. Ramnath, we have a meeting with the client this evening” Bipul was quite frustrated as always if the work was a bit late.

“We are doing it sir!” the employee said looking at his colleague who was in the same development team.

“Do it immediately, without fail, no extension!” ordered Bipul.

Bipul went directly inside his cabin ignoring all the greetings of the employees which he used to face daily.

He sat on the big office chair, a huge computer kept on his desk with a ton of papers scattered on the table.

He rang the bell and in came his secretary “Yes sir!” she said.

“Mrs. Lily, you know that I always need my list of appointments first on my table” said Bipul while searching the list within the pile of papers.

“Oh sir, here it is,” Lily took out a paper from her file book and gave it to him.

“Do your work on time! Be aware from tomorrow” ordered Bipul.

Bipul's phone rang while he was deeply rooted and concentrated on the list of appointments. He picked up the call, “Yes who is this?” he asked.

“You have not saved my number yet huh?” his wife on the other side of the phone call.

“Oh, sorry I was a little busy” he apologised.

“I was worried you just rushed out of home without saying a word” she said in a concerned voice.

“Today is an important day, Meera!” he exclaimed.

“So, you remember it!” she said in excitement.

“Yup, a couple of meetings, the most important with the American client” he said.

“So, this is it?” she asked.

“What else?” he asked swiftly.

“Nothing, all the best!” she said out of desperation.

“Thank you dear” he said.

“Ok, listen to one more thing...” as she was going to complete, he hung up the phone call.

A notification came on his phone, from Meera, “I am booking a table in Lincho Decor, come at 8 in the evening”.

He replied, “Done.”

“May I come in sir?” Mr. Ramnath knocked on the glass door.

“Yes, come in,” said Bipul.

Mr. Ramnath walked in slowly, keeping his hands clasped together, he said “Sir the American client is here.”

“Oh, you should have informed me earlier,” he said.

“Earlier?” Mr Ramnath asked for clarification.

“Once he informed you that he has left the hotel and is going to reach the office! Did you understand?” he said.

“Yes sir” Mr. Ramnath bowed down.

“Let’s go now” he ordered, Mr Ramnath followed him.

The conference hall had a huge round table in the center of the room, fully ventilated, packed with air conditioner on all the four sides. The round table consisted of a ton of chairs all around.

Bipul entered alongside Mr. Ramnath and noticed that the American client was sitting on the sofa kept right in front of the entrance of the hall.

“Welcome Mr. Smith, honour to have you here” Bipul greeted.

“Same here Mr. Bipul,” said Mr. Smith.

“Is all the setup done?” Bipul turned towards Mr. Ramnath.

“Yes sir,” Ramnath said.

“Shall we start?” asked Bipul.

“Absolutely” Smith commanded.

Mr. Ramnath along with his team of developers explained all the changes they incorporated since their last meeting.

Mr. Smith along with other stakeholders seemed pleased with the requirements incorporated in the project.

“Wait, why have you added this chatbot?” Mr. Smith pointed out to Mr. Ramnath.

“Sir this was not mentioned in the requirements of the stakeholders but our team thought it would be helpful for our users to ask any queries.” he clarified.

The meeting concluded on a good note, Mr. Smith along with the stakeholders seemed to be satisfied with the presentation.

After bidding goodbye to the client, Bipul asked Ramnath to come to his cabin.

“Why did your developer’s team come up with these stupid, stale ideas?” asked Bipul.

“Sir but the stakeholders were pleased with the idea of chatbot” Mr. Ramnath defended himself.

“Do as they say, don’t do what you think is right, get it?” ordered Bipul.

“Yes sir!” accepted Ramnath.

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Bipul checked his phone, “I am waiting!!” a message from Meera.

He rushed through the traffic and reached the restaurant, he saw his watch, he was half an hour late, he reconfigured his watch to 8 o’clock.

Amidst the people he spotted Meera wearing a black dress taking a sip from the glass of water.

“Hey, here I am,” exclaimed Bipul.

“You did a great job,” Meera said in frustration.

“Why so?” he asked.

“You are half an hour late dear; do you know it?” she asked.

“Wait what?” he showed his watch to her “see, it is 8 o’clock” he exclaimed.

Meera took out her phone and flashed the time in front of him “see, can you see?” she said in anger.

Bipul drifted to another topic and asked, “Why did you arrange this date tonight for us, huh? Being romantic haa” he tried to be playful.

“It is our 5th anniversary Bipul!” Meera exclaimed.

Amidst the noise of the crowd there was a silence between them, both staring at each other, Bipul looking down in shyness, Meera staring at him in sorrow.

## 6. Half Past Five

The night had darkened to its fullest. The lonely sky, with its eternal companion—the shimmering moon—cast a spell of silence over the city. There were no sounds of trucks, buses, or cars disturbing the city's quiet demeanor with the clatter of brakes and the blaring of horns.

Siddharth lay resting on the cold, dew-covered grass, his hands clasped behind his head. He gazed at the bright golden moon, which appeared larger than usual, admiration gleaming in his eyes. Meanwhile, Siya sat beside him, her arms wrapped around her knees, silently watching him as she absentmindedly twisted the wet grass between her fingers.

The silence between them broke when Siya said, “It's been two months now!”

Siddharth's focus on the shimmering moon was disrupted. He turned to Siya and said, “Yeah, time flew like the Vande Bharat train.”

Siya, quite annoyed, responded, “Don't be poetic, if you cannot!”

Siddharth responded playfully, “I have learnt it from you.”

She responded swiftly, “Don't dare to compare your pathetic line with my poetry.”

She continued to change the topic, “Let it go, when are you going to say yes to our marriage?”

Siddharth held her hand, "Some more time, please."

Siya did not respond in a way in which generally girls do, maybe she knew about the space which the other person requires in a relationship, she just gave a cheerful smile which kept her away from the guile nature of this world.

"Do you remember the first day when we met?" she asked.

Siddharth, now sitting in the same posture as Siya, "In a typical arrange marriage setup!"

"Rakesh Babu, now that we have met your daughter, it would be great if my son and she could spend some time together while we finish our lunch," said Siddharth's father.

A medium-sized, cream-colored dining table stood at the center, with four chairs placed opposite each other. Seated around it were Siya, Siddharth, and their families.

"Absolutely, Mohan ji" responded Siya's father.

Both Siya and Siddharth went out of the Rajasthani family restaurant.

"This mall is quite huge!", Siddharth exclaimed

"This is the city's biggest mall", replied Siya.

"Shall we go to that cafe, we will grab some coffee", Siddharth suggested, pointing opposite to the Rajasthani restaurant.

"Yeah, sure", Siya nodded in agreement.

"You got so nervous to ask for a coffee that day!" Siya exclaimed, her laughter filling up the silent space around the park.

“Oh madam, it was my first time in such an arrangement”, Siddharth tried to defend himself.

“Like mine was for the hundredth time, right?”, she teased.

“You didn’t pull the cafe’s door for me either”, she continued to tease.

“You forgot one thing!” Siddharth responded.

“What?” she asked swiftly.

Siya sat at the corner-most table, where two chairs were placed opposite each other. She watched as Siddharth approached with a tray carrying two cups of coffee.

Siddharth settled down, “Here is your coffee.”

Siya took the cup of coffee and smiled. 'Thank you!'

Siddharth asked, “Your father said, you are coming to Delhi, right?”

Siya answered, “Yeah, I got a transfer, I will shift in next two weeks.”

Siddharth said, “It has been two years since I started working in Delhi, my family is in a hurry to get me married!”

Siya replied playfully, “Then say no to this proposal.”

Siddharth conveyed, “See I just need time for it, maybe it would be great for both of us.”

He took a sip of coffee, “To meet with each other for a few days and then decide.”

Siya replied, “I understand”



Siddarth asked, "What should we tell our family?"

"The thing you said to me! This much you can do, right? she reacted.

Siddarth responded, "Yup!"

Siya asked, "It seems you have never been in a relationship, were you?"

Siddarth put his cup on the table, "if you don't mind, can you talk about it later?"

Siya said, "Yeah, no issues."

Siddarth got up from the wet grass, patted his track pants to take off the sticky grass. Siya offered her hand to Siddarth to lift her up, "You did not discuss your relationship yet."

"Will talk about it some other day!" Siddarth responded.

"Don't forget to come at five o'clock tomorrow, okay.", Siya reminded him.

"Why?", asked Siddarth.

"I want to tell you something", she said.

The sun cast the shadow of the light pole as the evening began to descend. The clock ticked at five, Siya settled on the sofa, checked her phone to see if there was any text from Siddarth.

"No text," she murmured as the clock struck half past five. Meanwhile the doorbell rang.

She rushed to the door and saw Siddarth at the entrance.

"See I am on time; it is five o'clock" he said.

Siya flashed her phone, "Then what is this?"

"Aree, let me get in first" Siddarth gently pushed her and got in.

"Sorry, you know about the traffic, right?" he continued and went towards the sofa.

Siya trailed him, "Hmm, you know what happened?"

She continued, "I got promoted today!"

Siddarth got closer and held her hand, "Oh great! Don't forget to give me a referral."

Siya pulled her hand away. "Is that something you say when you're holding someone's hand?"

Siddarth smiled, "First tell me, what about the party?"

Siya responded, "Dinner at Saporì d'Italia, seven o'clock"

Siddarth checked his watch, "It is near six o'clock, get ready!" His phone was constantly buzzing with someone's notification.

Siya pointed out, "who is texting you so much?"

Siddarth tried to brush off her question, "Nothing just random app notification."

Both of them reached Saporì d'Italia. The waitress led them to their booked table. A round shaped table, two chairs kept opposite to each other.

Siddarth pulled a chair for Siya.

Siya teased, "Something you learnt in these two months!"

Siddarth too settled down on the opposite chair.

"You order something, I'll be back from the washroom," he said.

Siddarth left his phone on the table, and it buzzed repeatedly with notifications. Siya hesitated for a moment but couldn't resist picking it up.

There were nearly twenty messages from someone named Meghna.

When Siddarth returned, Siya held the phone up to him, the screen glowing with unread texts.

"Who is she?" she asked, her voice softer than expected.

"I will tell you but listen patiently" he requested, holding her hand.

"Sure, go ahead", Siya said, her voice steady, but a small teardrop welled up in her eyes.

Siddarth began speaking in a steady, calm voice, "Before I met you, I was in a relationship with Meghna. But by the time we met, we had already broken up."

Siddarth continued, "We were in a relationship for three long years and all the things ended abruptly."

Siya interrupted, "You forgot her so easily?"

He answered, holding her hand tenaciously, "I was looking for a closure and I found you, Siya."

Siddarth's voice held some kind of attestment though Siya was not sure.

Siya scrolled through the messages, reading each one carefully. Siddarth hadn't replied to any of them, yet Meghna kept texting.

Still looking at the screen, Siya murmured, "Siddarth, I think she still has feelings for you. As a girl, I can tell—she's not making it up."

Siddarth sighed and insisted, "Siya, once a relationship ends, there's no way to fix it. If there were still feelings between us, it would have lasted."

Siya insisted, "I really think you should go and talk to her." She paused for a moment before continuing, "We've only known each other for two months, Siddarth. I will forget you. I haven't even told you that I like you... not yet"

She tried to mask her feelings for Siddarth with her words. In these two months, she had come to know that he had been there for her at every moment. Yet, with those very words, she held back the tear that threatened to escape her eyes.

Siddarth said in a concerned voice, "It seems you are not happy though."

She took a sip of water from the glass, "If you don't go then I will not be!"

In the following days, Siddarth booked his flight ticket. During this time, he and Siya did not meet even once.

The sun, as usual, casted the shadow of the electric pole in the street as the evening started to descend. Siya scrolled through her old messages to Siddarth, lost in thought. Abruptly, she noticed the time—it was five in the evening, the very hour she used to remind him to come.

She got lost in those messages once again, but this time, it didn't feel like she was just reading them. It felt as if Siddarth was sitting beside her, holding her hand, whispering those words himself.

The door was slightly ajar, as Siya often left it that way to let fresh air circulate through the flat.

"Siya!" a voice rang out, echoing through the living room.

Siya was startled. She stood up and saw Siddarth standing before her, holding a bouquet of dark and light roses.

She was awestruck; meanwhile Siddarth came forward, kept the bouquet on the table and embraced her.

Siddarth calmly said, 'I've told my parents yes for our marriage.' He paused for a moment before continuing, 'Now it's your turn to say yes to your family.'

Siya remained silent. Siddarth took a step closer and said, 'You are my truth, Siya.'

As the sun dipped below the horizon, the evening gracefully melted into a breezy night. Once again, the shimmering moon bathed the city in its soft, glowing light.