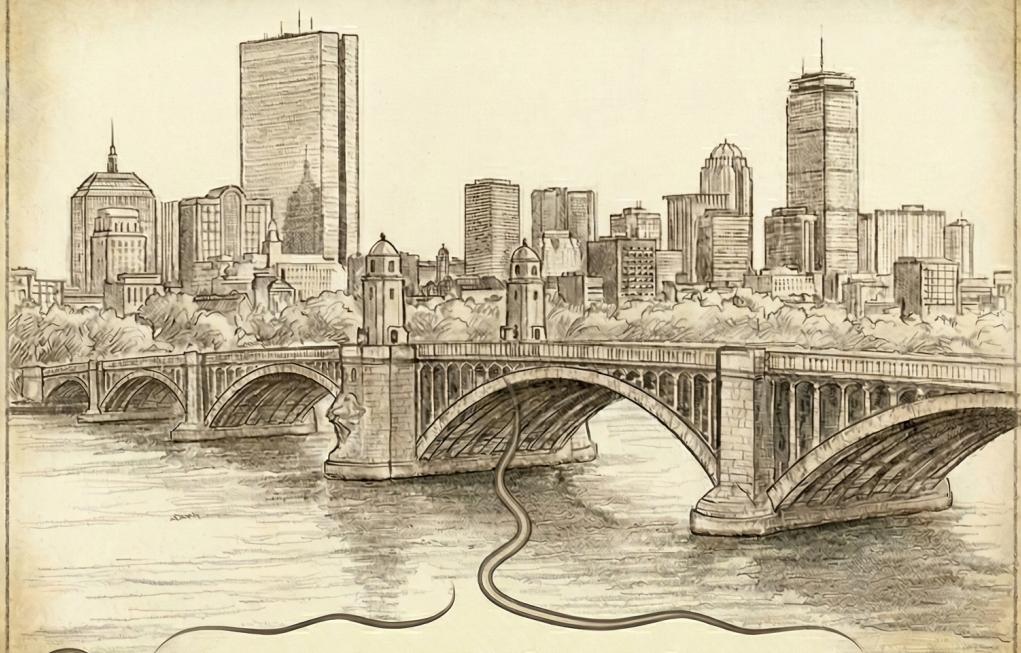
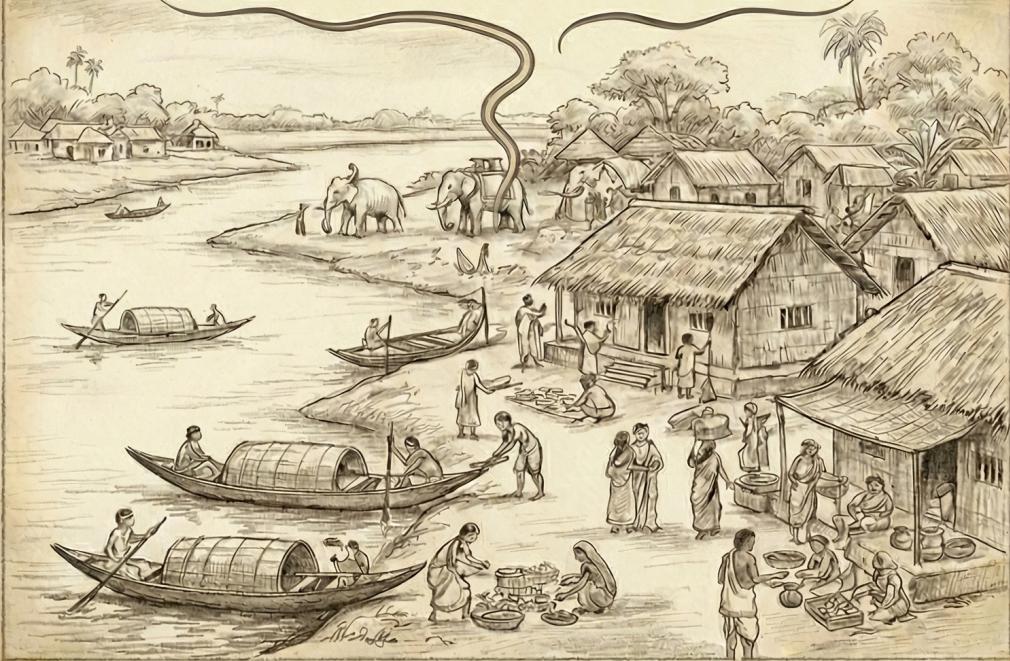


BETWEEN SHORES



NARRATIVES OF SMALL INSIGHT



BY ANIL SHELAT

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This work is based on my experience of living in two continents. The characters and incidents portrayed in it are real but names and dialogues have been modified.

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R E M E M B E R I N G

My grandfather, who gave me the courage to journey.

My grandmother, who instilled in me a thread of devotion.

My parents, brothers and sisters, the steady shore from which I launched and to which I could always return.

My teachers, who showed the maps.

My friends, whose stories taught me to read them.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

My journey to the USA began not with a plane ticket, but with a vivid image of a soldier preparing for battle. I was that young man, dressed in a black wool suit, clutching a large brown envelope that held not just the medical report but all my worldly ambitions. In my bag were a few clothes, two textbooks, and, most treasured of all, a slide rule. Packed into twenty-two kilograms was my future, my past, and the hopes of a generation. I was boarding a flight to the “New World” in the nineteen sixties, ready to conquer the high mountains of education.

I landed in Ames, Iowa, on a cold winter day. The shock was immediate and complete. The confident soldier who had boarded the plane met a reality that matched none of his expectations. The certainty I had carried across the ocean—my image of who I was and what awaited me—shattered against the stark unfamiliarity of everything around me. In that moment of disorientation, I encountered something I hadn’t known I was carrying: an invisible inheritance that was both my strength and my limitation. This invisible inheritance is what I call *Sanskara*.

Sanskara is the collection of deeply established patterns, images, and assumptions that we inherit from our family, our traditions, and the places we have lived. It’s the confidence of the soldier, yes—but also the rigid expectations, the unexamined beliefs, the automatic responses that once served

us but may no longer fit the world we find ourselves in. My *Sanskara* had propelled me onto that flight with courage and determination. But it had also blinded me to what actually lay ahead.

What I have come to understand is that *Sanskara* operates through two opposing forces. On one side is memory—the useful lessons, the ready-made formulas handed down by culture, the family values that instill a deep desire to learn. This is the propelling force, the engine of confidence. The soldier's image was exactly this: a *Sanskara* of conquest and mastery rooted in tradition.

But true growth requires the other side as well: curiosity and the willingness to take risks, to perceive the world in all its nuances. This is the openness to experience that allows us to eventually form new *Sanskaras*. Without it, we remain trapped in the images of the past. My inherited certainty was, I discovered, a kind of self-fiction—powerful enough to launch me into the unknown but too brittle to survive contact with it.

Personal evolution, I have learned, requires integrating both: harnessing the wisdom built on memory while maintaining the curiosity that compels us to adapt when reality insists on teaching us something new.

This book is a chronicle of that shock and that crossing—the metaphorical journey from a world of rigid expectation to a life built on unforeseen truths. It is the story of how my cherished, yet rigid, *Sanskaras*—my memory, my linear idea of time, my assumptions about how the world should work—were first broken, and then rebuilt.

I am not a trained writer. My life has been, by most measures, ordinary: a succession of jobs and moves, departures, and arrivals. Yet ordinariness, I have discovered, harbors its own truths. These narratives are a mixture of memoir and reflection, where the core events are authentic, but the dialogs and names are altered—recreated from fading memory to reflect the essence of my thoughts at the time. Each narrative, each chapter, can be read independently without loss of meaning.

Drawn from the places that sheltered and sustained me, these stories reveal what I call "small insights"—quiet revelations that illuminate the space

between who we were (as defined by our initial *Sanskara*) and who we are becoming.

An observant reader will find three themes woven through these narratives:

1. Modification of images. The stories chronicle the powerful internal images that drive us, revealing why these *Sanskara*-based images must be constantly modified to align with the reality, rather than rigidly upheld. The soldier who thought he was ready for battle had to become someone else entirely.

2. The cultivation of value. They explore the universal values we must embrace, often by confronting the parts of ourselves that cling to negative habits: the demand for excessive self-recognition, hypocrisy, guilt, or pranks that ultimately cause harm. Growth requires us to see clearly what we are holding onto and why.

3. The interconnected world and grace. They reveal how the universe communicates with us through magical coincidence—moments like running into a forgotten classmate in a distant, unrelated setting, encounters that defied my logical thinking. These are moments of grace that reveal the interconnected nature of reality and guide us towards the right action.

My story is part of a larger one. Although some of our generation eventually returned home, many stayed, creating a diaspora community whose grandchildren now face these same challenges of identity, belonging, and inherited expectation. These narratives are rooted in the values and struggles of their grandparents, offered as small insights for a new generation. My hope is that they will critically examine their inheritance, embrace the enduring values that connect us, and forge their own path with curiosity and a spirit of adventure—carrying forward the best of their *Sanskara* while remaining open to the transformation that life inevitably demands.

CHAPTER 2

SHORTCUTS

How I ALMOST GOT SHOT FOR TAKING A SHORTCUT

PICTURE this: a young man from India, fresh off his first international flight, standing on the tarmac at Paris Orly Airport, confidently striding toward a Boeing 707 while security guards in a jeep race toward him with flashing red lights. That young man was me, and I was about to learn that not all shortcuts are created equal.

This is not a story, It really happened to me. My journey began on a flight from Bombay (now Mumbai) to New York—my first international voyage. My only prior flying experience was years earlier, a short hop on a piston-engine plane between two cities in our state, a treat from my grandfather. I vividly remember passengers being weighed along with their bags! (“Step on the scale sir, with your bag”). After that, you simply walk across the tarmac and board. Simple as getting on a bus. Fast forward some ten years to that night in Bombay. After passing security, I walked onto the tarmac and climbed the ladder into a Boeing 707. Bombay’s airport was modest then; our flight was one of the few, the tarmac largely ours. No jet bridges, just a straightforward walk to the plane.

Athens was just a fuel stop—no drama there. But Paris? Paris was where my education in international airport protocol was about to begin. Orly Airport was a revelation. Massive, gleaming, filled with shops selling things I'd never seen and restaurants serving food I couldn't pronounce. With an hour to kill, I wandered like a tourist in wonderland, completely losing track of time and, more importantly, my gate location. Then I heard the call: "All Air India Passengers return to the gate..... Panic mode: activated.

I could see my plane through the terminal windows, sitting there like a patient metal bird. But where were my fellow passengers? Had they already boarded? The bus that had brought us from the plane was nowhere to be seen. Here is where my brilliant reasoning kicked in: In Bombay, you walk to the plane. This is an airport. Therefore, I should walk to the plane. Logic, right?

I somehow found my way to ground level and spotted my flight just a few hundred meters away. No bus, no problem! I started on the tarmac with the confidence of someone who clearly understood international aviation procedures. Halfway there, I noticed a jeep with flashing red lights speeding toward me. Now, in my defense, 1964 was a more innocent time. Hijackings were rare, airport security was minimal, and the idea of someone being shot for taking a shortcut seemed absurd. So when the security guards approached, I did what any reasonable person would do: I waved cheerfully, held up my passport, and walked faster toward the plane. The guards were shouting in French. I was shouting back in English. It was like a multilingual comedy sketch, except nobody was laughing.

"I'm a passenger!" I called out, pointing to the plane. "That's my flight!" They responded with more urgent French.

"I have a ticket!" I announced, now practically jogging toward the aircraft ladder. By the time they reached me, I was already scrambling up the steps, breathless and triumphant. The flight attendant stared at me like I'd just materialized from another dimension.

"Sir," she said slowly, "you're not supposed to walk on the tarmac."

"But I did it in Bombay," I replied, as if this explained everything. The security guards had a lengthy discussion with the crew, as I sat in my seat,

passport clutched in my sweaty palm, slowly realizing that my "logical short-cut" had been anything but logical.

Looking back, I'm amazed they didn't arrest me. Today, that little stroll would have earned me a very different kind of international experience—one involving handcuffs and interrogation rooms.

You'd think nearly getting detained by French airport security would teach me about the dangers of shortcuts. You'd be wrong.

Scene: University registration day, several days later. I am late (sensing a pattern here?), confused, and faced with a maze of requirements that makes Paris Orly look like a corner store.

My advisor, a patient man with the demeanor of someone who had dealt with overconfident international students before, reviewed my proposed course schedule. "You want to take Advanced Circuit Design without taking Basic Circuit Theory?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I skipped a grade in elementary school," I announced proudly, as if this qualified me to ignore university prerequisites. "I can handle it." He leaned back in his chair. "If I were you, I wouldn't do it." But I, in my wisdom, thought: You are not me. I am special. I am efficient. I take shortcuts.

"I will be fine," I assured him with the confidence of someone who had successfully walked across an airport tarmac without getting shot. Famous last words.

Three weeks into the semester, I was drowning. The professor might as well have been speaking in advanced French for all the sense his lectures made. My textbook felt like it was written in code. Other students discussed concepts that sounded like magical chants.

If I had just followed the normal sequence, I would have graduated earlier and actually understood what I was studying. I find myself constantly tempted by these modern shortcuts, and just as constantly reminded of that young man walking across the Paris tarmac, absolutely certain he understood how airports worked. Here is what I have learned from my various shortcut disasters: The Paris Principle: Just because something worked in one context does not mean it works everywhere. Airport tarmacs are not public sidewalks, no matter how similar they look.

The Course Sequence Corollary: Prerequisites exist for reasons that aren't always obvious to beginners. Sometimes, the long way is the only way that actually gets you where you want to go.

The Modern Paradox: In our age of instant everything, the biggest shortcut might be accepting that some things cannot be shortened without losing their essential value. Don't get me wrong—I am not anti-efficiency. I love that I can video-call my family across the world, that GPS prevents me from getting hopelessly lost, that spell-check saves me from embarrassing typos, that AI can help me get the answer quickly.

But I've learned to distinguish between helpful tools and misguided shortcuts. Tools enhance the journey; shortcuts often bypass the very experiences that make the journey worthwhile.

Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if those security guards in Paris had been a little less patient, or if airport security in 1964 had been as strict as it is today. Would I have learned the lesson about shortcuts sooner? Or would I have found new and creative ways to bypass established procedures? Probably the latter. Some of us, it seems, are destined to learn the hard way.

But here is the thing about taking the long way: you see more of the scenery. You meet interesting people. You develop problem-solving skills that no shortcut can teach you. And you collect stories that make people laugh at dinner parties. Plus, you avoid getting shot by airport security, which is always a bonus.

The next time you are tempted by a shortcut, ask yourself: Am I trying to enhance my journey, or am I trying to skip the parts that might actually be the most valuable?

CHAPTER 3

THE SNOW THAT TAUGHT ME TO WALK

It is unwise to be sure of one's own wisdom. It is healthy to be reminded that the strongest might weaken and the wisest might err.

—Mahatma Gandhi

The morning light filtered through the frost-covered windows of Memorial Hall as I stirred awake on that November morning in 1964. Across the room, my friend from Mumbai was already up, adjusting his Beatles-inspired jacket. We met at the consulate. He was from Mumbai, well-versed in Beatle culture coming for an undergraduate degree in Chemical Engineering.

"You made it," he grinned, his Western accent already more pronounced after his leisurely boat journey. "How was the flight?"

"Four days," I replied, still disoriented from the journey. "I was supposed to be here Monday morning. I am already late."

"Well, welcome to Iowa," he chuckled. "I'm off to the undergraduate dorm. You're headed to Lincoln Hall, right? Graduate life awaits you there."

As we parted ways, I felt the weight of my academic honors and youthful certainty. I was ready for anything—or so I believed.

Chapter 3. The Snow That Taught Me To Walk

* * *

At the cafeteria downstairs, I stared at the neatly arranged dishes with growing concern. As a vegetarian with only eight dollars to my name, my choices were stark: vegetables, butter and toast, or a grilled sandwich. I settled for a glass of milk and headed to the foreign student office.

The advisor who had helped me the previous day looked different behind his desk—more serious, paternal. After completing my registration and handing me the key to Lincoln Hall, he leaned forward with a sincere expression. "Remember," he said, his voice carrying an unmistakable warning, "institutions are like walls. If you bang your head against them, you only break yours." I nodded, though his meaning escaped me entirely. Was this advice or a warning? His earnest look suggested it was both.

At Lincoln Hall, I met Randy, my roommate—an ex-Navy man in his thirties studying under the veteran's grant. The room's party-themed décor, the calendar pictures sprinkled on the wall startled me.

"Do they allow this here? Doesn't the house monitor see this?" I innocently asked.

"Nobody visits us here. Only the maid comes here to clean our room on alternate days. She doesn't mind".

"And your parents"?

"Oh, they don't mind it either".

This casual attitude towards authority puzzled me. Back home such a display would be unthinkable in a student housing.

"You're the one from India, right?" Randy asked, barely looking up from his magazine. "Good luck with the graduate program. I'm here for... other pursuits." Down the hall, my Latin American neighbors offered their own perspective. "Learn to read the book," one of them advised in accented English. "Here, they just teach you that."

My cherished image of Lincoln Hall crumbled instantly. I had constructed an elaborate mental picture from brochures and letters—a scholarly community where students lived closely with their teachers, sharing meals and wisdom. Instead, I found myself in a place where knowledge was

transactional and community seemed foreign. *I had been clinging so tightly to how things "should be" that I couldn't see clearly enough to navigate what actually "was."* My mind drifted to my undergraduate dorm back home—a true community where graduate and undergraduate students lived together, sharing simple meals and common dreams. Here, I felt isolated in a sea of individual pursuits.

Randy had a big car. I could not understand why a single person would need a big car. Did cars serve purposes beyond transportation here in America? He was nice enough to give me a ride to a downtown bank far from campus where the Reserve bank of India would deposit an exchange amount granted to me.

Lincoln Hall seemed far from campus. It was a bit of a walk for me, especially in snow. When I attended my first class: 'Transistor circuit design', I had expected twenty or so students, there were only eight. While all of them had taken the previous course, I along with another student from Taiwan were the new additions. The student from Taiwan sent by the government, had practical experience in electronics. The professor was continuing on the previous chapter, for me it was all unknown. The book "Millman and Taub: Electronic circuit" I had carefully packed with me had no chapter on Transistors.

After a couple of classes, I approached the professor hesitantly.

"Sir, I'm finding the material challenging. My background might not—" "Did you take the prerequisite course?" he interrupted.

"No, sir. I thought my undergraduate experience would—"

"I see." His tone was not unkind, but definitive. "You might want to reconsider your enrollment."

I withdrew rather than lose money. What prompted me to register for such a risk, I wondered. Wasn't I in a hurry to get a degree, get work experience and return? Fantasy? Or a whimsical desire?

The quarter system moved like a sprint when I was accustomed to a marathon pace. Twelve weeks felt impossibly short. The Iowa winter seemed equally unforgiving, trapping me between Lincoln Hall, classrooms,

Chapter 3. The Snow That Taught Me To Walk

and the Union with little opportunity to build friendships or understand the culture around me.

During weekend visits to the undergraduate dorm, my Mumbai friend noticed my struggles over our shared vegetarian meals—a luxury I could afford only on weekends, where unlimited milk, vegetables, and bread dishes were available. By spring, reviewing the course catalog with dwindling options and financial resources, the foreign student advisor's words finally crystallized. I had been banging my head against institutional walls, trying to force my way through barriers that required patience, preparation, and humility to navigate.

What has gone wrong? I wondered. One of the values we were taught in our first grade was to respect our teacher: *Aacharya Upasana*. That requires being near the teacher, not physically but in thoughts. Was I close to my academic advisor? Did not I think that he would burden me with some extra courses that would just delay my graduation? Did he not say “If I were you.....”. I took his soft spoken word as a suggestion rather than a firm command. I had mistaken knowledge for wisdom, ambition for readiness. Winter wasn’t just a season to endure; it was a metaphor for the challenges that required me to slow down, reassess, and learn to walk before I could run.

As I prepared to leave for Columbia, Missouri, I carried something more valuable than academic credits: the hard-won ability to see clearly and walk with steady feet on uncertain ground.

I had arrived believing I could leap to the summit of my ambitions. Iowa’s unforgiving winter taught me something more essential—that wisdom begins with finding your footing, that strength comes from acknowledging your limitations, and that the longest journeys are best traveled with humility as your compass.

The snow that had seemed so foreign and challenging had been my most patient teacher, showing me not just how to navigate icy sidewalks, but how to walk through life itself.

CHAPTER 4

WHEN NARAD CALLS

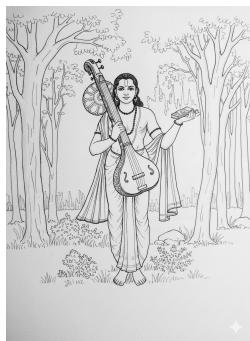


Figure 4.1: Narad: A Hindu Mythological figure

This bodily appearance is not all;
The form deceives, the person is a
mask; Hid deep in man, celestial
powers can dwell.

Shree Aurobindo-Savitri
Book 1 Canto 3

THE STRANGER'S GIFT

The Iowa winter sliced through my jacket like a blade. Unable to concentrate in the library's sterile silence or my apartment's bone-chilling dampness, I had taken refuge in the Memorial Union. I stood outside its entrance, watching my breath cloud in the brutal air, homesick and adrift in an ocean of indifferent faces. Three months into my graduate program, I felt like I was unraveling—the coursework that demanded foundations I had never built, the connections that remained stubbornly out of reach, even the basic need for familiar vegetarian food that my body could accept.

That is when I met him at one of my roommate's Friday pizza gatherings. He was older, a PhD student from Gujarat studying agriculture, sent by the Indian government to learn about improving cotton yields. While others called him by his given name, something about his quiet wisdom reminded me of Narad—that mythical messenger from Hindu stories who appears exactly when needed, bearing truths that change everything.

He listened more than he spoke, his eyes holding the kind of understanding that comes from having weathered storms. After several weeks of these casual encounters, he approached me with something that seemed almost throwaway.

"You know," he said, stirring his tea thoughtfully, "there was another student from your college who struggled here last year. He transferred to a university not too far away. Maybe you should write to him." He scribbled an address on a napkin. "Just a thought."

The simplicity of the gesture belied its power. Here was someone who had seen my struggle without my having to voice it, offering a lifeline disguised as casual advice.

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

I almost didn't write that letter. What would I say to a complete stranger? But desperation has its own momentum. I crafted a careful note, explaining my situation, asking for guidance.

The response came with timing so perfect it felt orchestrated by invisible hands. The student was graduating in just weeks, about to leave the university forever. Yet he replied immediately, providing several contacts and encouraging me to reach out.

Within days, I had an invitation—a campus visit, an interview with the department head. The person who facilitated this introduction had already left campus by the time I arrived, vanishing like a character in a story who appears only to set the plot in motion.

The new university welcomed my background, valued my experience, and offered a path forward that honored both my past and my dreams. I transferred that fall, completed my degree in one year as planned, and applied for a training visa.

Years later, I learned that my quiet messenger had become Dean of an agricultural college. When I tried to find him during a visit home, he had disappeared again, perhaps into retirement, perhaps into the realm of memory where all true teachers eventually reside.

The person who introduced me to the department head had left campus mere days before my arrival in Columbia. He'd been a senior during my undergraduate years, though our paths had never crossed then. Years later, our paths would cross again, unexpectedly, in Boston, where I found him contentedly practicing his original trade. These Narads, they enter our lives, offer their crucial aid, and then vanish.

WHEN CRISIS CALLS

Decades later I truly understood what I had encountered in that Iowa winter. The lesson came wrapped in what seemed like an impossible choice.

Two weeks before I was scheduled to perform an important ritual for a friend in Chicago, an urgent call shattered my plans: a family emergency required my immediate presence in India. Missing either commitment felt unbearable. My friend needed me—finding a replacement at such short notice would be nearly impossible. My family’s crisis demanded my physical presence halfway around the world. The logical mind offered only stark choices: disappoint a friend or abandon family. But something deeper rebelled against this false dilemma.

Each morning, I sat in meditation, not praying for a specific outcome but for clarity about the right action to take that day. I was searching for that same mysterious guidance I had encountered years ago—not in another person this time, but somewhere within myself.

In that space of seeking, something shifted. Beneath the chaos of conflicting obligations, a quiet certainty emerged: I will fulfill both commitments. The way will open.

What followed stretched the boundaries of coincidence. The complex travel arrangements fell into place with precision that seemed choreographed by an unseen director. Friday: fly to Chicago, complete the ritual. Saturday morning: race to the international airport for the flight to Mumbai.

But as my prearranged ride merged onto the Chicago expressway, traffic came to a complete standstill. No exits accessible, no alternate routes. We sat trapped while precious minutes ticked away.

Then, as suddenly as it had formed, the jam dissolved. We reached the airport with minutes to spare, only to face a security line that snaked endlessly through the terminal. Just as despair began to set in, an airline employee appeared—as if summoned—and ushered me and a few other desperate travelers through the gates. The flight landed in Mumbai’s pre-dawn darkness. Train to my hometown. Hospital arrival. Mission accomplished.

Hours later, monsoon rains shut down all transportation. I was stranded in the hospital overnight, but I had made it. Nine thousand miles, three cities, two commitments—both honored, neither compromised.

THE TEACHER WITHIN

In Hindu tradition, Narad appears when transformation is needed, often delivering truths that initially seem harsh but ultimately serve a greater purpose. He is the divine messenger, the catalyst who appears at crucial moments to guide us toward our highest path.

But perhaps these external Narads are reflections of something deeper—an inner capacity for wisdom that awakens when our familiar structures collapse. In moments of genuine crisis, when the masks of ordinary life fall away, we may discover that we carry within ourselves the very guidance we seek. Modern science offers intriguing parallels. Dr. Prigogine's work on dissipative structures shows how new levels of order can emerge from apparent chaos during moments of critical instability. Perhaps personal crises operate similarly—forcing us to a point where old patterns can no longer hold, opening space for something entirely new to emerge.

The young man struggling in Iowa needed external guidance to see possibilities his limited perspective couldn't imagine. The older version, facing an impossible choice, had learned to access that same wisdom from within. Both encounters with "Narad"—one external, one internal—shared the same quality: they revealed paths that seemed impossible until they opened.

Maybe the deepest teaching is this: the messenger we encounter in others is a reflection of the messenger we carry within ourselves. The Narad without prepares us to recognize the Narad within. And when we learn to listen to that inner voice—not in desperation, but in trust—we discover that what seemed like miraculous intervention was actually the natural unfolding of wisdom that was always there, waiting for us to become still enough to hear it.

The form deceives, the person is a mask. But when chaos strips away the superficial, the celestial powers hidden deep within us finally speak. And in that speaking, we remember who we really are.

CHAPTER 5

COLUMBIA: LESSONS OF TOGETHERNESS

Meet together, talk together, let your
minds apprehend alike
Common be your prayer;
Common be your end;
Common be your purpose;
Common be your deliberations.

Rig Veda
X.191.2-3

Ten dollars, that's all I had left after the bus ticket from Ames and one night in a Columbia Downtown hotel room. I stared at the cracked ceiling, calculating and recalculating. If Dr. Tudor said no tomorrow, I'd have enough for a return bus ticket and maybe a sandwich.

The March morning was raw as I walked towards the engineering building, dodging puddles that reflected my uncertainty back at me. Columbia's campus sat right in the heart of town, unlike Iowa State's isolated sprawl. The buildings huddled together as if sharing secrets I wasn't yet privy to.

"You look lost."

I turned to find a student about my age, with similar traits.

"First day?" he asked, then studied my face.

"I'm... I have a meeting with Dr. Tudor. About admission."

"Ah." He nodded knowingly. "The engineering building is that way. But hey, where are you staying? That hotel on Main Street?"

I nodded, embarrassed by the obviousness of my situation.

"Look, I've got a spare couch and my roommates won't mind. Better than burning through your cash." He shifted his books. "I'm Shirish, by the way."

Something in his casual offer struck me deeply. It was not just practical—it was an open door I hadn't realized I was desperately seeking. Did he see in me someone needing urgent help, lost in the campus trying to resolve the crisis?

Dr. Tudor's office smelled of coffee and old books. He was younger than I had expected, with wire-rimmed glasses that he kept adjusting as he read my transcript.

"So you want to study electronics, but your background is power engineering." He looked up. "Why the switch?"

My rehearsed answer felt suddenly inadequate. "I want to learn electronics, not so much theory but applications. Control systems, maybe."

"Hmm." He set down the transcript. "We do offer courses in control systems and semiconductor devices for power applications. You could tailor your studies toward that intersection. Talk to Professor Charlston about semiconductor physics before you leave town."

I waited for more, for a yes or no, for certainty. Instead, he stood and extended his hand.

"We'll be in touch about your application status. Good luck."

I walked out unsure whether I had been accepted or politely dismissed. On the way, I met Varma, the oldest student in the department.

"How did it go?"

"I honestly don't know."

"That's Tudor for you. You have to wait and see"

Chapter 5. Columbia: Lessons Of Togetherness

Two weeks later, the formal acceptance letter arrived in Ames. I departed for Columbia the following month.

I was stepping out of the foreign student office, still clutching my enrollment papers, when I saw him. Time stopped. The same lanky frame, the same way of tilting his head when he walked. But it couldn't be, not here, not in Columbia, Missouri.

"Ramesh?"

He looked up. His face went through the same sequence of emotions mine must have: confusion, recognition, disbelief.

"Anil? What the hell are you doing in Columbia?"

"I could ask you the same thing!" I was laughing now, the kind of laughter that comes from pure amazement. "I thought you were in Indiana!"

"I was. Got transferred here for graduate school." He shook his head. "Six years, man. Six years and we bump into each other in the middle of nowhere."

We stood there grinning like idiots, two pieces of home finding each other in the vast American puzzle.

"Listen," he said, his surprise shifting to something more practical. "I'm looking for a place to live. You?"

"Shirish—this guy I met—he's been letting me crash on his couch, but I need something more permanent."

"Then it is settled. We are apartment hunting."

That afternoon, we found ourselves in the Reverend Rippetoe's building on Fifth Avenue. The man was built like a football player, with hands that could probably bend steel, but his eyes were kind.

"Eighteen dollars a month," he said, showing us a two-bedroom unit. "Two floors, shared bathroom with the other tenants. You can add a third roommate. Most of my renters are international students like yourselves."

The apartment was nothing fancy—a part of an old building. Our unit had two rooms downstairs and one upstairs. The common kitchen was downstairs.

"We'll take it," I said before Ramesh could even respond.

Our building became a small United Nations. Upstairs: Jin-Ho from Korea studying civil engineering, and Chen from Taiwan working on his master's in mechanical. They nodded politely when they passed each other in the hallway but never spoke—some political tension I didn't understand. Downstairs: Reddy and Khuddus, both veterinary students who argued constantly about cricket scores, and a quiet Cambodian student whose name I never learned to pronounce correctly.

The basement kitchen was where we all converged. It was a chaos of cuisines—curry spices battling Korean kimchi, fish sauce mingling with unknown vegetables in a refrigerator that had seen better decades. The smell was overwhelming at first, but it became the scent of home.

"*Sam Gachhadhwam, sam vadadhwam,*" I whispered to myself one evening, watching Jin-Ho teach Chen how to make kimchi while Reddy explained the finer points of cricket to anyone who'd listen.

Ramesh was chopping onions nearby. "Did you say something?"

"Just thinking about an old Sanskrit verse. It is from Rig Veda; how a cooperative community works." I said.

"It is the old image that I lost in Iowa, now I am regaining it. It is the image of my student days in Baroda; the dorm life where we had students from all over India, of all faculties. Walk together, talk together." But I didn't say all that. He nodded, understanding without needing further explanation. That was the gift of old friendship—the ability to pick up conversations that had been interrupted by years and continents.

Three months in, I hit the wall that every graduate student knows: the problem that makes you question everything. It was Charlson's semiconductor physics. He was taking us deep into Quantum mechanics, some weird equations we all had trouble with.

"Rough night?"

"I think I'm in over my head," I admitted. "Maybe I should have stuck with power engineering."

He looked at the equations. "This isn't my area, but 'K' might know. He's got industry experience."

Chapter 5. Columbia: Lessons Of Togetherness

K lived on the other side of the campus, sharing a huge house with four friends. Studying chemical engineering, he was well versed in math. ‘K’ was our problem solver. Like an elderly brother he would advise us not only on academics, but on all practical matters.

I continued with Charlson for the sequel course. This time he took us to the innards of a crystal—the symmetry and harmony in matter giving rise to a definite structure—the individuality in nature.

“What do you think?” I asked Ramesh one night.

“I think,” he said, “that we have found something here that’s worth holding onto.”

Years later, after the degrees were earned and we had scattered to different corners of the world, I would think about that Sanskrit verse: Common be your prayer; common be your purpose; common be your deliberations. Columbia had taught me that the pursuit of knowledge was never meant to be a solitary journey. The real education happened in that basement kitchen, in those midnight study sessions, in the relaxed moment after exams, in the simple act of showing up for each other.

The degree was just paper. The friendships forged in shared purpose—those were the real treasures we carried forward.

The ancient Vedic ideal, ‘Sam Gachhadhwam, sam vadadhvam....’ ‘Let us walk together, let us speak together’, became the unspoken principle of our lives. This was the power of togetherness made real: the power of collective wisdom, of new ideas born from shared deliberation, of the motivation to pull and push each other forward. It was a stark contrast to a more solitary path where solutions had to be forged alone. Here, a question about a math problem or the need for a ride was not met with silence but with a chorus of potential helpers. The true treasure carried from Columbia was the enduring power of these connections, the lifelong friends forged in shared purpose. The pursuit of knowledge is richest when it is a shared journey.

CHAPTER 6

PITTSBURGH: MY PRAYAG

I stood at Point State Park, watching the Monongahela and Allegheny merge into the Ohio, their waters swirling together in visible eddies and currents. Two rivers becoming one, the Ohio river. From there, it travels southward passing through Illinois and eventually merging into Mighty Mississippi.

In the sacred geography of India, three rivers meet at Prayag: the visible Ganga carrying knowledge, the visible Yamuna bearing action, and the invisible Saraswati—the mystical river of desire that flows underground, unseen but essential. Here in Pittsburgh, watching these American rivers merge, I thought I was facing my own Prayag. But what if the hidden river refused to join the confluence? Looking back, my arrival in Pittsburgh feels like divine intervention disguised as poor planning. I had left the university abruptly, driven by financial urgency rather than careful planning.

Then chance intervened. A friend of a friend appeared in Indianapolis that weekend, bound for Pittsburgh. "Come with me instead," he suggested. With nothing but hope in my luggage, I changed course. Instead of going to Chicago, I joined him.

Chapter 6. Pittsburgh: My Prayag

My traveling companion had to leave Pittsburgh unexpectedly, abandoning me in a city I hadn't intended to visit. What seemed like another setback forced me into the Oakland neighborhood, where I found a house near the university with two roommates. Only later would I understand that this apparent mishap had placed me exactly where I needed to be—close enough to hear about opportunities that I would never have discovered in Chicago.

Sometimes the most important journeys begin with destinations we never chose. The construction companies—Bechtel, Swindell and Dressler—had dangled tempting offers. Overtime pay that would solve my financial crisis overnight. International projects that sounded impressive. But each time I approached their offices, something stopped me. An inner voice, quiet but insistent, whispered: This is not your path. You want to try something new, not to tread in the old field.

I began to think of this resistance as my hidden Saraswati, the underground river of authentic desire that refused to surface. While my practical mind calculated the logic of taking any decent offer, and my survival instincts pushed me toward immediate action, this third current ran deeper, more mysterious, utterly uncompromising.

My friend Doshi, who worked in electronics, had been optimistic. "You'll find something perfect," he'd said. "Your background is solid."

But "perfect" had proven elusive. The 'Westinghouse Power' interview had felt like walking through a factory of dreams deferred—engineers shuffled into neat hierarchies, creativity channeled through corporate protocols. The work was still closer to my undergraduate work. But my soul had recoiled from the old; - the power generation and distribution.

Maybe I'm being too picky, I confided to Joshi, my roommate, one evening as we shared a simple dinner in our rented house near the university. He was older, wiser, and had already sacrificed years to chase his American dream in pharmacology. "Picky?" He laughed, but not unkindly. "Or maybe you're the only one listening to what you actually want. Once you choose your line of work, it is hard to change it afterwards", he added.

My family's letter arrived on one Friday morning, their words reaching across continents to steady my wavering resolve:

"Who says that a job will come to you when you need it? Maybe God is testing you... Do not surrender to fate. Have faith that eventually everything will turn out your way." My grandfather who had lived through this play of fate versus effort was my overseas well-wisher and advisor. I had always listened to his most practical advice. But faith felt expensive when I counted my remaining dollars each morning. The tramcar rides to downtown had become a daily ritual of hope and disappointment. Interview after interview, each one a negotiation between what I needed and what I wanted, between the visible currents of necessity and the invisible current of desire.

"You're waiting for something that might not exist," my practical mind argued. The Ganga of knowledge said: Take a secure position. Use your education. The Yamuna of action urged: Stop hesitating. Decide. Move forward. But the Saraswati whispered differently: Wait. The right confluence hasn't appeared yet.

The call came through one of those mysterious chains of connection that seem random until you understand they are not. Tarneja—a neighbor I knew only through brief hallway conversations and the occasional shared evening on our front steps—had been quietly observing my daily departures for interviews, my increasingly subdued returns. Perhaps he recognized something in my expression that I hadn't yet admitted to myself. One Saturday, he invited me for tea. We sat in comfortable silence before he spoke directly, as was his way.

"These construction companies—they're not satisfying you. Why?" I hesitated. "I want to apply what I've actually studied. This new field I've been learning—it's fascinating. I do not want to be pulled down by the past." "But your time here was brief," he said matter-of-factly. "Your background is somewhat limited."

"Yes, but I am willing to put in the effort. Maybe I will find something useful to take with me home".

He closed his eyes as if meditating. I glimpsed a faint sorrow cross his face; -like a dream left unfulfilled. Tarneja was a research engineer also working for Westinghouse. What dreams did he have, I wondered? "Quite ambitious,

Chapter 6. Pittsburgh: My Prayag

may your desire be fulfilled”, he said. We sat in silence. He was a practical man who didn’t waste words on false encouragement.

“There is a place,” he finally said. “Westinghouse Power Semiconductor. Small division, about thirty miles out—different from what you have been chasing downtown.” They need someone with your power and electronics background. You could bridge two worlds: your background in old power engineering and newly learned semiconductor technology. Real problem-solving; applications of these devices in the industry.” Something in his tone made the Saraswati stir. Not the glamorous corporate trajectory I’d been pursuing, but something else—something that resonated in frequencies I’d almost forgotten how to hear.

The company was smaller than I’d expected, housed in a converted building that buzzed with genuine energy. No sterile corporate hierarchy here. No assigned parking spots. Engineers worked alongside technicians. They all ate in one cafeteria. There was a small research lab across the manufacturing. Problems were solved through collaboration rather than committee. The work was immediate, tactile, creative.

“We need someone who can think on their feet,” the hiring manager explained. “Someone who’s not afraid to get their hands dirty, to experiment, to fail and try again. Maybe you could use your mathematics background and refining our thermal studies. Heatsinking is a big problem for power devices”

For the first time in weeks, all three rivers aligned. My knowledge saw the technical challenges. My need for action recognized the immediate opportunities. And the hidden Saraswati—that mysterious current of authentic desire—finally surfaced, flowing strong and clear.

This. This is what I’ve been waiting for.

THE TRUE PRAYAG

Standing again at Point State Park after accepting the offer, I watched the waters merge with new understanding. The ancient sages knew something that my months of job hunting had finally taught me: every meaningful decision requires the convergence of three sacred currents, Iccha, Jnana and Kriya. The construction companies had offered only two rivers: Jnana aligned with Kriya—my engineering knowledge channeled into immediate action for financial survival. But Iccha, that deeper current of authentic longing, had remained underground. At Westinghouse's Power division, I could not see how I could apply my newly learned knowledge. The action available to me would be limited and channeled through protocols that felt foreign to my deeper aspirations.

The hidden river doesn't always flow where we expect. It doesn't follow the mapped channels of conventional success or practical necessity. It carves its own path through the underground landscape of consciousness, sometimes disappearing for years, only to resurface when conditions align for true confluence.

What I found at that smaller Westinghouse Semiconductor division was rarer than I had realized: a place where all three currents could merge naturally. My knowledge would be fully engaged by complex technical challenges. My authentic desire resonated with the nuances of the field; semiconductor devices. And my capacity for meaningful action would be unleashed rather than constrained.

This wasn't just about finding employment—it was about discovering what the sages meant when they spoke of sva-dharma, one's deepest natural tendencies and one's role in the world. When desire, knowledge, and action flow in the same direction, work ceases to be mere labor and becomes an expression of one's essential being.

My Pittsburgh Prayag revealed something the ancient texts had always known: partial confluences create temporary satisfaction, but only the full merger of all three currents generates the power to carry us toward our true

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destination. The *Iccha-Jnana-Kriya* triad is the practical blueprint for our unfolding in this world.

The Ohio River stretched before me, carrying the merged waters toward horizons I couldn't yet imagine. In its flow, I glimpsed my own future—not as a straight path, but as a dynamic system capable of adaptation while maintaining its essential direction. Like consciousness itself, this river would meander through different landscapes, sometimes running deep and narrow through challenging passages, sometimes spreading wide across fertile plains, but always carrying the unified current of its three tributaries.

Years later, overlooking the Mississippi's vastness in Memphis, I understand that the confluence at Pittsburgh was just the beginning. The Ohio River, born from that merger I witnessed, eventually joins the mighty Mississippi. Through countless confluences across the continent, what began as separate tributaries has become this roaring, dancing, mature river, transformed by its journey through time and space. Like the river, I too have traveled in time and place—from Pittsburgh to Boston to Ohio to Texas—and with each passage, the triad continues to shape every significant choice, every creative breakthrough, every moment when life presents us with multiple possible channels, multiple triads.

This is the deeper teaching of any true Prayag: not just the meeting of waters, but the recognition that consciousness itself flows through these three eternal rivers. When we learn to honor each current—the river of authentic desire, the river of genuine knowledge, and the river of meaningful action—we discover that our individual journey is part of a much larger flow, one that has been seeking the ocean of realization since the beginning of time.

CHAPTER 7

AFTER SUNSET: A STORY OF SELF-EXILE

The first time I saw Joshi, he was standing in the doorway at three in the afternoon, rubbing his eyes as if he just got up. His hair stuck up at odd angles, and he wore a rumpled t-shirt that looked slept in.

"You must be the new guy," he said, his voice thick with sleep. "Come in, come in. Don't mind the mess."

The house smelled of stale cooking oil and something medicinal. Doshi had warned me his housemate kept unusual hours, but I hadn't expected this—a man emerging from hibernation in the middle of the day, blinking at me like I was the strange one.

"Joshi," he said, extending a hand. "Welcome to our humble castle."

I shook his hand saying "Thanks for letting me stay. I should be able to find my own place soon—" "No rush," he said, already turning away. "Make yourself at home. I'll put some tea on."

He moved toward the kitchen, and I noticed he moved carefully, as if the floors might give way beneath him. Later, I would learn that everything about Joshi was careful—his words, his movements, his timing. Especially his timing.

That first evening, as I unpacked my single bag upstairs, I heard him moving around below—the steady rhythm of chopping, the hiss of oil in a pan, the whistle of steam. When Doshi came home at seven, dinner was ready: perfect rice, tender vegetables, chapatis that puffed like small balloons over the flame.

"Joshi's our chef," Doshi explained, settling into his chair. "Best cook in Pittsburgh, maybe the whole state." Joshi smiled at this, but it was a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Cooking is easy," he said. "It's the rest that's hard."

I'd return from job interviews to find Joshi emerging from his room, hair damp from the shower, moving with that same careful deliberation. Tea first, then the ritual of dinner preparation would begin.

During weekdays we hardly had any guests. Doshi's commute from work was an hour-long drive. Our dinner would be around seven to eight in the evening. We watched TV afterward. After the nightly news around ten-thirty, Doshi would retire for the day. But Joshi would continue. Since the TV room was also my bedroom, I was forced to watch TV as well. This would go on until late night. Joshi wouldn't quit until the last TV station had signed off, almost in the early hours of morning.

He never seemed to go out anywhere during the daytime. Normally I wouldn't have known this, but one day I returned home early and found him sleeping. One strange thing was that he would venture out only after sunset. There was a small grocery store nearby. Many times he wanted me to walk with him. For these trips, he would wear a hooded jacket and dark clothes. If an acquaintance met us on the way, he would try to ignore him by turning his face the other way, as if he did not see him. He hardly talked to me during those trips.

He seldom ventured out even on weekends. On Fridays, a bunch of friends would come, have pizza (prepared at home) and beer, and then we would go out visiting friends or for a stroll by the river. But he wouldn't join us. When we returned home, he would be watching TV.

I hesitated to ask him directly, but one Friday during our outing, the secret came out. Back home, he had a job in a pharmaceutical company, a

family, and children. Late in life, he had come here on a student visa for a degree in pharmacology. He was given an assistantship for his study. With his student years behind him, studying was difficult and he couldn't cope. His assistantship was gone. He had found another university where he could continue without any monetary help, but studying there was also becoming difficult. Returning home wasn't possible. He felt guilty for not living up to his family's and others' expectations.

None of us named what we saw happening. We just watched him shrink a little more each day, as if apologizing for taking up space in the world. I was beginning to understand that something deeper than homesickness was keeping him in the shadows. The complexity of our relationship—his careful distance, my growing concern—felt like walking around a wound neither of us knew how to tend.

I watched him move through the house like a ghost of his former self. Back home, he'd been the one giving advice, landing jobs, supporting a family. Here, he couldn't even meet his own eyes in the mirror. The weight of unmet expectations had bent him into this careful, shadowed version of himself.

Was I reading him right? Was he suffering from Self-condemnation?

Eventually, I found a position in Doshi's company. Without a car, I had to relocate from Pittsburgh to the nearby town. The job's demands quickly consumed my attention. Our previous conversations, our shared hopes, gradually faded into the background of professional necessity. The last time I saw Joshi was one Sunday late in the year. I'd driven up from my new job, hoping to take everyone out for dinner—my small way of celebrating the new job. Doshi met me at the door. "He's not doing well," he said quietly. "Hasn't come downstairs in three days."

I found Joshi in his room, sitting on the edge of his bed in the same clothes I'd seen him wear all week. The curtains were drawn, and the air was thick and stale. His textbooks lay unopened on the desk, collecting dust like museum pieces.

"Hey," I said. "Heard you might want some company."

Chapter 7. After Sunset: A Story of Self-exile

He looked up, and I was shocked by how much weight he'd lost. His cheeks were hollow, his eyes sunken. "You got that job," he said. It wasn't a question.

"Yeah. Finally."

"Good. That's good." He turned back toward the window, though there was nothing to see through the heavy curtains. "You know what's funny? I used to be the guy who got jobs. I used to advise people." "You still could—" "No." The word came out flat, final. "That person doesn't exist anymore. Maybe he never did." I wanted to argue, to tell him he was wrong, but the words wouldn't come. We sat in silence as the afternoon light faded behind the curtains.

When I left that evening, he was back at his usual spot in front of the television, but he wasn't really watching. His eyes were fixed somewhere beyond the screen, beyond the room, beyond reach.

"Take care of yourself," I said.

He nodded without looking at me. "After sunset," he murmured, and I realized he was talking to himself. "Everything's easier after sunset."

"Three months later, Doshi called to tell me Joshi had left. No forwarding address, no goodbye. Just an empty room and a note that said 'Thank you for the kindness.' I still think about that last evening, how he sat bathed in the television's blue light, waiting for the world to go dark so he could safely move through it. *Some people lose their way back to daylight. They learn to live in the spaces between sunset and dawn, invisible even to themselves.*

CHAPTER 8

DIGITAL POETS

Ray spread the circuit diagram across his desk like a conductor studying a symphony. "Listen," he said, tracing a line with his finger. "This transistor is singing off-key." I leaned closer, trying to see what he saw. To me, it looked like any other schematic—a maze of lines and symbols that might as well have been hieroglyphics. "Read it like poetry," Ray continued, his teacher's voice I had begun to recognize. "Every component has a voice. This one here?" He tapped a small symbol. "She's a gate between two current highways, opened by just a whisper from her base. But look—" His finger moved to another section. "These highways are eight lanes wide, and she's trying to control them with a garden gate. She needs backup."

For the next hour, Ray narrated the circuit's story. The transistor that couldn't handle the load. The missing diode that would prevent electrical backflow. The resistor, placed like a speed bump to slow things down. By the time he finished, I wasn't looking at a diagram anymore—I was seeing a living system, electricity flowing like blood through carefully designed veins.

"Your turn," Ray said, sliding another schematic across the desk. I stared at the foreign symbols, then back at him. "I don't—" "What's the first thing that speaks to you?" I looked again. There, in the upper left corner, a small

transistor sat at what looked like a crossroads. "This one seems... Lonely?" Ray grinned. "Go on."

* * *

Three years and two jobs later, I found myself in a conference room at Dynamics Corp, staring at my own reflection in a polished table. Across from me sat Jim, our software guru, with a roll of drafting paper tucked under his arm like a weapon.

"We're going to build the future," he announced, unrolling the paper across the table. "A new version of our graphics terminal that will have all digital components. Gone are your resistors, capacitors and analog-to-digital components.

My job in this process was to research the components he would need. He drew a simple box at the left edge of the paper. "Commands come in here," he said, labeling it INPUT. Another box appeared at the right edge: OUTPUT. Between them, blank space. "Now," Jim said, capping his pen, "we fill in the magic."

What happened next was like watching someone solve a Rubik's cube blindfolded. Jim knew every software command by heart, could visualize exactly how each one would trigger hardware components, how those components would manipulate beams of light to paint pictures on a screen. He worked methodically, adding boxes, drawing connections, scribbling notes in margins.

I watched him sketch for three days straight. Sometimes he'd stop mid-drawing, close his eyes for a long moment, then suddenly add a new component I hadn't seen coming. It was like he was consulting some internal blueprint that existed fully formed in his mind.

"How do you do that?" I asked on the third afternoon. Jim looked up from his diagram, pencil still poised. "Do what?" "See the whole thing before you've built it." He set down his pencil and gestured at the paper, now covered with interconnected boxes and flowing lines. "I'm not building it," he said. "It already exists. I'm just... finding the pieces that match the picture in my head."

* * *

Roy Patel's office looked like mission control for some secret operation. Two massive drawing boards dominated the space, their surfaces scarred by years of sketching and erasing. A whiteboard covered one entire wall, filled with equations and diagrams that looked like modern art. But Roy himself sat in a simple chair in the corner, eyes closed, perfectly still.

"Is he... sleeping?" I whispered to another engineer.

"Designing," came the reply.

I watched Roy for the better part of an hour. Occasionally his eyes would flutter, as if he were dreaming. His hands would move slightly, as though manipulating invisible objects. Then, without warning, he stood and walked to his drawing board. What emerged under his pencil was unlike anything I'd seen. Not the hesitant scratches of someone working through a problem, but confident, flowing lines—as if he were tracing something already there.

"How—" I started to ask.

"Ten years," Roy said without looking up. "Ten years of building things here first." He tapped his temple. "By the time I put pencil to paper, I've already tested every connection, stressed every joint, run every simulation. This is just documentation."

I knew Roy from graduate school. Hard working, intensely focused and loyal to a single discipline. He used to spend hours in his office, beyond the eight that most engineers would put. I thought about Ray and his poetic circuits, about Jim and his fully-formed visions and now Roy. They weren't just engineers—they were translators, converting invisible worlds into visible reality.

That night, I went home and tried Roy's method. I closed my eyes and tried to visualize the printer interface I'd been assigned. At first, nothing. Then, slowly, components began to take shape in my mind's eye. A signal coming in, hitting a decoder, splitting into multiple paths...

When I opened my eyes, I reached for my sketchpad. The design flowed onto paper like it had been waiting there all along. For the first time, I understood: the real engineering happened in the darkness behind closed eyelids, in the space where imagination and expertise converged. It was like writing poetry; you had command over words and an imagination to put them

together to create a meaningful composition. Everything else was just documentation of what you'd already built in your mind.

Three weeks later, I found myself in my own office, staring at a blank sheet of paper. No Ray to guide me. No Jim to show me the vision. No Roy to demonstrate the meditation. Just me and the challenge: decode signals from one device, store them, translate them, and send the results to a printer 100 feet away. All within the limits of form factor that would fit into a given cabinet with other components, power supply and wires.

I closed my eyes like Roy had taught me. What is given? Electrical signals, chaotic and fast, carrying encoded information like messages in bottles washing up on a digital shore. For what end? Clean, formatted output on paper, readable by human eyes. What stands in the way? Distance. Timing. The physical constraints of the housing that marketing had already promised to customers. In the darkness behind my eyelids, I began to build.

First, the input stage—not just a simple receiver, but something more elegant. I visualized the chaotic signals hitting a buffer, like water hitting a dam, smoothing out into manageable flow. Then a decoder, not the standard off-the-shelf component everyone else would use, but something custom, optimized for our specific signal patterns. The storage came next. In my mind's eye, I could see data flowing like grain into a silo, organized and waiting. But not just any storage—intelligent buffering that could predict what data would be needed next, pre-loading it like a chess player thinking three moves ahead. The translation layer proved trickier. Standard approaches would require too much space, too many components. But as I sat there, visualizing data flowing through virtual circuits, I saw a different path. What if the translation happened in stages? What if each component did double duty? I opened my eyes and began to sketch.

The design evolved over weeks, each day bringing refinements as my mental model grew more sophisticated. I would close my eyes and stress-test virtual components, watching them bend under imaginary loads, seeing where they might fail. Then I'd open my eyes and adjust the physical design accordingly.

Then came the final test. It was like a game. Roy would call his colleagues. We would all be staring at the design blue-print hung on the white-boarded. Each one would have a chance to suggest ways to reduce one component. Like the ‘name that tunes’ as the song is being played. Invariably few components would be ejected from the drawing. Once the design is thus optimized it would be released to production.

* * *

That evening, I sat in my apartment with a cup of coffee, thinking about the strange journey from Ray’s first circuit lesson to this moment. Three different teachers, three different approaches, but all pointing to the same fundamental truth: the real work of creation happens in the invisible realm of imagination.

I thought about the ancient texts I’d been reading lately—Buddhist descriptions of visualizing deities, Hindu practices of meditating on geometric patterns called Yantras. Different traditions, different purposes, but the same core principle: the mind’s ability to construct and manipulate complex images could serve purposes far beyond the merely technical. Perhaps the mind has a trap door, once opened we can see what moves the mind.

What if visualization wasn’t just a tool for engineers? What if it was a doorway to something larger? I closed my eyes and tried to imagine not circuits or data flows, but something more fundamental. Light. Consciousness, energy, time, space. The very fabric of experience itself. In the darkness behind my eyelids, new possibilities began to take shape. But that, I realized, was an entirely different story.

CHAPTER 9

FACES OF FEAR

WHat if I told you that everything you cherish—your pleasures, your reputation, your wealth, your power—is secretly poisoned by fear? The ancient Indian poet-philosopher Bhartrihari understood this paradox of human existence centuries ago. He wrote:

In enjoyment, there is fear of disease; in family reputation, there is fear of falling; in wealth, there is fear of kings (the rulers); in prestige, there is fear of humiliation; in power, there is fear of enemy or adversary; in beauty, there is fear of old age; in scriptural erudition, there is fear of learned opponents; in virtue, there is fear of wicked vilifying person; in body, there is fear of death. For human beings, everything in this world is coupled with fear. Not clinging alone bestows fearlessness.

Bhartrihari Vairagya Satakam, Verse 1.15

Bhartrihari, both yogi and poet, offers us a map for understanding fear's pervasive grip on human life. But ancient wisdom becomes meaningful only when tested against lived experience. Through examining my own encounters with fear—from the primal to the profound—I've discovered how Bhartrihari's insights illuminate the very fabric of our daily struggles.

1. NATURAL FEAR It was a routine walk. Almost every evening, after school, me and my sister would go out for a walk. Those days, the city had remnants of an old fort. While the real fort was gone, the wall surrounding the city remained. Walking on a three feet wall, some fifteen feet high personal highway was an adventure for us. One evening, as usual, we were walking on the wall, singing and laughing. Then suddenly a cobra sprang up just five feet ahead of us. He raised his head straight up like a rod and hissed. We stopped. Our hearts were pounding. We needed to retrace. Slowly we turned around and ran as fast as we could without stopping or looking back till we reached home.

This was natural fear at its purest—the "fight or flight" response that has kept our species alive for millennia. In that moment, fear revealed itself not as weakness, but as wisdom; not as limitation, but as an evolutionary gift that protects us from genuine danger.

2. FEAR BASED ON HEARSAY AND IGNORANCE. But then, the initial fear morphed into something else. The next day we told our adventure to our friends in school. "You know, cobras follow you and can remember your home. They are nasty and seek revenge." One said "Yes they will come for revenge, be careful", the other said. For a number of days, we lived with that 'cobra' fear.

3. FEAR DUE TO IMAGINATION We were on our way from Mysore to Bangalore. We were to start right at noon, but the car arrived late. Our plan was to stop at a place called Shravana- Belagola near Hassan, visit the famous Jain pilgrim place where some fifty feet towering statue carved from a single rock stands, and depart before sunset. We were seven;- counting the driver. We got late again to start from Belgula. As we entered the forest known for elephants, it was already pitch dark.

The driver would stop the car, turn off the engine and tell us to remain quiet. He would say, "this is an elephant crossing area, we don't want to attract their attention".

What are his intentions? What if he robes us? What if he leaves us in the jungle and drives with our bags? What if the car breaks down? There were several reasons to be afraid. We never said a word, we were all imagining scenarios that could happen. We were all silent until we came off from the jungle and saw city lights some twenty miles away.

4. FEAR CAN MORPH INTO RECURRENT ANXIETY DREAM In my college days, I would wake up from a dream, perspiring. The dream was always the same. I was in a big room giving an exam. Everyone had finished the paper and handed their answerbooks to the supervisor. The supervisor warns me that only ten minutes left for me to finish. I am in a panic, I still have to answer a few questions. Just as he comes to collect the answerbook, I wake up.

I never understood this dream. Maybe it was my slowness, maybe it was my habit of rechecking everything after answering all the questions for which there was hardly enough time.

5. FEAR OF LOSS OF A JOB Fear does not manifest in just the physical world but also in anxiety and losing stability. One word that would upset any government organization is ‘RIF’ or Reduction in Force. Reduction in force is the government way of firing an employee. It is like throwing a big rock into a quiet pond. After the election, the ruling party lost out and the new regime took over. The politicians started occupying technical positions. Our boss came back after a meeting to tell us that he was told; “We all were walking on eggshells”.

Our smooth running organization went into a tailspin. For no reason offices were shuffled. Rumors about which department might be axed started circulating. A young lawyer with no IT background was brought as a head of the department to ‘clean up’. His friend who was inaccessible during day hours was brought in as a head of operations. Co-workers started whispering as if walls had ears. Trust was lost. Order was lost. The new regime managed to create an atmosphere of terror.

There was even a day announced when the ‘RIF’ would happen. People stayed in their offices, Coffee rooms and the cafeteria were empty. Fear ruled the days.

Like the mountain that labored to birth a mouse, all the organizational upheaval produced minimal results—seven senior staff members nearing retirement were the only casualties.”

6. FEAR OF KNOWN I was very skeptical about the grave threat that was hanging over me. My primary physician had warned me not to walk around as usual, he had prescribed some Nitro pills that I should carry with me all the time, that I was in danger of having a heart attack if I exert myself. Not believing in any of this, I wanted proof. And I got one when they did exploratory angiography. It was after knowing that I had a serious blockage not in one but three arteries, I started fearing heart attack. I wanted that cure, the surgery, - insertion of magical stents to open up the clogged arteries the next day. But the same doctor told me that now I would have to wait a week before he could perform this miracle. I immediately took sick leave, stopped working. I was afraid to go out and even fetch mail. Every three hours I began measuring blood pressure and looking at my pulse. I searched the internet about stents procedures.

All this fear stemmed from my new found knowledge of my condition.

7. FEAR OF DEATH I was going for that operation in the morning. In four- five days between knowing the seriousness of my condition and the schedule of the surgery, I read every account of the surgery, possible outcomes, and what could go wrong before and after the surgery.

I searched the internet for all scenarios related to my condition. In most part this was a safe operation. I also read that the pioneer doctors had tried surgery on their own, risking their life for no sickness, no reason, just to prove the concept. The probability of complication was about 1

Human existence wants to continue, the mind seeks continuity. It is not prepared for the end. Patanjali (in his Yoga Sutras) calls this innate ‘will-to-live’ and its shadow, the fear of death, ‘Abhivivesha.’ He identifies this as

one of the fundamental afflictions (kleshas) stemming from an even deeper root: ‘avidya’, or spiritual ignorance – the profound misapprehension of our true, eternal nature. It is this ‘avidya’, this identification with the temporary body and mind, that causes, as Patanjali notes, -‘even the learned and philosophers [to be] as much attached to life as an ordinary person is. In my late fifties, I was not prepared either. It was my first surgery. The night before the surgery, I could not sleep. I had what the psychologist would call “anticipatory anxiety”. I could not overcome the image of a demon who was about to swallow me. No matter which side I ran to, he seemed to catch up. “The demon you can swallow gives you its power”, I had read somewhere. But this demon was hard to swallow. In that moment of exhaustion, a flicker of hope emerged, a desperate imagining: I became smaller and smaller, a fly. The fly, though small, possesses ultimate movement, able to evade even a demon. In this transformation, I found not escape, but a fragile hope, a way to navigate the impossible. I evaded the demon by becoming a fly. The mind eventually overcame its own fear. It settled for an action; whatever needed at that time; all for the survival of the body, and along with it, the mind.

Perhaps that small fly was a symbol of hope. “Hope is the elevating feeling we experience when we see-in the mind’s eye-a path to a better future”, says Dr.Jerome Groopman. “Hope is an unalloyed reality”, he would add. It is a forward looking force in which I saw a healthy life.

But can there be hope in the face of imminent death? Years before, I had read Victor Frankl’s account of “Man’s search for Meaning”. He survived Nazi death camp by creating a meaning for his life. Like Frankl in the face of unimaginable horror, I sought a meaning, a way to transcend the fear that threatened to consume me. My ‘fly’ was not just an escape, but a symbol of my will to survive, a meaning I created in the face of the void.

Perhaps, as Patanjali suggests, the ultimate liberation from fear lies in tracing it back to its source (Yogsutra 2.10). In my case, the ‘demon’ was not a physical entity, but the fear of the unknown, the fear of non-existence. By transforming myself into the fly, I confronted that fear, not by denying it,

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but by finding a way to move through it, to find action even in the face of the void.

I survived the surgery, but more importantly, I survived the night before. The demon of death still prowls the edges of my consciousness, it always will. But now I know something I didn't before: the fly was not born from desperation; it was always there, waiting. It represents not hope as mere wishful thinking, but hope as recognition that we are far more resilient and transformable than our fears would have us believe. Overcoming fear of death may indeed be a tall order, but in moments of extremity, we discover we are capable of orders we never knew we could fulfill.

CHAPTER IO

LIFE PAYS WHAT YOU ASK

I bargained with Life for a penny,
And Life would pay no more,
However I begged in the evening
when I counted my scanty store. For
life is a just employer, He gives what
you ask, But once you have set the
wages, Why must you bear the task? I
worked for a menial's hire, Only to
learn dismayed, That any wages I had
asked for life, Life would have paid.

My Wages

Jessie Rittenhouse

The handwritten notice slightly bent and hastily pasted on our apartment door read: "Help needed to clean up the building next door. About three to four hours of work. Will pay \$3 per hour. See Reverend Ripito. I read it twice, my engineering textbooks weighing heavy in my arms. Three dollars an hour—more money than I'd ever earned in my life. My

stomach tightened with a mixture of excitement and something I couldn't quite name. Was it shameful? Fear? In my twenty-two years, I had never worked for wages, never needed to. But here in America, everything felt different.

Rev. Ripito had the kind of presence that filled a room before he spoke. Six feet tall with carpenter's hands and a voice that could project from pulpit to back bench without a microphone, he wore his dual nature openly—Sunday mornings in pressed clerical collars, weekdays in paint-stained work shirts, collecting rent with the same methodical precision he brought to scripture. When he shook my hand that Saturday morning, his grip was firm but not crushing, the handshake of a man accustomed to sealing deals with his word.

Saturday morning, four of us gathered in the front of the building to be condemned. "You have to haul everything out from the building. Start from the third floor. Bring everything and lay it out here in the front yard." Ripito's instructions were clear. I was paired with another person, a tall, athletic built student. I was happy to get hired, but also nervous, for I had never done any work, -never earned anything until then. There never was a need; those days students were supposed to do one job; -studies. None of my classmates, even up to the college level, had worked in any capacity. Summer jobs were simply not available.

Mattresses are deceptively difficult—their unwieldy bulk seems to possess malicious intelligence. The third one nearly defeated me as I wrestled it down narrow staircases, my academic hands already blistering. Each step echoed with my father's voice: "Study hard so you won't have to do this kind of work." Yet despite the burning in my shoulders, I felt something unexpected—a peculiar satisfaction in the honest ache of physical labor. "I bargained with Life for a penny," I thought, watching my partner work with ease while I struggled with something so basic. Rev. Ripito counted twelve dollars into my palm—exactly what was promised. No bonus for inexperience, no penalty for clumsiness. Life had given me precisely what was agreed upon. I stared at this tangible proof of my labor, feeling something shift inside me. These bills represented more than two months of rent;

they were evidence that I could survive on my own terms, that my hands could produce value beyond theoretical equations. Walking home, I kept pulling the money from my pocket, as if it might disappear. For the first time since arriving in America, I wasn't just a dependent foreign student—I was someone who could earn his way in the world.

"What is this pot for?" my roommate Ramesh asked as I entered with a quarter's purchase from Rev. Ripito's yard sale. "Much needed for our rice cooking, from my work today", I replied proudly. Ramesh, eating leftover pizza from his campus pizzeria job, nodded approvingly. "You have to ask people if you want work. That's my secret."

He had an unusual knack for finding odd jobs—even spending a day as a farm laborer working a hay-packing machine. "Do you know that hay isn't just grass, but also alfalfa? Each bundle needs the right moisture, packing one, requires long hours when weather permits," he had an unusual curiosity for almost anything. He sought out unusual jobs in restaurants, small retail shops, in college cafeterias as a dishwasher.

Ramesh remained true to his engineering profession even as life took him to deserted areas and remote chemical plants. He understood something I was just learning: work was not beneath us—"life is a just employer".

Years later, when Mrs. Mehta asked me to perform her daughter's wedding ceremony, I thought of that aluminum rice pot bought for a quarter. Both were unexpected rewards from work initially taken for different reasons. Standing before that young couple, reading words connecting them to generations of tradition, I realized life had been a fair negotiator. I had asked for employment and received a profession. I had bargained for understanding my tradition and received purpose. The material rewards were modest and went to charities, but watching families celebrate, seeing gratitude in their eyes—these were wages of a different currency entirely.

What did I truly ask of life? Initially, simple employment when I was without. But once employed, the bargain shifted. I sought creative stimulation

tion, the application of learning, continuous growth in personal and professional standards. My deeper negotiations involved yearning for broader horizons through travel, the spark of curiosity leading down countless learning paths, and growth extending beyond material success to deeper self-understanding.

"However I begged in the evening when I counted my scanty store"—there were times I wondered if I had set my sights too low and asked for too little. Did I play all the cards life handed me? Did I hedge bets I could have made?

Now I understand what Jessie Rittenhouse meant about bargaining with life. That day, I asked for twelve dollars and received exactly that. But I had also asked, unknowingly, for something more fundamental: knowledge that I could transform effort into sustenance, that my hands, back, and will could negotiate with the world on equal terms.

The real question wasn't what I had asked for, but what I was prepared to ask for next. With each passing year, each new challenge accepted, I found myself raising the stakes of that original bargain—not just for more money, but for work that would stretch me, change me, make me worthy of whatever wages life might offer.

As the poet reminds us: "Once we have set the wages, we must bear the task." The integrity of our effort remains paramount in all that we do.

CHAPTER II

THE DANGER OF OBVIOUS ASSUMPTIONS

Your assumptions are the windows in the world. Scrub them off every once in a while or the light won't come close.

—Issac Asimov

Here's a simple test: I'm writing down some numbers: 1, 3, 5... Can you guess the next two numbers? Even without being a math major, you'd naturally assume 7, then 9. It's logical—odd numbers in sequence. Your brain recognizes the pattern instantly, and you're probably right. This is how we navigate the world: we see patterns, make assumptions, and usually succeed.

But sometimes, our assumptions become our blind spots. This lesson came alive for me through my friend Avinash during our engineering college days. We lived in adjacent dorm rooms—he was studying mechanical

engineering, me electrical. During exam season, our thin walls meant I witnessed his study habits up close.

Our annual exams were brutal affairs: the sole measure of academic worth, where you had to regurgitate an entire year's knowledge across five to seven subjects. Each exam was a three-hour marathon of memory and speed. That particular year, there was a day's break between two crucial papers: Heat Engine 1 and Heat Engine 2. Here is where assumptions nearly derailed everything. The administration had quietly announced a schedule change: Heat Engine 2 would come before Heat Engine 1. But Avinash, like most of us, assumed the logical sequence: 1 before 2.

That Sunday, while the rest of us frantically reviewed Heat Engine 2 material, Avinash was deep in Heat Engine 1 preparation. We found it odd. Why wasn't he studying for the next day's exam? Maybe he needed extra time for the harder paper, we reasoned. These exams rewarded memorization over analysis; you had to cram vast amounts of formulas and procedures.

Monday morning arrived. We all walked to the exam hall, minds buzzing with Heat Engine 2 concepts. Even at the last minute, Avinash was reviewing Heat Engine 1 notes. His friend Mahesh finally pointed out the schedule discrepancy. Panic. Pure panic.

In those final moments before entering the exam room, Avinash desperately tried to absorb essential Heat Engine 2 formulas. His face had drained of color. When the papers were distributed, we bent over our desks, minds racing through solutions. Avinash sat frozen, then began to cry. He had prepared meticulously for the wrong exam. His assumption about logical sequencing had blinded him to the actual schedule.

After the exam, he approached the stern examiner, explaining his genuine mistake. The professor's response was characteristically blunt: "If you reach near the passing mark, I'll add two points. No more."

Avinash scraped through that exam. The experience became a turning point, not just academically, but in how he approached life. He learned to verify rather than assume, to question rather than accept patterns blindly.

On a recent visit to California, I called him up. He had earned his coveted Ph.D. and became a professor himself. I often wonder if that painful lesson

Chapter II. The Danger Of Obvious Assumptions

made him a better teacher who understood how easily assumptions can derail even the most prepared minds. It reminded me how wrong assumptions derailed my study at the Ames campus.

Assumptions are merely superimpositions on our foundation of learned knowledge but not actual facts. Our windows to the world can be tinted with our expectations, and our pattern-seeking brains often distort our perception of reality. The number sequence 1, 3, 5 doesn't always lead to 7, 9. Sometimes it leads to 17, 257 or breaks the pattern entirely. The key is knowing when to trust our mental shortcuts and when to step back and scrub those windows clean. Because sometimes, the light we miss does not come from where we assumed it would.

CHAPTER 12

FROM OUTSIDER TO INSIDER: A JOURNEY BETWEEN STATIONS

“Remember, they own the compartment; they are the daily commuters from Mumbai to Valsad. The whole compartment will be yours after they get down at Vapi station,” my relative advised, his voice a low hum against the train’s arrival hiss. His words were a necessary caution for this hurried, unreserved journey south. I clutched the first-class ticket he’d handed me at the suburban Borivali station, my mind still reeling from the news that had propelled me here: my father’s recent leg amputation. There had been no time for the usual end-to-end reservations; seeing him was all that mattered.

The train before me was an express, yes, but also a lifeline for daytime commuters—one of those interstate arteries that pulse with people traveling daily between cities a hundred miles apart, many choosing to live in ancestral homes, close to extended family.

I entered a first-class coach with my suitcases and carry-on. In the first compartment, I saw four people playing cards. Two others were reading newspapers. One man had occupied the upper berth entirely to himself,

busy with his laptop. Opposite him, someone was sound asleep. I tried to draw their attention, but they paid no heed—none were willing to let me into the compartment. I moved to the next compartment. Like the first, there was also a card game in progress. There was no sense in forcing myself in, no point in picking a fight where I would surely lose.

I had to stay in the corridor, standing with a suitcase that still had the airline tag on it, and a carry-on at my side. I tried to sit on the suitcase but quickly found it would not support me. Unlike suburban trains that provide bars and handrails for standing passengers, this train had no such provision. It was difficult to maintain balance when the train took sharp turns at high speed. The old coal-fired steam engines had given way to electric ones, yet dust still blew in from the open corridors. After about forty minutes, the train stopped at Palghar station. Palghar used to be a watering station when steam engines were in use. A ten or fifteen-minute halt was sufficient for passengers to disembark, get food and tea. Now it's hardly five minutes. Nobody entered the compartment and nobody left, but the card game was interrupted. The laptop person had finished reading his emails. He saw me looking out from the window, standing in the corridor.

They looked at me now. I was disheveled. My worn-out clothes announced me as a distant traveler, belonging to another world. My gray hair revealed my age. I was not one of them—not so young, not dressed for office work—certainly like their older relatives. Perhaps an uncle from an extended family. Looking at my bags with airline tags, the fellow on the upper berth said, "You could keep your bag underneath the seats."

"And you can sit down here," the card-player said.

I moved into the compartment and took my seat. Slowly, they began asking questions. How far was I going? Where was I from? What brought me here?

"Oh, Austin, Texas! Here it is on the map," the fellow with the laptop said, looking at his screen. He turned out to be an engineer working for a chemical company. Someone from the adjoining compartment came with slices of apple and started sharing with everyone. He called everyone by name and exchanged greetings. "Here, have one too," he said, giving me a

slice. A second person arrived with orange slices. They began sharing food with me.

"What do you do there? How long are you going to stay here? Do you have family there? How many children? How many cars do you have? What taxes do you pay there?" They were an inquisitive bunch. Human curiosity. How quickly we compare ourselves with others! "Vapi is near; you can smell the place from twenty miles away." Indeed, there was a smell of chemicals. Some factories with tall chimneys were spewing black smoke. Even on a sunny day, it looked like fog had enveloped the area. The atmosphere changed. I saw a fellow from another coach entering our compartment. He was going around shaking hands with everyone and giving out small bags of candy.

"Good luck to you. Remember us and visit sometime; we will miss you," I heard several heavy, somewhat tearful voices as he made his rounds. "He has been commuting with us for years. This is his last day. He's retiring today," someone explained. I could see the real loss of friendship. They all started checking their watches, looking as if their destination was near. As the train stopped at Vapi Junction, they all disembarked hurriedly. "The whole compartment is yours now. Be careful. Surat is another two hours," the computer fellow said.

The train started again. I was the only one left. What had truly shifted in those few hours? The compartment was now mine, yet it felt emptier without them. The initial wall of indifference had dissolved into a surprising warmth. Perhaps in my travel-worn appearance, my foreign luggage tags, and the unspoken urgency of my journey, they eventually saw beyond the outsider. They saw, perhaps, a reflection of their own lives: a person traveling with purpose, shouldering responsibilities, cherishing family. My distant home, my different daily routine—these were just surface details. Beneath them, we spoke the unspoken language of shared human experience: the same anxieties for our children, the same joy in friendship, the same nostalgic pull of old Hindi film songs from a land I'd left but never truly forgotten. I wasn't just an intruder; I was, like them, simply human, navigating the same world.

I remember a short story by the famous American storyteller O. Henry. A thief enters a victim's house but suddenly cries out because of some painful condition. This wakes the victim, who happens to suffer from the same ailment. The thief forgets his identity, and the would-be victim becomes the thief's friend. They begin discussing remedies for their shared affliction. Finally, the thief departs without stealing anything.

That train compartment, for a few fleeting hours, became its own small story of connection. The initial barriers crumbled not through force or argument, but through the simple, shared humanity that emerged when we truly saw one another. As the train carried me towards my father, I also carried the unexpected warmth of those fellow travelers—a quiet reminder that the journey from outsider to insider often begins with a single, understanding glance.

Empathy is understanding another person by putting oneself in their shoes. It is the feeling of nearness that unites. For a while, we exchange our egos (individualities) and then realize they are made of the same stuff. We are all products of the same nature.

CHAPTER 13

THE GENTLEMAN'S WRATH

Professor Dave walked into our structural design classroom each morning like a ghost haunting familiar corridors—his beige shirt perpetually wrinkled, his wire-rimmed glasses sliding down his nose, his voice a monotonous hymn to concrete and steel. We the second-year electrical engineering students saw him as background noise, a necessary evil in our march toward more exciting subjects.

How wrong we were.

What started as casual inattention evolved into something crueler. Paper airplanes became missiles launched mid-lecture. Students orchestrated elaborate entrances and exits, timing their disruptions for maximum comedic effect. Someone discovered that a particular squeak from the old wooden chairs could derail his train of thought for precious seconds.

Through it all, Professor Dave continued his quiet recitations. He'd pause when a paper airplane grazed his shoulder, clean his glasses with deliberate precision, then resume as if nothing had happened. His patience seemed infinite—a weakness we exploited with the ruthless efficiency of bored teenagers.

"Poor old Dave," we'd whisper. "Doesn't have it in him to fight back."

We mistook gentleness for surrender.

Exam day arrived with the weight of finality—our last hurdle before freedom. The examination hall buzzed with nervous energy as question papers were distributed. We opened them expecting the usual predictable problems.

Instead, we found a masterpiece of academic warfare.

While the external examiner's questions looked manageable, Professor Dave's half of the paper was a labyrinth of complexity. These weren't just difficult problems—they were surgical strikes designed to expose every gap in our knowledge, every moment we'd chosen mockery over learning. It was an exam; it was revenge, a day of reckoning.

An hour into the three-hour exam, the silence was deafening. Our classroom supervisor, perhaps recognizing the collective panic, stepped outside—whether by design or coincidence, we'll never know. In that moment, our moral compass spun wildly. Fear has a way of reducing complex ethical questions to simple survival math. Formulas began flowing like contraband across the examination hall. Even the most principled students found themselves whispering crucial equations, their integrity crumbling under the weight of potential failure.

I watched this academic collapse unfold from my corner, having memorized just enough to scrape by. The sight was both pathetic and oddly moving—watching classmates who'd spent months mocking our professor now desperately helping each other survive his carefully crafted revenge.

Results day brought the second shock. A quarter of our class received no grade at all—suspended in academic limbo, summoned before the university's ethics board. Professor Dave had documented everything. He presided over the inquisition.

“Can you describe the formula you would use to get this?” “And now I give you this slide rule to multiply these two numbers”. “Oh good, note down your answer.” Fifteen minutes later, he would give the same multiplication problem and the poor student would not be able to get the same answer. Back in those slide-rule days, accurate multiplication up to four digits was not possible.

“So how is it that you and your neighbor got the same numbers, accurate to the fourth decimal?”, he would inquire. His evidence was methodical, devastating, and absolutely irrefutable.

The university found itself caught between institutional reputation and one professor’s quiet fury. To keep twenty or so students from the next class was a logistical nightmare. But Professor Dave wasn’t interested in pragmatic solutions—he wanted justice, and more importantly, he wanted us to learn.

The compromise that emerged created something entirely new: "Allowed To Keep Terms" (ATKT). Students could advance to the next year but were shackled to Professor Dave’s exam for six more months. It was elegant in its cruelty—a constant reminder of consequences, a bureaucratic scar that would outlive us all.

Years later, I realized Professor Dave had taught us something far more valuable than structural design principles. He’d shown us that gentleness isn’t weakness—it’s often strength under perfect control. That patience isn’t passivity—it’s strategic waiting for the right moment to act. We’d spent months testing his limits, never realizing he was simply choosing his battles. When he finally struck back, it wasn’t with anger or cruelty, but with the precision of an engineer who would calculate all the variables.

As Patrick Rothfuss wrote: “There are three things all wise men fear: the sea in storm, a night with no moon, and the anger of a gentle man.” We learned to fear that third thing too late, but we learned it completely.

CHAPTER 14

THE WINDOW AT LUBY'S

MEDITATIONS ON HUNGER

The Greyhound station in Cleveland smelled of diesel and disappointment. I stood on the sidewalk, my stomach hollow, watching the lunchtime crowd through the window of Luby's cafeteria. Golden grilled cheese sandwiches glistened under the warm lights. Steam rose from bowls of soup. A woman in a floral dress carefully selected a slice of apple pie, and I could almost taste the cinnamon on my tongue.

The interview that morning lasted exactly thirty minutes. A small sensor company, a brief handshake, a polite "We'll be in touch." The interviewer had dropped me back at the station with time to kill before my bus to Pittsburgh, but no offer of lunch. Just me, a handful of coins in my pocket, and hours before I'd be home to dinner.

I counted the quarters and dimes again. Enough for the bus fare, nothing more. Through the glass, I watched a businessman bite into a grilled cheese sandwich that looked thick with cheese and lettuce.. My mouth watered.

People fast for days during religious observances, I told myself. Surely I can wait a few hours.

But it wasn't just hunger anymore. It was the whole scene I craved—the cool air conditioning, the clatter of trays, the simple act of choosing what I wanted instead of calculating what I could afford. The hunger in my belly had become something larger, more complex, reaching beyond my empty stomach into places I didn't have words for yet.

* * *

Years later, watching the great migration in Kenya, I would understand what I felt that day in Cleveland.

We sat in our Land Rover as the earth itself seemed to move. Thousands of animals—zebras, wildebeest, gazelles—stretched across the savanna like a living river. They had traveled hundreds of miles from Tanzania, driven by the ancient rhythm of seasons, grass, and water. Some would die crossing crocodile-infested rivers. Others would fall to lions and leopards. Yet still they moved, pulled by something stronger than fear.

Our Maasai guide, Thomas, watched the spectacle with reverent eyes. "They cannot choose," he said simply. "The hunger chooses them."

I thought of Luby's window then, of my own small migration from interview to interview, city to city, carrying my resume like these animals carried their instinct. The zebras didn't analyze their hunger or debate whether to migrate. They simply followed what called them forward. But we humans—we complicate everything. Standing outside that cafeteria, I hadn't just wanted food. I'd wanted the comfort of choosing, the dignity of being able to say yes to desire instead of always calculating, always rationalizing, always waiting.

* * *

There's an ancient story from India (in Aitareya Upanishad) that Thomas's words brought back to me. In the beginning, the cosmic consciousness created the world and needed to sustain it. So it made food—but when the senses tried to grasp this nourishment, it fled from them. Sight couldn't capture it, nor could hearing or touch. Only the mouth, only the act of actual eating, could finally seize and transform it.

The story suggests that we feel hunger with more than something to eat for our stomachs. Our eyes hunger for beauty, our ears for music, our minds for understanding, our hearts for connection. Each sense has its own appetite, its own way of reaching toward what it needs.

Standing at that window in Cleveland, all my hungers had converged. The empty stomach was just the beginning. Behind it lived the hunger for the smell of good food, for choice, for the simple freedom to walk into a restaurant and order what appealed to me. The hunger for a job that valued what I offered. The hunger to belong somewhere, to not always be the outsider pressing his face against windows.

* * *

In Africa, watching those endless herds, I felt something I could only call sacred. This wasn't just survival—it was the universe expressing itself through need, through the relentless pull toward what sustains life. The Hindus have a word for this subtle cosmic energy: shakti—the divine force that moves through all things, appearing sometimes as the zebra's thirst, sometimes as the lion's pursuit, sometimes as a young man's longing outside a cafeteria window.

The migration would continue for months. Some animals would find rich grasslands; others would perish along the way. But the great wheel would keep turning, driven by this fundamental force that shows up as hunger, as desire, as the irrepressible urge to keep moving toward what calls us. "Salutations to You, the universal goddess (*Ya Devi sarva bhuteshu*)" goes an ancient prayer, "who abide in all beings in the form of (*kshudha*) hunger. Salutation to the sovereign power abiding in the sense. The light in the sun and moon. Salutation to the one residing in the being as their inner urge towards liberation"

* * *

I caught my bus that afternoon, arrived in Pittsburgh as the sun was setting, and ate dinner with gratitude I hadn't felt before. But the memory of that window stayed with me—not as deprivation, but as revelation. In that moment of wanting what I couldn't have, I'd glimpsed something essential about what it means to be alive.

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We are all migrants, following hungers we barely understand toward destinations we can't quite see. Sometimes we stand at windows, watching others feast. Sometimes we find our grasslands. But always, always, we keep moving forward, pulled by the same cosmic force that drives zebras across dangerous rivers and young dreamers across uncertain landscapes.

The hunger never really ends. It just changes form, deepens, becomes more subtle. And maybe that's not a problem to solve but a mystery to honor—this endless appetite that keeps the world spinning, keeps us searchin, keeps us reaching, keeps us human.

In the end, I learned that some hungers feed us even when they're not satisfied. They teach us who we are by showing us what we long for. And sometimes, that's nourishment enough.

CHAPTER 15

THE UPWARD PULL: A JOURNEY THROUGH DESIRE

Look into the nature of desire and
there is boundless light

Yogi Padmasambhav

In creatures, I am the desire that does
not impede sacred duty

Bhagavad Gita 7.11

THE VIEW FROM BELOW

At Honeywell, I spent my days hunched over component specifications, calculating resistor values and capacitor tolerances and approving the design of Integrated Circuits. I was a component specialist—the bottom

rung of the engineering ladder. But every day, I would glance up at the third-floor offices with their large glass windows, where the real architects of our products worked. Those men in pressed shirts and ties didn't deal with individual resistors; they envisioned entire systems, dictated what machines should do, how they should function, what instructions they would receive.

I wanted to be one of them.

This wasn't mere career ambition—it was something deeper, more primal. Like Sita in the ancient Ramayana, captivated by the golden deer that would lead her into the forest, I was drawn by something that glittered beyond my reach. The desire created a gap, a restless space between who I was and who I might become. But unlike the princess in the epic, I didn't yet understand that this gap itself was sacred—the very engine of transformation.

THE FIRST LEAP

That burning restlessness drove me to evening classes, accumulating credits toward a higher position. Just as I was working towards transferring to the logic design group—one step closer to those glass offices—the company merged, and I lost my job.

Standing in the unemployment line, I made a decision that would have seemed reckless to any reasonable observer: despite having no experience in logic design, I began seeking positions in that field anyway. The desire was stronger than the fear. Something in me understood that we don't wait until we're qualified to reach for what calls us—we reach, and the reaching qualifies us.

This led me to Boston's electronics corridor, where I joined as a component engineer in a small company manufacturing graphics terminals. But now my desire has evolved. I no longer just wanted to characterize components; I wanted to understand how a graphics terminal actually worked. When the opportunity arose, I fought for a piece of the design process. The company's management allowed me to design a small piece

and learn the mathematical magic that transforms electrical signals into three-dimensional images on screen.

Each desire fulfilled only revealed the next horizon. I had wanted a fragment of the creative process; now I craved the whole symphony.

THE PRICE OF REACHING

My next move was to a company where I could work alongside a college friend—a "hardware poet" who could transform functional requirements into elegant designs within days. Together, we took on IBM itself, working weekends and enduring crushing pressure. The creative fulfillment was intoxicating. I designed hardware worthy of a patent, though the company folded before we could file it.

This taught me something crucial about desire: it demands sacrifice, but the transformation it offers is worth the price. In the Ramayana, Hanuman represents this mediating force—the loyal servant who makes the gap between desire and fulfillment bearable, who helps us understand that the journey itself is the destination.

Each job loss, each company failure, each risky leap had been my Hanuman, carrying me across the chasm between who I was and who I became.

THE DEEPENING

Armed with accumulated knowledge, my desires matured. I no longer wanted merely to design components or even products—I wanted to define them entirely: working with marketing, securing funding, overseeing all aspects of development. This desire led me to relocate to what some dismissively called a "one-horse town."

Far from being a setback, this move proved transformative. The slower pace, the deeper community connections, the absence of urban distractions—all created space for both professional growth and personal reflection. From this unlikely base, I eventually moved to define a novel product in a location I truly preferred.

But then something unexpected happened. As my family grew, as my children demanded attention and love, my desires began their most profound transformation yet. The nomadic pursuit of career advancement gave way to something I hadn't anticipated: the desire for stability, for presence, for being fully where I was, rather than always reaching.

THE INNER TERRITORY

This shift revealed desire's deepest secret. In Dr. Mark Epstein's exploration of Buddhist teachings, he shows how the characters in the Ramayana each represent different faces of our inner life. Ravana embodies grasping desire—the clinging that creates suffering. But Sita, even in captivity, represents something else entirely. When Hanuman offers to rescue her, she declines, preferring that Rama himself reclaim her. Her desire has evolved from wanting something external to becoming something internal—from objective to subjective, from grasping to devotion.

My own journey followed this arc. The early desires for better positions and more creative roles were like Sita's initial attraction to the golden deer—beautiful, compelling, but ultimately leading me away from home. The middle phase, with its risks and sacrifices, was my time in Ravana's court—necessary exile that deepened my understanding. And finally, like Sita awaiting Rama, I learned to desire not just achievement but alignment, not just success but meaning.

THE RETURN

Now, watching my grandchildren grow, understanding their educational goals and dreams, I grasp that desire was never the enemy to be conquered. It was the force that refined me, burning away what was superficial until only what was essential remained. Each wanting led to learning, each reaching led to becoming, each dissatisfaction carved out space for deeper fulfillment.

The component specialist gazing up at those third-floor offices couldn't have imagined that the real architecture wasn't in the building's blueprints

but in the blueprint of his own unfolding life. The desire that seemed to trap me in endless wanting was actually the light illuminating each step of the path.

In the end, I discovered that we don't conquer desire—we are overcome by it, transformed by it, elevated by it. The gap between wanting and having isn't the problem; it's the space where we become who we're meant to be. And in that becoming, we find that what we were really seeking all along wasn't out there in those glass offices or corner suites.

*First we climb on the ladder of desire, at some point the desire shifts and turns into **aspirations**; - a deeply personal vision of fulfillment.*

CHAPTER 16

WHEN A SON BECOMES A FRIEND: A STORY OF STARTING OVER

"Pandit jee, can you help me with my sister Usha's wedding ceremony?" The call came mid-morning on what seemed like an ordinary day. Yet something in the caller's voice—not quite urgency, but a quiet determination—suggested this would be no ordinary wedding story.

"And when do you plan this?" I asked.

"In about two to three weeks. I know it is short notice, but the bride and groom both will have a week off, so we thought this would be a good time."

I looked at my calendar and saw it was possible. Still, it struck me as unusual that the family was in such a hurry for such an important life event. Typically, families take months to prepare for a wedding. I tried to gather more details, knowing that in such a limited timeframe, it would be challenging to coordinate family members and other guests.

"It would be a simple wedding, the caller said. Besides him and his sister Usha, there would be the mother who wanted to return to India a few days after the ceremony. From the groom's side, the parents will attend. Then

there will be friends from both sides—perhaps 50 to 75 people in all," I was told.

I learned that Usha worked at her brother's Montessori school. The groom, Ashutosh was a Bengali gentleman, and this would be his second marriage. He had a seven-year-old son from his first marriage. His parents were living with him, taking care of his son and they too would return to India after the wedding. The ceremony would take place at a nearby temple, a simple affair with no fancy 'barat'. The groom would simply walk into the 'mandap' with a few friends. After the morning wedding, there would be lunch for all attendees. No reception was planned.

Though it was not possible to meet the bride and groom beforehand given the time constraints, I spoke with them over the phone. The North Indian wedding would be simple, lasting no more than an hour. The groom had only one request: he would like to have his "buddy" sitting beside him in the 'mandap'. This was not unusual. In many weddings, the groom's brother or a close friend sits beside him throughout the ceremony, but I wondered why the request came a few days before the wedding.

On the wedding day, I arrived at Barsana Dham, a temple near Austin named after Barsana, India—the birthplace of Radharani, Lord Krishna's consort. The Texas temple was a replica of its Indian namesake complete with peacocks and fields of marigolds. The 200-acre complex, the oldest temple in Austin, even featured a creek flowing through the property like the river Yamuna near the original Barsana. The miniature landscape faithful in all details to its inspiration.

Usha's family was already in the hall. On the groom's side, I was greeted by his parents. We awaited Ashutosh's arrival, and he appeared right on time with his friends. Attired in a simple beige outfit, slim and straight-backed, he stepped in. Usha's mother welcomed him with the traditional 'aarati'. He folded his hands and greeted us all. I appreciated his simplicity and sincerity. A child of about seven years accompanied him.

As Ashutosh was being seated, I asked about the friend who was to sit beside him. He pointed to the child, saying, "He is my friend, my buddy.

He is going to be with us today." I glanced at the bride and her family. They didn't object; they seemed to expect this.

A seven year child as a witness? What was the message his father was trying to convey to him? That he will not be forgotten? That they both will take care of him? That he is very much in their relationship?

Ashutosh was visibly nervous. Perhaps he thought about his past unsuccessful marriage and the new relationship he was about to enter into. He mentioned politely that he had been trained at the Ramakrishna Mission school in India and knew some Sanskrit. He offered to repeat or recite the Sanskrit mantras (vows) if needed, and added that he had a masters degree in English.

While there was no formal role for the son, he sat quietly observing the ceremony. After the rituals concluded, the newlyweds sought blessings from the elders. Usha's mother grew emotional. She approached the 'mandap' and began collecting the flowers used in the ceremony, explaining that they were sacred and she would take them back to India to place in a holy river near her town. She expressed joy at witnessing this day, adding how happy her husband would have been to see it. Later, I learned then that the father had died in a plane crash over the Atlantic en route from London to Canada.

The groom's parents were also happy that now the family was on the right course. They have been taking care of their grandson, but now they can return back to India.

That evening, the couple visited us. They expressed gratitude to me for conducting the ceremony.

"What are your future plans?" I asked Ashutosh.

"I am getting back on my feet now; the struggle is over. Life took a strange turn, but now everything will turn out right."

"A strange turn?", I asked.

He shared his recent journey. His first wife had left him, and he had also lost his job. A friend had invited him to New York to manage a high-end restaurant. He had called his parents to Houston to care for his seven-year-old son while he relocated to New York. Though the pay was good, he was not comfortable there. Running a restaurant wasn't his calling. Despite

his master's degree in literature, which he found had little value in his new country, he returned to Houston and began searching for employment. With no clear profession to claim, his restaurant experience was enough to land him a job as a school cafeteria manager.

"Gradually, I advanced to become a substitute teacher," he continued. "My skills were recognized, and now I am progressing toward a permanent teaching position."

"I am also going to join him in the same school. I have been teaching here in the Montessori school. I like teaching", Usha added.

I've performed and witnessed many second marriages, but this one stands out. Perhaps it was Ashutosh's quiet authenticity, a man who had weathered significant losses and yet found a profound sense of peace in pursuing his true calling as a teacher. Perhaps it was the harmony I felt between his words, his actions, and his inner self, a sincerity underscored by the simple yet significant presence of his young son, his "buddy," beside him in the mandap. Perhaps it was his desire to get back to teaching, a profession that he knew was his true calling.

"Panditjee, do you remember Krishna's saying in the Bhagavad Gita: "*swa dharame nidhanam shrey, pardharmo bhayavah*", (It is better to follow one's own dharma, though imperfect, than another's dharma even if well practised), he said after a long pause.

"Yes, I remember Krishna's advice. "Everyone in this world has a peculiar inclination towards his duties, his actions in this world. It is better to follow that to mimic someone else for the sake of money." I replied.

I often think of that wedding not for its simplicity alone, but for its profound honesty. In choosing to have his son beside him, Ashutosh had made visible what every parent hopes for: that love multiplies rather than divides, that families are built not just through marriages but through the daily choice to include, protect and honor those we hold dear. Sacred vows are sometimes not spoken, but rather quiet promises we make with our presence.

CHAPTER 17

WHEN RECOGNITION BECOMES A DEMAND

Our community meeting started with an acrimonious debate. Six directors, the president and the secretary all looking at one letter spread out on a shiny table.

“But this fellow is asking too much. A guaranteed audience of 300 or more? Travel allowance, a room in a nice hotel. We can’t pay him that much!! After all we are a small community”, our secretary Desai said.

“But then, he is the foremost speaker and an excellent writer. See the list of his books. Some of the best spiritual books. “Countered Mrs. Patel, thumbing through her cell phone.

“And he is also visiting the USA. There will not be another opportunity to get him here. We can certainly raise the money he is asking”. Shah corroborated.

“It’s not about his talent,” I interjected as the newsletter editor. “I mail exactly ninety-seven newsletters each month. Where are we supposed to find 300 people on a Saturday evening?”

The letter detailed the renowned speaker’s requirements: the audience guarantee, a specific introduction format, and a fee that, while manageable, came with conditions that felt more like demands than requests.

"Read this part," said Desai pointing to a paragraph. "He wants to be introduced as 'one of the foremost spiritual authorities of our generation' and requires that his host have certain credentials."

An uncomfortable silence settled over the room.

"It's not that he doesn't deserve respect," someone finally said. "But this feels like..." "Like we're being asked to worship him rather than learn from him," I finished.

The decision was unanimous. We did not invite him.

Curiosity got the better of me one afternoon. I searched for our would-be speaker online, wondering how his career had progressed. His books were still there, digital monuments to past influence, but something was missing. Current speaker bureaus didn't list him. Recent conference websites showed no trace of his name. The trail seemed to have gone cold.

Had his demands for validation finally outgrown what audiences were willing to provide?

* * *

The memory of that community meeting came flooding back as I waited for a taxi outside Delhi's railway station. Across the busy street, through the glass windows of the railway headquarters, I witnessed something extraordinary.

A newly promoted officer sat like a king receiving tribute. One by one, representatives from various divisions approached with marigold garlands—endless, identical garlands. Each bearer delivered nearly the same speech of praise, each gesture performed with ritualistic precision. I started counting: fifteen garlands, twenty, twenty-five... An elderly taxi driver noticed my fascination. "New promotion," he said with a knowing smile. "They do this every time. Thirty-five garlands today, I'd guess."

"Does it mean anything?" I asked. He shrugged. "They respect the chair, not the man. Wait until he retires—you'll see how quickly those garlands disappear." More recently, at a yoga event, the hype was considerable. The speaker, introduced as "Dr. XYZ," flaunted an honorary degree in Humanities from a college of seminary established in late 1980s offering online

courses. He promised to unveil an ancient form of yoga, long hidden from the world. This ‘yoga’ was to bring health and happiness to everyone.

“I am the only teacher in this region certified to share these ancient practices,” he announced, his honorary diploma prominently displayed behind him.

My friend leaned over. “If it’s so ancient and profound, why does he need a diploma from an online seminary to teach it?” I found myself thinking of our community’s rejected speaker, of the railway officer and his garlands, of the taxi driver’s wisdom. The pattern was becoming clear.

* * *

Three different people, three different stages of life, but the same underlying story: the moment validation becomes a demand rather than a natural consequence of good work, something precious gets lost.

The community speaker, whose genuine knowledge became overshadowed by his requirements for recognition. The railway officer, surrounded by ritual respect that would vanish with his retirement. The yoga teacher, whose need for academic validation undermined the very authenticity he claimed to represent. Each had something valuable to offer, but their need to be seen as important created barriers where bridges should have been built. They forgot that true respect is earned through service, not demanded through ceremony. As I left the yoga seminar early that day, I thought about our community’s decision years ago. We had chosen correctly—not because the speaker lacked knowledge, but because wisdom wrapped in excessive pride loses its power to transform.

Sometimes the most profound teaching comes not from those who demand to be heard, but from those who simply serve, knowing that recognition, when it comes naturally, is far more meaningful than any amount that can be demanded. The Sanskrit word ‘*manitvam*’ describes self-aggrandizing, self-worshiping that masquerades as self-respect. In a world hungry for genuine wisdom, perhaps the greatest teaching is learning to distinguish between the two.

CHAPTER 18

SELF-PRETENCE (DHAMBHAHA)

Lincoln Hall was driving me crazy. The echoing hallways, shared bathrooms, and my party-loving roommate Randy had worn me down. I needed my own kitchen, a quiet study space, and most importantly, a serious student to share expenses with.

That's when I met Raj* (*name changed to protect the... well, you'll see). "I'm looking for a roommate too," he said when we met at the student union after winter break. "Someone serious about studies, you know? I don't have time for campus parties and all that nonsense."

Perfect, I thought. Finally, a like-minded scholar.

"I'm very focused on my engineering degree," he continued. "Though honestly, I probably don't even need to attend most classes anymore. I already know the material."

I should have paid attention to that first red flag. But I was desperate to escape Lincoln Hall, and he seemed financially stable. We shook hands on the apartment deal. The first few weeks were blissfully quiet. Then the declarations started.

"You know," Raj announced one morning as I prepared for my 8 AM class, "I've decided I don't need to attend lectures anymore. Some subjects I already know, and the rest I can master on my own."

I paused, books in hand. "But what about exams? Assignments?" He waved dismissively.

"Please. I've been studying engineering concepts since I was twelve. My father's oil mill uses all this machinery. I grew up around it."

"Your father has an oil mill?"

"Oh yes," he said, settling back into bed as I bundled up for the bitter Iowa morning. "Quite a large operation. He imports machinery from Germany regularly, so exchange rates are never a problem for us."

I was walking to my first class of the day, puzzled but impressed. Maybe I had found the perfect roommate after all—someone so academically secure he didn't need to follow the usual routines. As weeks passed, the stories grew more elaborate. Raj's future was apparently set in stone: upon graduation, he would return to India as the General Manager of his father's oil mill. The business was expanding, the profits were substantial, and his position was guaranteed.

"What kind of oil does the mill produce?" I asked one day, genuinely curious. "Oh, you know... various types," he replied, suddenly busy with his textbook.

"Where exactly is it located?"

"In our district. You wouldn't know the place."

"What's the name of the company?"

"It's... well, it's named after our family. Very traditional setup."

Every answer was smoke and mirrors, but delivered with such confidence that I began to doubt my own curiosity. Was I being too nosy about his family business? Our weekly tradition became Friday night pizza-making. After a long week of studies, we would buy a Chef Boyardee pizza kit and unwind with a home-cooked meal.

"Leave it to me," Raj would announce every Friday. "I know how to cook. We used to cook at home all the time."

The first time, I believed him. After forty-five minutes of confident kitchen activity, he emerged with something that looked like charcoal with cheese melted on top.

"The oven must be running hot," he explained, scraping black bits off the bottom.

The second Friday brought a half-raw pizza, dough still sticky in the middle. "American ovens are different from ours," he said, as we ordered actual pizza from downtown. By the fourth Friday, I had quietly started timing the oven myself and checking the pizza when he wasn't looking. Raj continued to insist he was the cooking expert, even as the evidence mounted to the contrary.

Despite his claims about his father's prosperous business and indifference to exchange rates, Raj often seemed to run short of cash.

"Can you spot me five dollars until tomorrow?" became a regular request.

"I thought money wasn't a concern for your family," I said one day.

"Oh, it's not. It's just that international transfers take time, you know? My father's accountant handles everything, and sometimes there are delays."

The borrowed five dollars would become eight, then ten, then twelve. Always with promises of swift repayment, always with elaborate explanations about banking procedures and family business protocols.

There's a Sanskrit word that perfectly captures what I was witnessing: Dhambha. It means false pretense, ostentation, or deceitful display—the act of projecting an image that has no foundation in reality.

Watching Raj, I began to understand dhambha not as simple lying, but as something more complex and tragic. Here was someone so insecure about his actual circumstances that he had constructed an elaborate alternate reality. The oil mill, the guaranteed management position, the cooking expertise, the financial stability—all of it was a castle built on sand.

But why? What drives someone to maintain such an exhausting facade? When spring quarter ended, I decided to transfer to a different university. As we settled our accounts, Raj owed me eight dollars in borrowed money.

"My payments are somewhat delayed," he explained, "but I'll send the money as soon as I receive it from home." In the excitement of moving and

adjusting to my new environment, I completely forgot about the eight dollars. Raj faded into memory as just another college roommate experience.

Several months later, I received surprising news from home. Someone had sent money to my family in India with a note: "This is what I owe him in dollars, but now that I am back in India, I am paying in rupees." It was Raj. He had actually repaid the debt.

That small act of honesty made me reconsider my judgment. Despite all the false claims and pretenses, Raj had integrity in at least one crucial area by honoring his debts. Perhaps his dhambha came not from malice, but from a deep fear of being seen as inadequate. Maybe he really was from a humble background and felt pressured to compete with wealthier international students. Maybe the oil mill stories were his way of claiming equal status in a world where he felt small. Maybe his cooking claims were just the universal male tendency to overestimate culinary abilities.

The tragedy of dhambha isn't that it's evil, it's that it's self-defeating. By pretending to know things he didn't, Raj closed himself off from actually learning. By claiming financial security he didn't have, he created unnecessary stress. By maintaining facades, he prevented the genuine connections that might have helped him grow.

Years later, I realize that dhambha isn't just about individuals—it's a reflection of societal pressures that make people feel they must appear perfect to be accepted. In a world that often judges worth by external achievements, some people create fictional achievements rather than face the vulnerability of being seen as they truly are.

But here's what I learned from living with Raj: real learning happens when we admit what we don't know. Real relationships form when we show our actual selves. Real growth occurs when we stop defending fictional versions of ourselves and start improving our actual selves.

Raj taught me to recognize dhambha in others and, more importantly, in myself. We all have areas where we're tempted to project competence we don't possess or success we haven't achieved. The question is: will we choose the exhausting path of maintaining facades, or the challenging but rewarding path of authentic self-development?

Chapter 18. Self-Pretence (Dhambhaba)

That eight dollars, converted to rupees and sent across the world, became more valuable than any amount of money. It taught me that people are complex, that dhambha often coexists with genuine virtue, and that beneath the pretenses, most people are trying their best to navigate a world that can feel overwhelming.

I never saw Raj again, but I often wonder: did he eventually find the confidence to be himself? Did he discover that people would have liked the real him better than the fictional version? I hope so. Because in the end, the most liberating truth is this: you don't need to own an oil mill to be worthy of friendship, respect, and belonging. You just need to be genuinely yourself—burnt pizza and all.

Dhambha may promise social acceptance, but it delivers isolation. Authenticity may risk rejection, but it makes genuine connection possible.

CHAPTER 19

THE BALANCE POLE

The slow dance quickened. The song '*tara veena shyam mane ekладу лаге, raas ramvane vehlo aavaje* (I feel lonely without you, oh Krishna, come soon); a devotional song that had begun with gentle beats now pulsed faster, drawing us deeper into its rhythm. The small circle of dancers had widened now, in the middle was the deity, the goddess 'Aadya Shakti (The Primal source of creation). The smell of incense of sandalwood paste, a small lamp with a golden flame lit in the middle, all transformed the dance hall into a temple.

We were in the middle of our Navarati dance- what I call the dance of harmony.

October is a good time of the year in India, a month of many festivals. The monsoon recedes and the new harvests fill the markets, a noticeable joy settles over the land. The Navarati; - a festival of nine nights arrives. During these nine days of festivity, everyone, young and old, men and women take part in worship of Mahadevi in the form of Durga, Lakshmi and Sarswati. After a day of fast, the worship culminates in a dance in the evening.

The Dance of Harmony

I was in such a dance that October. It had been hardly ten minutes, the dance was just picking up a speedy rhythm. All of a sudden my world tilted. My chest tightened, sweat beading on my forehead as the vibrant blues and

reds of the dancers' garments blurred into watercolor smears. The steady ground beneath my feet seemed to sway like the deck of a ship."

No longer able to keep up with the pace of the dance, I had to get out. I got hold of the bench nearby and sat down. Across from me, my doctor friend, with whom I was paired, also had to withdraw; the synchronicity essential to the dance was broken by my faltering.

"What's wrong?" He steadied me with a firm grip. "We've barely begun the first cycle." "Doc, I am feeling dizzy, out of breath, need to rest a bit", I replied. "Have you seen your doctor lately? Doc's voice showed concern" "Yes I have. I am taking blood pressure medicine. Just a little high blood pressure, they say." "How long have you been suffering from this? What other symptoms do you see?" Doc started probing looking intensely at me. Doctors have keen eyes. He quickly arrived at a conclusion. "I think you have a bigger problem than that. Without examining you, I can tell you that. Get a thorough investigation. Get a new doctor. Act before it gets too late".

Heeding Doc's advice, I sought a new doctor, who promptly ordered a treadmill test. I was eagerly waiting for the result. Days stretched into weeks—first one, then two, then three. When a full month passed in silence, I convinced myself that no news means good news. I started preparing for a trip abroad in December.

Then there was a coincidence. I had to see the doctor for some other reason, and he found my treadmill test. For some reason it had not reached his office for a month!! He did not say anything while studying the results. But then his face lost that charming look, his tone changed. "You will have to cancel your trip", he said. "I am fixing an appointment with a cardiologist ASAP, in the meantime take rest, do not exert and keep this medicine always with you that you must pick up from the pharmacy on the way. And use it as prescribed if you have breathing difficulties."

I was stunned by his pronouncement. I never felt I was that sick to postpone my trip. After all, I used to go to the office and carry out the day without a problem.

Next Monday I visited the cardiologist. He looked at me from head to toe and without even examining me said “You have vascular disease, we need to do angiography to see what can be done”.

I gave him a skeptical look. “I am an engineer and besides I am from Missouri, you got to show me”, I said. “I will prove it to you”, he said quietly.

Why hadn’t I recognized the seriousness? Self-images. I had an image of myself as a healthy person. Like everyone else, I walked from the parking lot to the office, put in a full day of work, and much more. Another image reinforced this perception—that of my father, who, like me, used to breathe heavily after climbing stairs. I had normalized what should have been warning signs. Recognition of a problem is the first step in solving it.

The blood test painted a stark picture: dangerously high LDL, critically low HDL, and triglycerides soaring—clear indicators of clogged arteries, further evidenced by an eight-to-ten-pound weight gain in a short period. My entire metabolism was in disarray. More accurately, my body’s homeostasis—its crucial ability to maintain internal equilibrium—was profoundly disrupted, an imbalance that resonated through both body and mind.

Where did I go wrong? I was really in the middle of the dance. My children had completed high school and were both in out-of-town-college. After years of work in a dynamic industry developing computer products, I had switched sides where I could apply those products for social benefits. I had some interest in writing and I got an opportunity to write for a user magazine on computer application in government. I had some interest in teaching and I was able to join a community college as a part time teacher. Yes I was in the midst of things. My day started early and ended late. I was happy doing all that came to me that day.

I’ve often marveled at high-wire performers—those extraordinary artists who traverse a thin wire stretched between towering structures, suspended hundreds of feet above the ground. With unwavering focus, they walk the wire from end to end. Their secret lies in the long balance pole they carry, swinging it deliberately to counteract any tilt. The pole distributes weight away from the center, creating opposing forces that maintain equilibrium.

When they feel themselves tilting left, they shift the pole right; when leaning forward, they adjust backward. This constant, mindful adjustment keeps them centered on the wire.

Without realizing it, I had become a high-wire walker who had forgotten his balance pole. When life's dance picked up speed, I lost my footing. In my zeal to pursue mental activities, I was neglecting the physical. My weekly walks disappeared as I became too busy grading students' homework. Instead of eating healthy evening meals, I packed double lunches to consume after work before teaching evening classes. Exhausted and drained of energy, I would return home, eat ice cream, and worst of all, go to bed immediately, allowing harmful blood sugar spikes.

This internal equilibrium is what science calls homeostasis, nature's own intricate balancing act. Life itself hinges on this harmony, a delicate dance between opposing yet codependent forces—like anabolism building up and catabolism breaking down, their combined rhythm forming our metabolism, or the simple, vital exchange of each breath in and out. Even our emotions seek balance through the body's responses.

I was home resting before the scheduled surgery. During this time, Doc came to visit. We would explore the alternatives for the invasive procedure: Should I choose stents or bypass? We would study the images of my beating heart. He would point to sections of arteries and explain: "See this—LAD 95% blocked, and here RCA 70% blocked, and the circumflex artery..."

"You know what my professor used to say?" He asked as we were discussing my surgery options. "Medical school is about learning this one poem over and over," he said.

*"For want of nail, the shoe was lost, For want of shoe, the horse
was lost, For want of a horse, the rider was lost, For want
of a rider, the battle was lost, For want of a battle the
kingdom was lost, And all for want of a horseshoe nail."*

He traced the progression on my test results. "Lack of exercise weakens your cardiovascular system. Poor eating habits disrupted your metabolism. Midnight ice cream spiked your blood sugar and disrupted your sleep cycle.

Between Shores: Narratives of small insight

Each small compromise sets up the next failure, until your body can no longer compensate." He gestured at the surgical recommendations before us. "It's like that old saying: 'A little neglect may breed great mischief.'

A year later, I returned to another Navarati dance. This time, I carried my invisible balance pole—morning walks that counterbalanced long desk hours, planned meals that offset late-night work, deliberate rest that balanced intense activity. When the music quickened and the circle widened, I felt the familiar rhythm. But now I also felt something else: the steady weight of small, conscious choices keeping me centered in life's dance.

The high-wire performer knows that balance isn't a destination—it's the constant, mindful adjustment between opposing forces. I had learned to carry my pole again.

CHAPTER 20

THE PERFECTIONIST'S TRAP: ARVIND'S CHOICE

By the fourth day of our final exams, the news had spread through all five dormitory halls. At every dinner table, there was only one topic of conversation: why hadn't Arvind appeared for today's exam? Missing even a single paper meant automatic failure for the semester—no degree that year, regardless of the reason.

Ours was a close-knit campus. The five dormitory halls formed a tight community: Manubhai Mehta Hall sat across from my residence, Arvind Hall; T.K. Gajjar Hall stood behind us; while Jivraj and Munshi Halls completed the circle. Arvind lived in Mehta Hall and had been our classmate for four years. Often, we bicycled together to the academic campus, discussing everything from circuit theory to our dreams of graduate studies abroad.

Arvind was an exceptional student, distinguished by his intellectual curiosity. While most of our classmates were content with rote memorization, he sought to understand the underlying principles behind every formula. Always among the top ten percent of our class, Arvind was ambitious and

driven. His wealthy family supported his dream of studying in the United States, and he'd been preparing for international university admissions with an intensity that others reserved for Olympic training.

Our final exams spanned a week, with a written paper for each subject. The first two days went smoothly, but the third day brought an exam on 'Electronics'—the paper set by our Department Head that proved unexpectedly challenging. The questions seemed unusually difficult, and after the exam, we gathered in small groups, comparing notes and acknowledging our shared struggle.

"Did he even prepare us for questions like these?" someone muttered as we walked back to the halls. Even Cooper, the brightest among us—someone with such a sharp memory that he kept only one small notebook for all his classes—shook his head in bewilderment. "I've never seen problems structured quite like that," he admitted.

It was after this electronics exam that Arvind failed to appear for the next paper. Initially, we wondered about his absence. Was he ill? Had there been a family emergency? The speculation continued through dinner and into the evening study sessions. Then, through the campus grapevine that connected all five halls, we learned the startling truth: Arvind had deliberately dropped out.

His reasoning, when it finally reached us, was mathematically cold in its logic. He planned to wait six months for the next examination cycle, when there would be fewer students competing, thus increasing his statistical probability of achieving the first rank. He would also have some extra time in which he can master the subject, and be prepared for even a tougher exam. It was the kind of calculated decision that might have impressed a computer algorithm, but it completely ignored the human elements of the situation.

Something in Arvind's mind had convinced him that he wasn't perfect enough, and wasn't ready for the rigorous demands of graduate study abroad. The challenging electronics exam had triggered a crisis of confidence that overshadowed years of consistent academic excellence. He was fixating on absolute perfection while overlooking the relative nature of aca-

demic assessments. By stepping out of the evaluation process, he was essentially sabotaging his own momentum. Academia was testing us like ore through a sieve; instead of trusting the process, Arvind had jumped out, convinced he wasn't ready for what lay ahead.

During our practical lab exams the following week, we learned something that made Arvind's absence even more poignant. Dr. Mehta, our electronics professor, made an unexpected announcement. "I want to acknowledge," he said, adjusting his glasses with what seemed like embarrassment, "that last week's written exam was more challenging than intended. The difficulty level exceeded what was appropriate for your level of study. The grading will be adjusted accordingly."

The irony was palpable. Arvind—brilliant, dedicated Arvind—would have likely performed well despite the initial difficulty. He had withdrawn from a situation that turned out to be far less dire than he had imagined.

This feeling of self-sabotage was one I understood well. It was probably the second or third day of my secondary school examinations—the results of which would determine my university placement. Convinced that I had performed poorly on the English exam, I returned home dejected and despondent. When my grandfather asked how it went, I replied, "Not well at all. I'm considering dropping out. Perhaps I should study for another year and try again." Word of my distress somehow reached my well-wisher uncle, a professor who lived nearby. That evening, he sent a handwritten note through a messenger (telephones being rare in those days), urging me not to abandon my efforts—he knew better than I did. I heeded his counsel, only to discover when results were announced that I had indeed performed quite well.

His intervention proved invaluable, helping me recognize that my self-assessment had been distorted by anxiety rather than grounded in reality. I was measuring myself against impossible standards that existed only in my worried mind. Through this experience, I learned that we can emerge from seemingly dire situations through incremental progress. Perfection may be unattainable, but meaningful improvement is always within our

grasp. Sometimes we need someone else to remind us that we're not seeing clearly, that our harshest critic is often ourselves. Dropping out might seem like a strategic retreat, but more often than not, it represents a surrender—a momentary escape that can cost far more than the challenge itself.

* * *

Years later, this lesson came back to me during a business trip to California, where I reconnected with Arvind over coffee in Palo Alto. As we caught up on old times, the conversation inevitably turned to those crucial exam days. "You know," Arvind said, stirring his latte thoughtfully, "I often think about that decision to drop out. At the time, it felt so logical, so necessary."

"You did clear the exams eventually, though—with high ranks, if I remember correctly."

"Six months later, yes." He paused, looking out at the bustling street. "But I realize now how much that perfectionist mindset cost me. While you and the others were settling into your graduate programs, I was scrambling, trying to piece together a new timeline that had completely fallen apart." "But you found excellent opportunities in Europe—"

"I did," he interrupted gently. "And I'm grateful for how things turned out. But the path I had envisioned, the one I'd planned so meticulously? That was lost forever. Looking back, I think I was measuring myself against some impossible standard that existed only in my head. I saw that day, not the exam room, but a battlefield where only the perfect warrior wins."

He took a sip of his coffee before continuing. "The irony is that if I'd just trusted the process, accepted that 'good enough' might actually be good enough, I probably would have done fine with those original results. Instead, I wanted to be Leonardo da Vinci."

"The famous Leonardo? What did he do wrong?"

Arvind smiled ruefully. "He was famous and had a great following, but in his pursuit of ever-greater technical mastery and perfection, he left many projects unfinished—sketches, sculptures, and even major paintings. It wasn't always a lack of effort; it was often the belief that the idea could always be improved."

Chapter 20. The Perfectionist's Trap: Arvind's Choice

I wasn't an art student like Arvind. I just stopped there, absorbing the unexpected comparison. Arvind set his cup down. "Not regrets, exactly. But I learned something valuable: sometimes our pursuit of perfection can derail us from perfectly good opportunities."

CHAPTER 21

WHEN THE IMAGE BREAKS

"You have to see this place. It's perfect for my daughter's wedding. Why don't we drive out today? I can pick you up if you'd like."

I recognized the voice immediately. Mr. Joshi had been calling me weekly for months, his voice carrying the crisp authority of someone accustomed to boardroom decisions. There was never a question in his tone, only statements of what needed to happen. He was seeking an ideal venue for his daughter Priya's wedding. As an officiant I had suggested several beautiful ranches and lakeside properties around Austin, but none had captured his imagination. This time, however, there was something different in his voice—a breathless excitement that made me curious.

We drove out the following afternoon, winding through the Hill Country until we reached a secluded property overlooking Lake Travis. The moment I stepped out of the car, I understood his enthusiasm. A charming stone terrace cascaded down three levels toward the water, with an elegant partially covered pavilion on the top, and an open patio that could easily accommodate a hundred guests for an evening dinner and celebration.

"The mandap will go right here," Mr. Joshi declared, his words carrying the authority of someone who made boardroom decisions. He pointed

toward the uppermost terrace, his eyes bright with vision. "Overlooking the lake, with the sunset behind them. The ceremony space can hold seventy to eighty chairs—perfect for our intimate, family-oriented celebration."

He walked me through his mental blueprint: after the religious ceremony, guests would move to the middle terrace for cocktails, then down to the lakeside patio for dinner, each level offering that breathtaking view of the water. My only concern was the distant parking area. Mr. Joshi waved it off. "People our age have walked farther for less beautiful occasions".

Over the following weeks, I watched him pour his heart into the details. This wasn't just about finding a venue—it was about creating a perfect moment for his only daughter. He'd even arranged something special: since his brother had no daughter of his own, he would perform the sacred ritual of *kanyadaan*, formally giving Priya's hand to her groom. The honor meant everything to both men. "What about weather backup?" I asked during one of our planning sessions, my officiant's instincts kicking in. After all, I would be performing the ceremony on a partially covered pavilion, while the guest would have some coverage from the rain. "There's the covered pavilion for the reception," he assured me. "The terrace has partial covering, and we're getting a beautiful canopy for the mandap itself. But the forecast looks perfect—not a cloud in sight."

He'd hired the premier mandap designers from Dallas, specialists who created elaborate, flower-draped ceremonial structures. Everything was falling into place for his dream wedding.

Three days before the ceremony, the weather forecast changed dramatically. A strong storm system was moving in, promising heavy rain two days before the wedding. Even on the third day, there was a good chance of rain. I called Mr. Joshi immediately. "We need to discuss alternatives," I said gently. "We could move the mandap to the covered pavilion, or at least position it where the terrace roof would protect the ceremony."

The silence on the other end stretched long. Finally, he spoke, his voice tight with emotion. "But then we'd lose the lake view. The sunset. Everything that makes this place special."

"The marriage will still be beautiful, if we use the partially covered side" I said. "The love will be the same regardless of the backdrop."

"Let me think about it," he said, but I could hear the resistance in his voice. I could guess what he was thinking. Retired after being a General Manager of a chemical plant near Corpus, he had come to Austin to be with his daughter. They were living on the other side of the lake. The lake and its symbolism was special to him. Besides, this man who had seen and navigated many emergencies was not to panic over the weather.

When the wedding day arrived, the clouds were still hanging around. In the forecast was an occasional thunderstorm. As I always do, I arrived a few hours before the wedding was to start. The mandap was still being decorated. I pointed out to Mr. Joshi that the canopy of the mandap; - the transparent, white plastic cover was too thin to protect against a pouring rain. "But any darker canopy would ruin the beauty of the scene", the mandap contractor said. "We would take a chance", Joshi said.

Light rain started falling just as the guests started arriving. Guests struggled up the muddy path from the distant parking area, protecting their elegant saris and suits from the puddles. The mandap's decorative canopy, designed for beauty rather than function, began to sag and leak within the first hour. Fortunately, there was a pause in the pouring rain, so I started the ceremony at that opportune time.

We still had the danger of rain starting any time, so I recited mantras as fast as I could. Just as we approached the '*kanyadaan*' moment, the rain started again. Joshi's brother was emotional. This is the moment he was waiting for. I could see that emotion of a family man, doing the greatest deed of his life; offering his niece's hand to the groom. The rain was ruining their beautiful attire. Some one held umbrellas over their heads as they hurriedly performed the ceremony. The bride and groom were somewhat protected, the plastic cover over the mandap would not let the rain drench them. I moved to the side that partially covered me. The ceremony came to an end quickly. The blessing ceremony, where all guests would take part, had to be conducted hurriedly. Joshi and his brother were soaked, their faces streaming with rain and tears, but they completed the sacred ritual with dig-

nity intact. Priya, radiant despite the chaos, laughed as her new husband helped her navigate the slippery stone steps. I felt that I could not dwell a little longer, reciting mantras slowly so that the full force of emotions and grace could be expressed.

Later, as guests huddled in the pavilion sharing stories and warming themselves with their beverage, I found Mr. Joshi staring out at the rain-lashed lake.

I said softly. "I know this wasn't what you pictured."

He was quiet for a long moment, watching his daughter dance with her new husband in a room that barely accommodated all the guests, while rain drummed on the roof above them. "You know what's strange?" he finally said. "I spent months obsessing over every detail, every angle of that lake view. But looking at them now..." He gestured toward the young couple, their joy undiminished by the weather. "*I realized I was clinging to an image that existed only in my mind.*"

The rain continued through the evening, but the celebration grew warmer and more intimate because of it. Guests who might have remained formal in perfect weather found themselves laughing together, sharing umbrellas, and creating memories that no staged photograph could have captured.

I reflected on Mr. Joshi's final words. *How often do we become so attached to our idealized visions that we miss the beauty of what actually unfolds?* The perfect wedding he had imagined was indeed broken by the storm—but what emerged in its place was something more authentic, more human, and perhaps more perfect in its imperfection.

The marriage, after all, was never about the venue. It was about two people choosing to weather life's storm together surrounded by the family members who would do the same.

CHAPTER 22

SEVEN STEPS TO FOREVER

THE phone rang early that morning, carrying a voice I'd never heard before—hesitant yet determined.

"Do you perform Hindu weddings? I only want part of the ceremony, not the long version that takes hours."

I paused, intrigued. In fifteen years of officiating ceremonies, few requests had been this specific. "I generally perform the complete ceremony. What part interests you, and why just a portion?"

"My fiancé is from India, and I want to include some Hindu elements alongside our Catholic ceremony," she replied, uncertainty creeping into her voice.

Most such calls led nowhere, but something about her sincerity made me listen. The next day, she called again—this time ready to meet. Kristine—a Canadian had a clear vision. Her fiancé Rakesh's mother lived in a small Indian village and couldn't afford to attend their wedding. Kristine, raised Catholic, had learned about Saptapadi—the seven sacred steps—and wanted to honor this tradition. She planned to send photos to Rakesh's mother, showing how both cultures were celebrated.

"Initially, I thought about dual ceremonies," she explained, "but I've been reading about Hindu traditions. Could you perform the complete ceremony in about an hour? I'm dropping the idea of two separate ceremonies."

Her research impressed me. She understood that Saptapadi was the culmination of several rituals—the *Kanyadaan* where parents give their daughter's hand to the groom, the sacred fire ceremony, the circumambulation with vows. She wanted the full experience, compressed but complete. The details emerged through our conversations. Rakesh hailed from my home state in India, adding personal connection to my community services. The ceremony would be intimate—twenty guests in their backyard, with Kristine's parents performing the *Kanyadaan* and Rakesh's Canadian family in attendance.

October delivered a flawless afternoon. Cool breeze rustled through oak trees like natural wind chimes, while filtered sunlight created an ethereal backdrop. Kristine approached the mandap in her traditional white dress, her father beside her. Rakesh waited with his best friend Zamil, both men beaming.

The ceremony unfolded beautifully. After exchanging garlands and prayers, we moved to *Kanyadaan*. Kristine's father offered green leaves, rice, flowers, and water to the couple's open hands while I spoke on his behalf: "May there be greenness in your life, may you be healthy, may you have a long life." Rakesh accepted graciously as I recited the ancient mantras: "Who is the giver and who is the receiver in this world? Aren't they both made of the same divine desire that splits into giving and receiving?" We lit the sacred fire—*Yojak*, the arranger—and began circumambulation. Hand in hand, they walked around the fire four times, each round sealed with sacred vows. The anticipation built toward the moment they'd both been waiting for: Saptapadi. "*Ekam eeshe Vishnutwa nayatu*," I intoned, invoking the supreme Godhead as they touched the first mound of rice. "We pray for plenty of food." Six more steps followed—for energy, vitality, prosperity, happiness, progeny, and lifelong companionship.

Then came the seventh step, the most significant: "*Sakhe saptapada bhavatu*—on this seventh step, we become friends."

I read from the Ekagni Kand scripture: "A friend shall thou be, having placed these seven steps with me. Now we have become friends. May I retain your friendship. Let us unite together, propose together, loving each other and ever radiant in each other's company, sharing all enjoyments and pleasures, joining our aspirations, vows, and thoughts." Looking at their radiant faces, I continued with the Rig Veda's closing verses: "Walk together, talk together, learn from each other. Common be your prayer, common be your end, common be your purpose. United be your intentions; perfect be the union amongst you." Kristine's smile told me everything. I pronounced them "dampati"—two owners of one house, two flowers with one fragrance, husband and wife.

A call for dinner soon took us out. In the neighbor's house a big tent was erected, tables and chairs were set for some fifty guests. It was a chilly evening, so we sat near a heater. Catered food was Mediterranean, with vegetarian dishes for us. Zamil had planned everything so well.

The moon came out and lit the entire tent.

At the neighbor's house reception, I learned more about the families I'd just united. Rakesh's two sisters and brother had flown in from different Canadian cities, their children adding joyful chaos to the celebration. His eldest sister, Meera, had been his anchor when he'd arrived in Canada at seventeen—a scared boy from an orthodox Brahmin family suddenly thrust into a world where tradition meant nothing and survival meant everything.

"He worked in that saw mill for three years," Meera told me, pride evident in her voice. "Twelve-hour shifts, then evening classes. Kristine was the one who helped him with English assignments." Kristine's parents, warm and accepting, had embraced their daughter's choice completely. Her mother confided that they'd worried initially about cultural differences, but seeing Rakesh's dedication to both honoring his heritage and building a life in their world had won them over entirely.

"How long have you been living together?" I asked Rakesh during a quiet moment at dinner.

He paused, setting down his fork. "About seven years."

Seven years!! The words hit me like a thunderbolt. I stared at him, then at Kristine across the table, my mind reeling. Seven years of shared mornings, shared struggles, shared dreams. Seven years of already being partners in every way that mattered.

"Seven years," I repeated, my voice barely above a whisper. "And you're just now...?" Before Rakesh could respond, commotion erupted in the kitchen. He was whisked away to help, leaving me stunned at the table, the revelation echoing in my mind like the sacred mantras I'd just recited.

Later, walking through the quiet neighborhood while their celebration continued under a moonlit tent, I heard Bollywood music mixing with Western melodies. The multicultural party perfectly embodied their union—"Mera juta hai Japani, ye patlun Englishstani" (my shoes are Japanese, my pants English) played while guests from different continents danced together.

Walking alone through the quiet neighborhood streets, the revelation consumed my thoughts. Seven years. Seven steps. The parallel was too profound to be a coincidence.

Everything suddenly clicked with startling clarity. Rakesh and Kristine weren't just getting married—they were celebrating seven years of friendship, equality, and harmony that had already bloomed into the deepest form of partnership. They had taken their seven steps together, day by day, year by year, building a life based on mutual respect and love.

The ceremony wasn't about beginning their journey as partners; it was about honoring the path they'd already walked together. In the Hindu tradition, the seventh step declares friendship as marriage's foundation. They had been living this truth for seven years.

As I watched their celebration from the quiet street—friends from multiple continents united under one tent, sharing food, music, and joy—I realized I had witnessed something profound. This wasn't just a wedding ceremony; it was a recognition of love that had already proven itself through time, culture, and distance.

The seven steps of Saptapadi had already been taken in their daily lives. Today, they simply made it official, surrounded by the people who mattered

Between Shores: Narratives of small insight

most. In the end, the most beautiful weddings don't create love—they celebrate love that already exists.

And sometimes, the most meaningful ceremonies are the ones that honor not just the promise of forever, but the forever that has already begun. Seven years of steps, one perfect ceremony, and a lifetime of friendship ahead.

CHAPTER 23

INVISIBLE CONNECTIONS

The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead as I stared at the computer screen, my eyes burning from hours of debugging. It was a sunny Saturday in Austin—the kind of day when families would be spreading blankets at Zilker Park or launching boats at Lake Travis. Instead, I sat alone in the lab, surrounded by the quiet whir of cooling fans and the persistent glow of diagnostic equipment. My project was due Monday, and I was nowhere near a solution.

For weeks, I'd been wrestling with diagnostic code designed to test our hardware's memory module. The program would run smoothly for minutes, sometimes hours, then suddenly crash without explanation. Each failure felt like a personal insult.

I'd connected an In-Circuit Emulator—a sophisticated instrument that let me step through code one instruction at a time, watching the hardware's state change with each command. It was like examining a thick novel word by word with a magnifying glass, searching for a single misplaced comma. But even this advanced tool revealed nothing.

The ritual had become maddening: load the program, watch it run, wait for the inevitable crash, reset everything, try again. My notebook was filled

with crossed-out theories and dead-end observations. The coffee had long since grown cold.

As the sun began to set, casting long shadows across the lab floor, I slumped back in my chair. The pre-internet era meant no quick emails to colleagues, no online forums to consult. I was truly alone with this problem.

"Only divine intervention can save me now," I muttered to the empty room. The words had barely left my lips when I heard footsteps echoing down the hallway. Two figures appeared at the lab entrance—my boss, looking as surprised to see me as I was to see him, accompanied by an elderly gentleman with kind eyes.

"What are you doing here so late?" my boss asked. "Fighting with this memory diagnostic," I replied, gesturing helplessly at the screen. "It keeps crashing and I can't figure out why."

He introduced his father, whom he'd brought to see the lab. But instead of a quick tour, he led his father to his office, while he returned to help me out. I ran the program while he watched for clues to his erratic behavior. It was not easy:—within an hour, we'd identified a timing issue in the memory refresh cycle that my single-step debugging had been too slow to catch. I finished the project Sunday evening, well ahead of the Monday deadline.

* * *

Wolfgang Pauli, the Nobel Prize-winning quantum physicist, once partnered with psychologist Carl Jung to explore something they called synchronicity—meaningful coincidences that seem to transcend ordinary cause and effect. While Pauli studied particles that behaved in seemingly impossible ways, Jung mapped the landscape of human consciousness where archetypal patterns emerge across cultures and time. Together, they proposed that reality exists on a spectrum: at one end, events following clear physical laws; at the other, synchronistic events connected not by causation but by meaning. They wondered if consciousness itself might interact with the physical world in ways our science couldn't yet explain. That Saturday in the lab felt like such a moment—as if my desperate need had somehow called help into being.

A VOICE FOR THE VOICELESS

A year later, I found myself in another moment that challenged my understanding of coincidence. I'd just finished a conference in Philadelphia and arrived at the airport early, hoping to browse the gift shop for something to bring home to my family. As I approached the shop entrance, an announcement crackled over the PA system:

"If you can speak Hindi, please contact TWA Airlines immediately. We have a passenger who only speaks Hindi and she needs assistance."

I paused at the shop doorway. What kind of passenger couldn't communicate their destination? Surely she had a ticket, boarding passes, some documentation? But as seconds ticked by with no response to the repeated announcements, I realized I might be the only Hindi speaker in the terminal that day. Without even checking in for my own flight, I found a courtesy phone and called the airline.

"Thank God," the gate agent said when I identified myself. "Can you talk to her? We'll put her on the line."

The voice that came through the phone was elderly, trembling with anxiety. In the familiar accented Hindi spoken in the dialect of my home state, she explained her predicament. She'd boarded a flight in Los Angeles bound for Boston, where she was to attend a family wedding. But in her nervousness—this was perhaps her first time flying alone—she'd gotten off during a layover in Philadelphia, thinking she'd arrived. Now she didn't want to continue to Boston because the wedding party would have already left for New York, the actual wedding location. She had only fragments of information: a few family names, some partially remembered phone numbers.

Working as translator between the airline staff and the confused woman, I helped piece together contact information and arrange for her ticket to be changed to New York's LaGuardia airport.

Problem solved, I thought. I checked in for my own flight and headed to my gate. Just as I reached my departure area, I saw an airport cart rolling past with a passenger—perhaps the same elderly woman. Something made me

follow the cart to the TWA gate, where I found commotion and confusion. The flight they'd rebooked her on had been canceled.

This time, I spoke with her directly. Not only were we from the same state, but we shared the same regional dialect—a connection that felt too specific to be mere chance. She told me she'd spent the previous night in an airport hotel, unable to sleep from anxiety. She hadn't eaten because she suspected the food might contain meat, which her religious beliefs forbade. She'd prayed through the night for help to arrive.

Again, I became the bridge between her world and the airline's bureaucracy. We found a later flight to New York and arranged for someone to meet her there.

As we finished the arrangements, I heard my own flight being called for final boarding. An airline employee offered me a ride back to my gate in the same cart that had carried the woman. I barely made my flight, rushing on board without even getting her name or contact information.

During the flight home, questions tumbled through my mind: How had I arrived at that gift shop at precisely the right moment to hear the announcement? What were the odds that among all the travelers in Philadelphia that day, the one person who responded would speak not just Hindi, but her specific regional dialect? And why had I felt compelled to follow that cart, arriving just in time to help again when her rebooked flight was canceled?

* * *

Could it be that intense desire for help somehow summons assistance from unexpected sources? Perhaps my Saturday afternoon desperation had drawn my boss to the lab, just as the elderly woman's prayers had guided me to that airport announcement.

Jung and Pauli believed such moments reveal glimpses of an interconnected reality beneath our ordinary perception—a web of invisible connections binding us all. In our age of instant communication and global networks, we might understand this better than ever. Yet the deepest mysteries remain: How does consciousness reach across space to touch other minds? What invisible threads weave through our seemingly separate lives?

Chapter 23. Invisible Connections

These weren't mere coincidences, I've come to believe, but windows into something far more profound—the hidden architecture of human connection that makes strangers into instruments of grace when we need them most.

CHAPTER 24

ROOTS IN THE SKY

Roots in the air, branches below,
The tree of life is unchanging,
They, say: its leaves are hymns,
And he who knows it, knows sacred
lore.

Bhagavad Gita 15.1

"Another rent increase," my friend said, waving the notice from Lord Barron Park apartments. We'd been neighbors for five years now, two immigrants watching Boston rents climb from 185 to 200 a month. "Time to put down roots," we agreed.

The three-story split-level on Wilhelmina Avenue seemed perfect—three bedrooms, half-acre lot, quiet dead-end street. When we got it for less than the asking price, the retired lawyer explained our luck: "Algonquin gas line easement runs through your property. But don't worry—practically means nothing." That should have been a lesson in impermanence. Although the land is technically ours, they are the true owners.

We painted every board ourselves, rented scaffolding, scraped old paint with wire brushes. The pneumatic hammer we used on the broken brick step made such noise that neighbors' windows popped open in alarm. We

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carried 12x20 feet of carpet tied to our car roof from New Hampshire, installed our own air conditioning, and framed the basement into a study.

Our son was born that year. I finished my MBA. Neighbors became family—Mary next door with her mysterious garment business, the retired shipyard worker who invited us for tea, the pilot's five-year-old daughter who played with our baby. We planted strawberries in the backyard, grew Indian squash and bitter-melon, and shared our harvest with neighbors. We were the tree growing branches deep into suburban soil. Then the company was sold. We survived a few months, but eventually we had to look for jobs. There were other jobs; the Boston area and route 128 was sprinkled with small and large manufacturers but I was getting job offers that looked better from out of state companies.

The dream job materialized in a small Ohio town—rolling hills, apple orchards, a research lab where I could pioneer new work.

Finally the day came. As I loaded boxes, a young couple pulled slowly down our street, eyes bright with possibility as they studied our "For Sale" sign. We were severing roots, they were desperate to plant. I carried grief; they carried hope.

* * *

Our real estate agent Helen was showing us houses in Coventry Estates, a new subdivision in Cambridge, Ohio.

"This one you'll really like."

She was right. The house sat on a hill overlooking a valley of green pastures where cows wandered freely, and yes—an old oil derrick stood sentinel in the distance.

"Is that oil well still producing?" I couldn't resist asking.

"Not for several years now. But this was an oil country," Helen replied. "There's even a coal mine not far from here, though the coal's low grade—nobody mines it anymore."

We were sold.

This time it was the outdoors that claimed our attention. We tended rhododendrons, managed the evergreens planted on the hilltop to prevent erosion, graveled the long driveway, and painted the basement. New fur-

niture came from a store in Zanesville, thirty miles south. Our family was growing, adding another child to our expanding circle.

Like Boston, we rooted ourselves in the community. The small town lacked shopping malls and theaters, but it offered something else—great outdoors. Community picnics at Salt Fork Park, visits to orchard farms, drives through the rolling hills of West Virginia. The work at the company was exciting, challenging. Once again, we felt deeply rooted in this new home.

Then, in the midst of our rising contentment, we saw signs of the receding tide. Manufacturing was leaving Ohio. Nimble competitors had entered our market. The economic downturn loomed again. What had once been a coveted destination was becoming a desert.

Time to uproot again. This time, deep into the heart of Texas. Uprooting is never easy.

* * *

Sitting back on my swing in Austin, overlooking the beautiful evening hue of orange in the western sky I ponder over all the houses I had lived in. Now I understand the Gita's paradox for the first time. This tree of life we'd been growing—its real roots weren't in the foundation we'd painted, the steps we'd repaired, the neighbors we'd loved. They were reaching upward, toward something we couldn't see.

The house was never meant to be forever.

Boston became our first conscious uprooting, Ohio our second. Then there was the third in Austin. Each place we inhabit becomes part of our internal landscape—not as attachment, but as accumulated wisdom, relationships that transcend geography, memories that nourish something eternal within us.

It is the uprooting that brought me here. Tracing back through generations, I discover this restlessness runs in our human blood. My great-great-grandfather, some twenty generations back, uprooted from the village of Nadiad to the small town of Umreth. Years later, my grandfather moved from Umreth to Surat, then a thriving commercial city near Bombay (now Mumbai). These moves spanned only a few hundred miles within Gujarat,

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yet I crossed oceans. Who knows what our true cosmic origin is? Perhaps some distant star, some other galaxy entirely?"

The Aswastha tree of the Gita grows with roots in the divine, branches reaching down into the world of our senses and actions. We think we're rooted in soil, but we're actually rooted in sky—in the transcendent connections that sustain us through all our uprootings and relocations in this impermanent world.

Our rootedness isn't static. It's alive, dynamic, and sacred. What travels with us isn't wood and mortar but the person we've become through the loving of each place. We don't lose ourselves through movement; we discover ourselves. Every uprooting reveals what was always true: home was never a location. It was always us, growing upward, carrying heaven within us wherever we go.

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