My heels click against the cobblestone as I try to find my way to this quaint, small town’s centre. With my unruly hair and eyes fixed on the tip of my shoes, overtaking one after the other, I stride forward without a care for the world.

I tightly clutch my folder with all the needed documents that took me a lifetime to collect. Either I walk with new ones attached to this or I burn the whole file down tonight.

But the universe seems to have other plans when my shadow suddenly is wept away from beneath my feet. I tear my eyes away from the road and look up to see thunderclouds gathering fast. My heart races as though my favourite character is plummeting to their death.

I’m soaked before any shelter comes into view. When I said small town, I meant the town being five kilometres away from the bus stop with nothing but farm fields all around.

The first thing I check when I do find a shelter is whether my documents are safe. Just as I think things can't get worse, I spot a figure in the distance, hurrying toward the abandoned hut I’ve picked to be my refuge.

His broad frame is hunched over from panting. His beard is overgrown in places, his glasses fogged up in the rain, and his raven hair dripping with water. I can’t stop myself from staring at his rain-soaked face and his stout arms gripping a box tightly.

Not wanting to pry and to avoid having any awkward conversation, I look away up at the sky to see if the rain is going to last long. I sigh, receiving only bad news.

“Damn it,” I’m speaking out loud without meaning to.

“Yeah,” the man speaks beside me, surprising me. “That ain’t stopping any time soon.”

I notice a tinge of accent in his words that I heard around on the bus. I give him a nod and this time I can’t look away. Something about him is so warm and inviting that I end up offering him a smile.

He tells me that he is from this village. He also tells me that the rain has been overdue for the past week, so it’s going to be a long pour. Hearing my anxious sigh again and continuously looking at the folder in my hand, he asks what I’m in town for.

“There is a Mr. Gupta here who is looking over my application for college. This should’ve been done two weeks ago but his wife is sick. I couldn’t afford to lose more time so I came here to get it done in person. But he has to leave for a flight at four.”

“That’s only one hour from now.”

“I know!”

“Don’t worry. I’ll help you.”

I watch him juggling the heavy box in one hand as he pulls his phone out to dial his friend. They converse for a minute, him insisting his friend to leave his work for a while. That he owes him a favour. Assuming the friend denied help, the kind stranger does not waste a second to dial another number. All this to help a stranger he met twenty minutes ago?

He says he’s got it covered now. His friend will come to take me to the town as soon as possible. But somehow I’m not relieved to have been saved. My thoughts are actually on the actions of my saviour.

He could have offered sympathy and moved on with his life. He could’ve easily gotten someone to come and help him to the town instead of standing here for so long.

Did he do it simply to give me company or did he have other plans to go from here? Is he helping me to get something in return or is his kindness just a fragment of him? I don’t have it in me to question him because I just met him.

But then again, he did not consider this before jumping on to help me out.

So, I find my voice and ask him. “Why are you helping me?”

“Do I need a reason to help someone in need?”

I can’t deny. I stand quietly. Guilt bubbles up inside me because except for a measly ‘thank you’, I have nothing to offer him. The selflessness of a guy without expecting anything in return is unparalleled. And the greater he seems, the smaller I feel.

Then, my gaze falls on the box he’s been carrying and I find small talk to drive the guilt out of me.

“I don’t mean to pry but,” I point to the box in his hand. “That looks heavy. You should put it down.”

The man smiles and somehow he becomes ever friendlier now.

“Why don’t you put your documents on the ground?”

I scrunch my brows and search for a joke on his face. “I can’t. It’s not that heavy and it’s really important-”

“Exactly.”

I’m still unable to comprehend his response. Maybe I shouldn’t concern myself with his belongings but I feel I’m somewhere obliged to talk about it now. Like I have to because if I don’t, I’m selfish enough to have my wa y and walk away.

So, I press on. “Still. What you got in there? I hope it’s not deadly chemicals and formulas which you’re bringing to your secret laboratory.”

“Why would my laboratory be secret?” He plays along with my joke.

I smile. This is better now. Humour always breaks the ice. “You know, mad scientists usually have crazy labs in secluded, unnoticed towns.”

He laughs out loud. My smile gets wider now.

“And why am I a mad scientist now?”

“You know, glasses, wrinkled shirt, and that seemed to have electrocuted hair.”

His hand shoots out to smoothen out some vertical hair strands. I snicker and he mocks my words. We talk for a few more minutes and the world around me seems to have disappeared. I don’t smell the drowned soil anymore, but all I feel is a freshness spread across the atmosphere.

As if I’m not standing here under a crooked shelter in a village far away from the bustling city I’m used to, but I’ve escaped to a meadow with tall grass that stretches beyond the horizon.

I laugh so much that my eyes start to tear up. We talk about things that cross nobody’s mind twice. He beam me up like no one else ever did. He shows how big the world truly is and how we can be even bigger than that.

I tell him about my plans, bits about my life and he listens to it intently. I ask him of his and he confidently cowers away. Someone’s life can be personal to them and I know to respect it, so, I don’t insist on the topic and we soon find something else to chat about.

His takeovers never feel hostile, his smile is always inviting. For a moment, I almost believe this is a dream because how can someone be so unrealistically good?

We talk and laugh until the rain powers up and we realize that his friend hasn’t arrived yet.

I check the time and it’s barely fifteen minutes to four. When he notices me panicking, he dials his friend again and curses under his breath.

He tells me it is bad news and his friend can’t make it.

“That’s okay, if I ran it wouldn’t be that bad. It’s not that far anymore.”

He shakes his head as if he’s an authority here. “Absolutely not. You’ll be drenched, your documents will be ruined and you might slip and crack your skull open.”

“It’s good then I have a mad scientist here who can fix me.”

“I’m a scientist, not a surgeon. But you can’t go alone.”

“What? You’ll come with?”

When he nods, I end up laughing. I can’t believe he was serious. I stop laughing.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, come on!”

“But how-”

“You question too much. Have faith in me and let go. Come!”

I shouldn’t be trusting someone so bluntly. I shouldn’t risk it all because he asked me to. And I certainly shouldn’t follow him when he’s ready to be battered for my sake.

But while these qualities may make him chivalrous and may impress others, I find it hard to love them. While I truly admire his dedication and care, I feel it is wasted on someone who doesn’t deserve it, someone like me—a stranger he’s known for a mere time.

He says it’s because I’m not used to being treated right. Because I’ve never been around the right people. Because I’m too caught up in the false reality of the world.

When I step into the rain with my folder clutched tightly against my chest, I watch him use his box as a shield against the rain. I jump back into the shelter and try to push him inside too.

“What are you doing!?” I shout over the rain. “It’s important to you! It’ll be ruined.”

“Just come on! If you keep talking instead of moving your feet it’ll be ruined regardless.”

I hesitate for a minute, looking back at him and his soggy cardboard box. I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t think I can do it to him.

Before I can vocalize my protests, he pulls me by the hand and forces me to run along. He puts the box completely above my head while his back is exposed to the downpour. I squint my eyes and run as fast as I can before every remaining of his belongings gets ruined because of me.

“Are you sure about your stuff? It’s not too precious, is it? Or something that can’t be repaired?”

“I said don’t worry about it!” He shouts behind me. “I can always remake this box, not your documents! Protect them.”

We make it to the town in five minutes and I lead him to Mr. Gupta’s house because he refuses to cut this short until I reach my destination.

“I’m not going to leave you hanging in the middle no matter how worse this gets,” he had said.

I don’t get to thank him as he pushes me into Mr. Gupta’s veranda. I quickly ring the bell and turn around to find him gone. I sigh and the gate opens up.

Mr. Gupta lets me inside and offers me a towel. I tell him what happened.

“Oh him?” He says and laughs as if it’s a fantasy story I’m telling him. “He’s like that with everyone around here. It’s not a big deal to him.”

“Yeah, but for a stranger…”

“Hm, that is odd. Maybe he saw something in you. Who knows?”

I don’t know how to feel about it. The kindness he showered today can never amount to what I have received all these years, combined. My guilt monster is growing exponentially just thinking about his stuff that probably got destroyed in the rain. Something he didn’t even want to place on the ground.

Mr. Gupta quickly completed my documents and I bid him farewell for his trip. While I’m leaving, he notices my thoughts still being misplaced so he tries to help me out.

“Pay him no heed, dear. He tends to go above and beyond for people he cares about. I heard only this morning that he is coming back to town. I can’t wait to see the things everyone is so excited about.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s the talk of the town that he spent three years working to collect all these antiques and materials for his fiancee. Well, fiancee-to-be. He is planning to propose today. Too bad I’m going to miss it.” He rambles on. “Don’t worry, only I knew about his plans. He is my student after all. He called me this morning telling me how nervous he was. He doesn’t know how he can pull this off. I wish I could’ve offered him some advice but I needed to look after my after my wife…”

My heart almost stops, feeling like it's about to crumble into pieces. The realization hits me hard: he’s been avoiding talking about his life because he was nervous. He knew Mr. Gupta all along, yet he kept it from me. He put his things through possible ruin, despite knowing how important they were to him. And not just important, they were irreplaceable because it is meant for a once-in-a-lifetime moment.

The weight of his silence and the sacrifices he made out of generosity pierces through me, leaving me overwhelmed with a mix of sorrow and anger. His grand gesture for his fiancée-to-be, three years in the making, destroyed in a single afternoon. The thought is unbearable, and I can’t help but feel responsible for his loss.

If only he had told me what was in the box, I would’ve found a way to save both of us. If only he had trusted me with his plans, I would’ve helped him find a way to protect both his and my dreams.

I feel as though he leaves me no choice but to be only thankful to him. It’s the truth that there can never be any selfless good deeds. His way of ensuring his good deeds are fully altruistic is by shutting down any possibility of it returning to him.

Tokens of appreciation are too hefty for him so he trades in favours.

I may never see him again after today, but I somehow know if we had met in another circumstance, in another reality, he’d help me the same. That’s the kind of friend he is. He loves great, cares greatly, and works even greater.

Hearing Mr. Gupta’s words, I can only imagine how absurd this man is. On a single mention, he’s willing to travel seas to get the said clothes. On a single wish, he’s ready to let it get rain-soaked for a stranger’s aid.

But how callous of me to pick apart this beautiful friendship I somehow stumbled upon. Shouldn't I be grateful rather than spewing nonsense complaints like this? But acceptance is a virtue that a vice like me may not have inherited.

He gifted me impossible things so I promised myself to become someone a little more than just grateful. His wild, unpredicted gestures and my grounded morals should balance each other, ensuring his sacrifices never go to waste again.

I look up at the clear sky and think about the boy with the box I met during the worst and the best shitstorm of my life. Oh, how gravely he’s imprinted in my heart from a single meeting.