

A journey of purpose, people
and the pursuit of a better world.

SEGUI IL TUO CUORE

FOLLOW
YOUR
HEART

A MEMOIR OF CHOICES,
COURAGE AND COMPASSION

ANAND PRIYA DEO

ONE JOURNEY. MANY STORIES. A LIFE OF IMPACT.



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DEDICATION



To my parents, who taught me resilience long before I knew the meaning of the word.

To every teacher, mentor, friend, and stranger who, in ways both seen and unseen, became a bridge along my journey.

Above all, to my wife Shambhavi, whose love, inspiration, and unwavering encouragement to follow the path my heart had always known shaped my writing into this book.

And to everyone who listens to the quiet voice within!



FOREWORD

There are journeys that begin with a destination, and there are journeys that begin with a question.

This book belongs to the second kind.

Follow Your Heart is not the story of a perfect plan or a carefully scripted career. It is the story of choosing uncertainty over comfort, purpose over security, and curiosity over fear. It is about leaving behind a successful corporate life, crossing continents in search of knowledge, and discovering that the most important journeys are often the ones that transform us from within.

The pages that follow travel through the villages of Bihar, the classrooms of England, the canals of Venice, the streets of Padova, the corridors of Geneva, and the halls of the United Nations. Along the way are friendships that became family, failures that became lessons, and moments of doubt that quietly shaped a life of meaning.

A simple poster hanging in a small shop in Padova, Italy, inspired the title of this memoir. It read, “Segui il tuo cuore”—follow your heart. I found myself returning to those words again and again, asking whether I was truly living by them. This book is my attempt to answer that question.

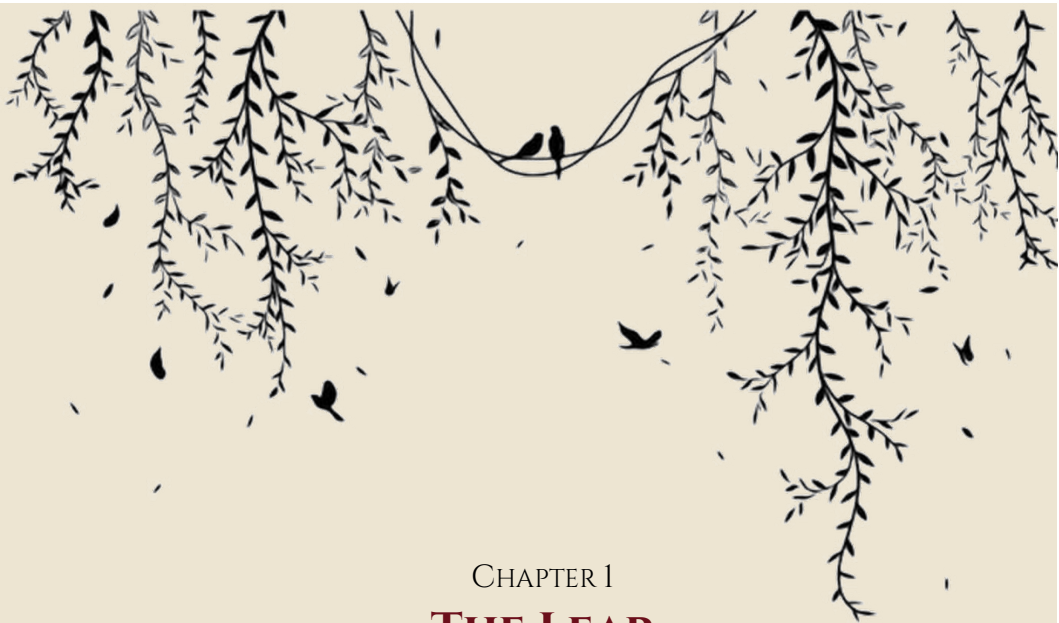
If these stories encourage even one person to take a leap of faith, to pursue a long-forgotten dream, or to believe that an ordinary individual can create extraordinary change, then this journey will have found its purpose.

— Anand Priya Deo

CONTENTS

Dedication	i
Foreword.....	iii
Chapter 1: The Leap.....	1
Chapter 2: Snow, Separation, and the Beginning of the North	5
Application Started in Finland	10
Interview from Sarajevo.....	15
The Geneva Ladder	23
The Price of a Dream	29
Walking towards the Unknown	35
Chapter 3: Arrival in Geneva.....	43
Looking for a Hostel	43
International Youth Centre	46
Chapter 4: My First Day at the Office.....	48
Searching the Office.....	49
Meeting the HR.....	51
Introduction with My Department.....	52
The Badge, the Broken Chair, and the Beginning of Hope	54
Crossed Paths with Shyami	57
Rendezvous with the Sri Lankan Guy	60
Moving from a hostel to an Apartment	61
Chapter 5: Continuous Struggle for a Flat	64
Posting for Help on Couchsurfing	65
Moving from Flat to Hostel	66
Final Acceptance on Couchsurfing.....	68
Going to Meet Helene	69

Chapter 6: Appointment with Helene.....	72
First Week with Helene	72
Started Living with Helene.....	75
Comfort Came with Conditions.....	76
Morning Walk in the Snowfall	79
The Spanish Guy, My Next-Door Neighbour.....	81
Started Working in Lausanne.....	86
Started Teaching Hindi.....	90
Christmas Dinner at Helene's Place	94
Hosted a Friend from Russia.....	100
Chapter 7: My Professional Life	113
Thander Tun.....	113
Lisa Neddoff Smith	121
Bashar Jamal	127
Wajira Ranasinghe.....	137
An Old Lady	142
Yuri, My Supervisor	148
Karolina Saviova	154
Chapter 8: My Visit to Istanbul.....	158
Seven Days Under the Istanbul Sky	168
Chapter 9: Inching towards the End of My Internship	181
Chapter 10: Time to Say Goodbye to Geneva.....	186
Goodbye to Helene, and Departing from Geneva.....	197
Chapter 11: The Seeds of a Foundation.....	202
Ananda Foundation.....	207
A Travel Scrapbook: A Mosaic of Footprints	208



CHAPTER 1

THE LEAP

"In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity."
— Albert Einstein

There are moments in life that do not announce themselves with fanfare. They arrive quietly, almost unnoticed, and yet they alter the course of everything that follows. Looking back now, I realise that my journey did not begin in England, Italy, or the corridors of the United Nations. It began much earlier, at a traffic signal in a crowded Indian city, where children sold pencils, pens, and books while I sat inside an air-conditioned car on my way to a corporate job with Airtel.

Before I left for the United Kingdom to pursue a master's degree, I had already spent five years in the corporate world. By every conventional measure, I was doing well. Through hard work, relentless ambition, and a genuine passion for what I did, I had climbed to the upper levels of my industry. I had the salary, the

designation, and the career that many people dream of.

But success has a peculiar way of exposing the questions we spend years trying to avoid. Every morning, on my way to the office, I crossed the same traffic signals. The same young boys and girls would appear with handfuls of pens, notebooks, and small toys, weaving between cars under the scorching sun. Some cleaned windshields with worn-out cloths; others simply held out their hands. They were children, yet they carried the exhaustion of adults.

I could not look away.

I had grown up in a small village where poverty was not an abstract concept discussed in reports or classrooms. It was a neighbourhood affair where one could not afford medicine, a family that skipped meals, and a child who left school for work. Those memories had never left me. Sitting in my car each day, I felt an increasing discomfort that no promotion could erase. I wanted to do something meaningful, even if it meant changing only a few lives.

Mahatma Gandhi has always been a source of inspiration for me. His words, “Be the change you wish to see in the world,” echoed in my mind with unsettling persistence. Those words refused to remain merely a quotation in a book; they demanded action.

And so, despite having a career that others considered enviable, I made a decision that surprised almost everyone around me. I took a sabbatical from my job and applied to universities in the United Kingdom to study policy and international affairs. Several institutions accepted me, but one name stayed with me: the University of Sheffield.

It was exhilarating, but also terrifying, to make that decision. I did not have to make it with family wealth. Financing a master’s degree abroad meant taking an education loan and risking a lot on an uncertain future. I signed the papers anyway.

In England, I completed my master's degree and returned to India in October 2010. For the next two years, I worked again, carrying with me new ideas and a broader understanding of the world. Yet the restlessness had not disappeared. If anything had grown stronger, it was my keenness to explore cultural diversity in depth. I was eager to learn how public policy could be used not merely to govern, but to create dignity, accountability, and justice. I wanted to explore the world beyond textbooks and conference rooms.

For a long time, I fantasised about crossing oceans and immersing myself in other civilisations to learn about their economic and social systems. I wanted to traverse landscapes marked by the horrors of war and genocide, from Cambodia to Bosnia and Kosovo. Above all else, I aspired to work with the United Nations, climb Mount Kilimanjaro and the Alps, and stand before the Pyramids.

These were not practical dreams. They were expensive, uncertain, and often difficult to explain. But I had learnt that the heart rarely speaks the language of practicality.

In 2012, I finally resigned from my job. I used my savings to apply for a second master's degree in human rights and democratisation at a prestigious institution in Venice, which was supported by the European Union. The campus was unlike anything I had ever imagined: a centuries-old cathedral on the small island of Lido, surrounded by the quiet beauty of the Venetian lagoon.

The day the acceptance email arrived, I read it several times before I allowed myself to believe it.

People often ask whether I was afraid.

The honest answer is yes.

I was afraid of failure, of debt, of uncertainty, of disappointing the people who believed in me. But I never allowed the fear of the future to become stronger than the pull of my dreams. My plans were not always clear, and the road ahead was rarely visible, yet I trusted

something deeper than certainty.

I trusted myself.

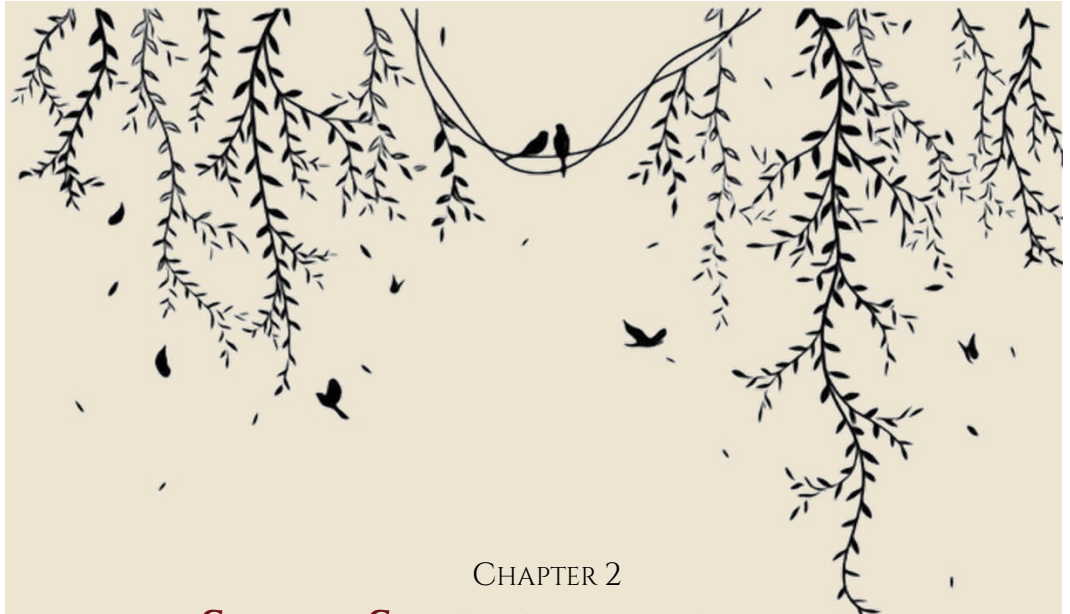
Someone once said that if we wait for the perfect moment to take a risk, that moment may never come. As they say, “Jump and then think; do not think before you jump if you really wish for that leap.” So I stopped waiting. I listened to my heart, packed my bags, and boarded a flight to Italy. I arrived in Venice with two suitcases, a handful of savings, and a heart full of impossible dreams. I became part of a remarkable academic community, surrounded by students from around the world, each with their own story and hopes for the future.

Our lives are not painted only in the colours we choose, but more by the tints they leave on the canvas of our lives. My life had all the luxuries, but what stayed with me was the idea of creating everything myself. My father is a successful politician who had then already served as minister in the state of Bihar. I direly needed to protect this journey of mine from any such factors and to carry forward everything very much by myself. Everyone who already knew me could not believe in the high I was planning for myself. But the ‘Anand’ in me was determined that if it had to, it had to be this way. The penny does not count so much as the living and learning does.

I had taken the leap.

What I did not know then was that this leap would lead me to Padova, to Geneva, to the United Nations, and ultimately to a version of myself I had not yet met.





CHAPTER 2

SNOW, SEPARATION, AND THE BEGINNING OF THE NORTH

“Every departure is a small death inside, and every arrival, a small resurrection.”

The first semester had finally come to an end, and I found myself in Rome, carrying a suitcase filled with books, memories, and uncertainty. My destination was not Italy's eternal city, however. Rome was merely a transit point in a much larger journey, one that would take me to Finland for the second semester of my European Master's programme.

Yet before Finland could welcome me, there remained one final hurdle: 'the visa'.

My financial situation was precarious. The bank statements I carried were far from reassuring, and I was painfully aware that my documents might not satisfy the requirements for a six-month residence permit. As I walked into the Finnish Embassy in Rome, I

carried more anxiety than confidence. Every question from the visa officer felt like an examination of not only my papers but also my dreams. I submitted the application with trembling hands and stepped out into the Roman afternoon with a strange mixture of hope and despair.

The wait began.

Leaving Venice had been far more painful than I had anticipated. During those first few months, Venice had ceased to be merely a city; it had become a home. We were eighty-seven students from more than forty countries, thrown together by chance and united by youth, curiosity, and ambition. We lived like a family. We studied together, argued together, watched television together, wandered through the narrow Venetian alleys together, and spent countless evenings hopping from one bar to another or inviting each other to our apartments for dinners that stretched long into the night.

We were from different countries, spoke different languages and had different histories, but nevertheless, we became intertwined. Then, all at once, we were scattered all over Europe. My roommates (Leo, Tigran, and Kamadi) were going somewhere else. I had a really close bond with Tigran, and I remember one of his habits: he used to go to attend the class every day after having a sip of Armenian brandy (konyak); it always baffled me. My female friends Julie, Edith, and Annie were departing for different universities. We tried to smile as we hugged each other goodbye, but beneath those smiles lay an unspoken fear: the fear that perhaps the moment was not a goodbye for six months but forever.

Looking back today, I realise that few farewells were indeed final. I never saw some of them again.

Zuhair. Kamadi. Vlad. And many others whose faces remain preserved in the museum of my memory.

At that age, however, we believed that youth could conquer distance and time. We promised to meet again, unaware that life had already begun writing different stories for each of us.

Two days after I submitted my visa application, I received a call informing me that my visa for Finland had been approved. I remember staring at the message for several seconds before fully understanding what it meant. Finland was no longer a dream. It had become a destination. I immediately booked my ticket on Finnair for the 26th of January, 2013.

What followed was perhaps my first lesson in the harsh economics of international journeys. At the airport, I discovered that web check-in was mandatory. Since I hadn't checked in online, I was forced to pay an extra twenty euros at the counter. It was an amount I could scarcely afford, but I had no choice. Then came the second blow. My luggage exceeded the permitted weight limit. The airline staff calmly informed me that carrying all my belongings would cost an additional four hundred and fifty euros. Four hundred and fifty euros. For a moment, I thought I had misheard.

My heart sank. Missing the flight was not an option, yet paying the amount was equally impossible. Panic slowly began to replace reason. I stood there surrounded by suitcases, exhausted and desperate. Then suddenly, an idea emerged. I called my friend Annie and asked if she could keep part of my luggage in Rome until I could return someday. She immediately agreed. The challenge was now getting the luggage to her apartment.

Without wasting another second, I booked a taxi, loaded half of my belongings into it, wrote down Annie's address, and sent my possessions into the Roman winter with complete faith that somehow everything would work out.

To this day, I still admire the optimism of my younger self. Without waiting for confirmation that the luggage had actually arrived, I

rushed back to the check-in counter. Then came the final boarding announcement. "The flight to Helsinki is now ready for boarding." The words echoed through the terminal. At that moment, my mind registered that I was leaving behind much more than just a city. I was leaving behind friendships, memories, and perhaps even a version of myself. I boarded the aircraft carrying only a fraction of my belongings but all of my emotions. After a long journey via Riga, I finally arrived at Helsinki International Airport shortly after midnight on the 27th of January, 2013. The Nordic winter greeted me without mercy.

The cold was unlike anything I had ever experienced. The wind cut through my clothes as though they did not exist. Snow swirled violently through the air. My body, accustomed to Indian winters, had no understanding of what minus fifteen degrees truly meant.

Yet there was no time to adjust. I had to catch a bus to Turku. Dragging my suitcase through the snow became an impossible task. The wheels refused to move. Every few metres I stopped to catch my breath.

Finally, swallowing my pride, I approached a stranger and asked for help. He looked at me carefully. Perhaps he saw my fear. Perhaps he saw my exhaustion. Or perhaps he simply noticed another lost backpacker. Without saying much, he helped me pull the luggage to the bus terminal. I boarded the bus just moments before departure. For the next three hours, I sat silently, staring through the window.

Everything outside looked unreal.

The roads were frozen. The rivers were frozen. The forests were frozen.

The entire world felt frozen beneath a blanket of white. I should have been excited. Instead, I felt empty. The journey from Rome had exhausted me physically, but the farewells had exhausted me

emotionally. Somewhere behind me, I had left a life I deeply loved. Ahead of me lay a future I could not yet imagine. Eventually, sleep overtook me. When I woke up, we had arrived in Turku.

The bus terminal was deserted. Snow fell heavily beneath dim yellow lights. The silence was terrifying. For the first time in my life, I truly missed India. In India, no railway station, airport, or bus terminal is ever completely empty. There is always noise, movement, and life. Here, there was nothing. Just silence and snow. I had no idea how to reach my apartment. The street signs were buried beneath ice. My phone battery was dying.

After standing alone in the freezing darkness for what felt like an eternity, I made perhaps the strangest decision of my life. I called an escort service. The voice on the other end initially refused. It was too late. Nobody wanted to come. I offered more money. There was silence. Then came the inevitable questions.

Nationality? Preferences? Appearance?

I was shivering too violently to care. "Send anyone," I said. "I just need help." After what felt like forever, headlights appeared through the snowstorm. A car stopped beside me. The woman introduced herself as Anakova. Without asking questions, she helped me load my luggage and drove me through the sleeping city of Turku. She even helped me carry my bags to my apartment. Once inside, I paid her.

Then, somewhat awkwardly, I explained that I had called only because I had been stranded and had no way to reach home. She smiled. Perhaps she understood loneliness better than most people.

Before leaving, she handed me her phone number. "Call me," she said softly, "if you ever need help." When the door closed behind her, I finally allowed myself to breathe. I collapsed onto the bed. That night, I dreamt of Rome.

I dreamt of walking near the Colosseum, hand in hand with someone I had left behind. And when I woke the next morning and looked out of my window, I forgot everything else. The city outside was white. Not merely covered in snow but rather revamped. Turku looked like heaven. The sunlight danced across the snow like millions of scattered diamonds. For several minutes, I simply stood there. I had arrived. Not merely in Finland. But in another chapter of my life. And I had absolutely no idea that this frozen city would change me forever.

Application Started in Finland

When I first arrived in Turku, I did not realise that I was entering not merely a new country but an entirely different emotional landscape. I had come to Finland as an exchange student at the Åbo Institute of Human Rights, carrying with me the excitement of a new academic journey and the emotional burden of leaving behind a life that had become deeply meaningful in Italy. Turku was beautiful, undoubtedly one of the most picturesque cities I had ever seen. Yet there was something profoundly melancholic about it. Almost every part of the city was covered in snow. The roads, rooftops, trees, rivers, and even the distant horizons had surrendered to an endless blanket of white. Standing near the window of my apartment on the first morning, I pulled the curtains aside and looked out in disbelief. The city resembled a canvas, a world sketched entirely with shades of graphite. A gust of freezing Nordic air struck my face as I slightly opened the window, immediately reminding me that I had entered a climate completely foreign to my body and mind. I was going to stay there for six months, and the realisation itself was terrifying.

Leaving Venice had been emotionally exhausting. Until only a few weeks before, I had spent every hour of the day surrounded by friends. We were eighty-seven students from over forty countries, living together, studying together, arguing, celebrating, cooking,

and dreaming together. My roommates Leo, Tigran, and Kamadi had become family. Friends like Julie and Annie had become indispensable parts of my daily existence. We spent evenings on Lido Beach, rode to Padova for bar hopping, sat through endless lectures, overcame difficult academic deadlines, and rewarded ourselves with cheap bottles of wine after each successful submission. Life in Venice was noisy, chaotic, exhausting, and beautiful. There was never a moment when I felt lonely.

Turku, on the other hand, felt like a ghost city. The population density was so low that some days I would walk for hours without seeing another human being. There were moments when an entire day passed without me speaking a single word to anyone. The silence was overwhelming. It slowly entered my mind and began affecting my emotions. Never before had I truly understood what loneliness felt like. I missed the chaos of India. I missed the laughter of Venice. I missed simply being around people. But there was no room for emotional surrender. I had come to Finland with two major objectives: to complete my master's thesis and to apply for the internship programme at the United Nations.

My thesis focused on education and its significance for marginalised communities. The timeline was brutal. I had barely four months to produce a piece of work that required not only academic rigour but also intellectual and emotional resilience. At the same time, various United Nations bodies had opened applications for internships, and they would announce the results by June. I made a promise to myself that I would complete the majority of my thesis before devoting my complete attention to the UN application process. From that day onwards, I completely immersed myself in my work. Every morning began with lectures and library visits, followed by endless hours of reading, writing, editing, and rewriting. The loneliness of Turku became my greatest enemy, but also, paradoxically, my greatest ally. I had nowhere else to go, nobody to meet, and nothing to distract me

from my goals.

The United Nations application process was one of the most demanding exercises I had ever undertaken. Every answer had to be precise, every statement had to be supported by evidence, and every word felt as if it could determine my future. I spent days refining my application before finally submitting it. Once it was done, I forced myself to forget about it and redirected my attention entirely to my thesis.

Gradually, Turku began revealing its softer side. Near the university and alongside the Aura River, I discovered a small café. It soon became my refuge and eventually my second home. Every afternoon after lectures, I would sit there for hours, surrounded by books, notes, and unfinished arguments for my thesis. After a few visits, the waiter began to recognise me, too. Without asking, he would place a cup of strong Italian coffee on my table and greet me with a warm smile. In a strange nation, such modest gestures can feel like acts of profound generosity. Slowly, I began to feel less like an outsider.

One morning, while still lying in bed beneath several layers of blankets, I opened my email. I read the message once, then twice, and then several more times to ensure I was not imagining it. My application had been shortlisted for the second round of interviews with the United Nations. For several moments, I remained frozen. Then I jumped out of bed and prepared what felt like a celebration feast: scrambled eggs, sausages, and strong coffee. It was perhaps the happiest breakfast I had eaten in months. On the bus to the university, the driver, who had grown accustomed to seeing me every day, greeted me with a smile. Our silent friendship had developed over weeks of routine encounters.

I began preparing obsessively for the interview. I read reports, studied international affairs, revised human rights conventions, and rehearsed answers repeatedly. Then, on the day of the interview, fate

decided to intervene. While preparing in my apartment, I heard an unusual noise outside. Curious, I stepped outside and saw a man attempting to steal a bicycle. Instinctively, I confronted him and chased him away. Until that moment, I had naively believed that countries like Finland were somehow immune to crime. Only after returning to my room did I realise the catastrophic mistake I had made. I had left my phone inside. It was a telephonic interview. My heart sank as I looked at the screen and saw two missed calls from Geneva.

I felt physically sick. I immediately sent an email explaining the bizarre situation and apologised profusely. Hours later, a brief response arrived informing me that the interview would be rescheduled. Relief flooded through me. I had been given another chance.

Meanwhile, I continued meeting my thesis supervisor regularly. He was patient, supportive, and instrumental in helping me adapt to life in Finland. During those months, I also observed something that deeply influenced my worldview: Finland's extraordinary commitment to gender equality. Women occupied positions of authority across academia and public life with remarkable confidence and competence. Coming from a society where patriarchy remained deeply embedded, witnessing this reality challenged many assumptions I had unconsciously carried with me.

Then, almost overnight, winter ended. Snow melted, rivers awakened, and colour slowly returned to the city. Trees became green once again. The Aura River flowed freely, and swans gracefully returned to the water. Turku transformed before my eyes. The ghost city became alive. During evenings, my friends and I would gather near the Turku Cathedral, carrying packets of chips and a few bottles of beer, and sit for hours beside the river discussing life, politics, dreams, and the uncertainty of our futures.

Then another email arrived. The United Nations interview had been rescheduled. This time, I was prepared. On the 10th of July, 2013, I appeared for the interview. The panel questioned me extensively on global affairs, human rights, and developments in India. One question centred on the horrific Nirbhaya rape case, which had shaken India and drawn international attention. It was perhaps the most difficult question of the interview. I found myself balancing honesty in between patriotism and criticism with a hope to choose the answer truthfully.

As the thesis deadline approached, I virtually moved into the university library. My daily diet consisted largely of croissants, tuna salad, and coffee. During breaks, I sat on the steps of Turku Cathedral, enjoying the rare warmth of the Finnish sun. Finally, after months of relentless effort, I submitted my thesis: one hundred and seventy pages of research, struggle, sacrifice, and perseverance.

The feeling that followed was indescribable.

It felt like winning the World Cup.

To save ten euros, I decided to bind the thesis myself and later spent the saved money on wine. When I finally held the completed thesis in my hands, I experienced an emotion I had never felt before. It felt as though I were holding a newborn child; it was my brain baby. Every page carried a part of me. That evening, we celebrated with cheap wine, snacks, and borrowed cigarettes. It was not an extravagant celebration, but it was perfect. Sitting there with my friends, laughing beneath the Nordic summer sky, I made a silent promise to myself.

One day, I will write this story.

Interview from Sarajevo

I submitted my thesis and returned to Padova, the historic heart of Italy. Padova was more than just a city; it was an idea, an academic sanctuary where Galileo Galilei had once studied, questioned, and reshaped humanity's understanding of the universe through reason and observation. Education seemed to flow through its streets like an invisible river, and the city itself felt alive, breathing history, scholarship, and centuries of intellectual curiosity. From the moment I arrived, I was captivated by its charm. The narrow cobbled streets, ancient alleyways, hidden piazzas, and endless arcades gave Padova a character unlike any other city I had known. There was a small café that I started visiting every morning before heading to the University of Padova. The owner soon recognised me and greeted me with a smile that felt familiar. Near the café, there was a piece of graffiti that caught my attention every single day. It read, "True Democracy Makers", accompanied by the image of a tank. I never fully understood its meaning, yet somehow it seemed to capture the contradictions of Europe itself, its long struggle between war and freedom, violence, and democracy.

The University of Padova fascinated me deeply. Walking through its historic corridors, I often found myself imagining Galileo himself crossing those same courtyards centuries earlier. The thought that one of the greatest minds in human history had once stood exactly where I was standing filled me with humility and wonder. History no longer felt distant; it felt tangible and alive. Padova also offered another luxury that had become essential to my life: free public Wi-Fi. Every day, I walked to the city centre to connect to the internet and speak with my family back in India. Those brief conversations became my emotional lifeline, reminding me that, despite the thousands of kilometres separating us, home was still only a voice away.

Yet beauty always carries contradictions. Having arrived directly from the Arctic climate of Finland, the Italian summer felt almost unbearable. In Turku, I had endured temperatures of minus fifteen degrees, while in Padova, the August sun seemed determined to punish me. The heat pressed down relentlessly, making every walk exhausting. What had once sounded romantic, an Italian summer, soon became oppressive. I quickly realised I could not stay in Padova. Movement had always been my response to uncertainty, and so I decided to do what many students dream of, but few actually attempt: I would go all over Eastern Europe. I planned a fifteen-day journey. It is commonly said that Germans meticulously plan their vacation itineraries, in contrast to people from developing countries who rely on instinct and improvisation to survive. I belonged entirely to the second category. I had no elaborate itinerary, no detailed maps, and very little money. I simply booked my first ticket and trusted that the rest would somehow unfold.



The 'True Democracy Makers' graffiti near the café in Padova.

Croatia was the start of my journey. It was my inaugural experience taking a bus across Europe, and I was astounded by how intricate the continent's network of roads and trains was. I abandoned the idea of planning altogether and decided to book each leg of the journey as I progressed. By evening, I arrived in Pula, a coastal Croatian city that left me in awe. Situated on the Adriatic coast, Pula possessed a quiet grandeur. Ancient Roman ruins stood beside crystal-clear waters, and the city was home to one of the best-preserved Roman amphitheatres in the world. The sea fascinated me more than anything else. I had never seen water in that colour before. It was not merely blue; it was every imaginable shade of blue. The Adriatic stretched endlessly, touching the horizon, shimmering beneath the summer sun. My hostel stood directly beside the beach. After completing the check-in formalities, I wasted no time and rushed for the water with the joy of a child discovering the ocean anew.

Then disaster struck. The moment I jumped into the sea, an unbearable pain shot through my foot. It felt as though thousands of needles had pierced my flesh simultaneously. I screamed and instinctively stumbled back towards the shore. Looking down, I saw blood flowing heavily from my foot. For several terrifying seconds, I had no idea what had happened. Nearby tourists rushed to help and explained that I had accidentally stepped on a sea urchin hidden beneath the rocks. Its venomous spines had embedded themselves deep into my skin. This was certainly not the welcome I had expected from Croatia. Yet somehow, even this painful initiation failed to diminish my excitement. After receiving basic treatment, I returned to the sea. Perhaps youth carries its own form of madness.

While the Adriatic calmed my body, my mind remained restless. I was still waiting for the outcome of my United Nations application, and the uncertainty followed me everywhere. The first thing I requested after checking into every hostel was not food or directions,

but the Wi-Fi password. That evening in Pula, I connected to the internet and opened my inbox. Two emails awaited me. My heart began to race. I opened the first email and immediately felt my stomach tighten. The division that had interviewed me had closed its recruitment process, and my application had been unsuccessful. I stared at the screen in disbelief. Months of effort had disappeared in a single sentence. For several moments, I simply sat there. Then I opened the second email. Another division within the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights had reviewed my profile and wanted me to participate in a second round of interviews. Relief arrived so suddenly that I almost laughed. The second email had saved my journey as well as my dream. However, the date of the interview was not stated. Therefore, I kept on touring, juggling the roles of tourist and candidate while waiting. The United Nations, I would later learn, operates according to its understanding of time. Whether dealing with genocide, war, or human rights crises, the anxieties of a single applicant rarely accelerate its machinery.

Pula prepared me for what came next: Bosnia. Ever since childhood, Bosnia had occupied a special place in my imagination. I was a student of history, and I knew Sarajevo had become the flashpoint for the First World War after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, Sophie. For years I had wanted to go to the city where the twentieth century had, in many ways, begun. The journey was complicated. After a few hours of confusion I found out that I had to go first to Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, before going on to Sarajevo. I met Arzoo, a Persian girl, in the Pula bus station, also going to Bosnia. Her gorgeous Arabic name implies desire or longing. We talked for a few minutes, and I found that she was a history student, studying war crimes and genocide. We had shared interests, as I was also quite interested in Bosnian history, so we decided to travel together. You can make friends easily in strange countries. Familiarity itself often bonds people

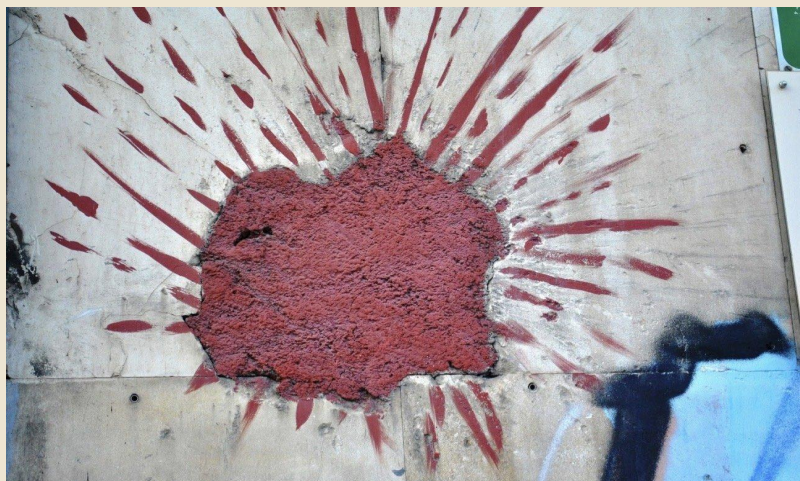
more tightly than fear, uncertainty, and curiosity.

We arrived in Zagreb with several hours to spare before our overnight bus to Sarajevo. Money was scarce, so we prepared our dinner, sandwiches, a small bottle of wine, and conversation. We spent the evening wandering through Zagreb's illuminated streets. Decorative lights reflected off historic buildings, and cars flowed through the city like rivers of light. Everything around us felt alive. Eventually, another familiar craving emerged. I wanted a cigarette. Unfortunately, I could not afford one. So I resorted to an old strategy. I began to watch strangers, hoping to read friendliness in their faces. Finally, I approached a young woman and politely asked whether she could spare a cigarette. To my surprise, she smiled and handed me an entire packet. Often humanity reveals itself in the smallest acts.

A short while later, the station was filled with an announcement. The bus to Sarajevo was coming in. I learned that the woman who had given me the cigarettes was also heading to Bosnia as we boarded. During the journey, she spoke passionately about Sarajevo, sharing its rich history and the resilience of its people. She also recounted the tragic events following the collapse of Yugoslavia: how Serbia and ethnic Bosnian Serbs, using former Yugoslav military equipment, attacked Bosniaks and laid siege to Sarajevo. Many Bosniaks were forced into concentration camps, where women and girls suffered systematic sexual violence, and countless civilians were tortured, starved, and killed. Dedicated camps were established for these atrocities, and children born of such violence became known as "war babies." This tragedy echoes the ancient myth of the "Rape of the Sabine Women", a stark reminder that, throughout history, women have endured oppression and brutality at the hands of men. By the time we arrived, she had invited us to stay at her apartment. We accepted immediately. I cancelled our hotel reservation without hesitation.

Trust is more valuable than comfort. Suddenly, we had a new friend, a place to stay, and a new city to explore.

After some rest and a small lunch, I could not wait to go out and explore the city. To my surprise, I did not find a single house in the capital that did not carry the marks of bullets on its walls, scars left behind from the collapse of Yugoslavia and the wars that followed the fall of communism. The city wore its history openly, in a way no textbook had ever prepared me for.



Bullet scars are still visible on the walls of Sarajevo.

I also visited the museum built around the assassination of the Archduke, walking through the very corner where his death had lit the fuse of the First World War. Displayed behind glass was the pistol used that day. Standing before it, I felt something heavier than curiosity. It struck me how a single act of violence and the wars that followed it could tear apart a society's fabric so completely, producing a mass exodus, atrocities, and unspeakable suffering for ordinary people who had wanted nothing more than to live their lives. And I could not help but think that decades later, in this same region, the world's institutions had failed again. The United Nations

had been too slow to stop the atrocities in time, and NATO¹, too, had not acted proactively enough to prevent the genocide that followed. History, it seemed, had tried to warn us twice.



The pistol used in the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, on display in the museum.

Yet beneath all this excitement, one question continued haunting me: when would the interview happen? Finally, the email arrived softly while I was in the Balkans. We were wandering about in the capital of Bosnia, named Sarajevo, out of internet contact. For hours, my BlackBerry device has been out of touch with the world, starved of even the smallest signal. It was only after we entered the centre of the city that my mobile became linked to the public network.

Suddenly, the stillness broke. The device buzzed frantically, as if to make up for lost time. The screen was bursting with notifications.

¹ North Atlantic Treaty Organization was founded in 1949 after the World War II to keep peace and stop threats, and the main office of NATO is in Brussels, Belgium.

Messages from my maa², notes from friends, and one email that would change my life.

I was curious and opened the email. My heart started to pound within seconds. It came from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. The anti-discrimination division wanted to interview me, and it was set for August 25th. I was very happy. A peculiar swirl of excitement opened in my gut, and the scenery of the city suddenly seemed brighter than before. The day appointed arrived. I was in Sarajevo, in a friend's apartment, and had prepared well for the call. Finally, at 12:05 p.m., my phone rang. My palms started to sweat from the force of my grip on the Nokia phone. And right at that time, maybe out of pure anxiousness, the phone fell off my hands. It fell and smashed on the floor. I believed my dream was over for one horrible second. Luckily it was Ina Nokia phone. It survived, like any good legend. For a moment I just stood there dumbfounded. When I finally got all the pieces of the phone back together, the call had long gone. I was devastated. So I immediately sent an apologetic email to the sender, describing the sad occurrence and seeking another opportunity. I was really relieved to get an answer shortly thereafter. They agreed to put off the interview until the next day. This time I was determined that nothing would go wrong.

The interview went on for about an hour. The panel questioned me about India, human rights, inequality, caste and social exclusion. The Anti-Discrimination Section of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights carried out the interview. They asked me about Dalits. About caste. About structural inequality. About discrimination built into the very fabric of society. Fortunately these were not only intellectual problems. Those were the exact questions I had researched for my thesis. A rush of

² In India, we lovingly call our mothers 'maa'.

realisation struck me. I stopped trying to impress people and just expressed the truth. When the interview was over, I sat quietly for a few minutes and thought about it. After weeks of doubt, I finally allowed myself to believe I could actually be heading to Geneva. The interview had gone well, and now the opportunity seemed genuine. The next day I got the news I had been praying for: they validated my internship. We negotiated the joining date and exchanged some final formalities, and the call ended.

The Geneva Ladder

I returned from our journey through Eastern Europe carrying a suitcase full of memories and a mind full of uncertainties. Twenty days had slipped past us without warning, as if time itself had conspired to move faster than usual. Compared to Eastern Europe, Padova felt warmer and almost oppressive, its familiar heat greeting me like an old companion whom I had once loved but no longer fully understood. Graduation day was approaching steadily, and with it came the unavoidable reality of defending my thesis. After submitting my thesis, I had never opened its pages again. It lay untouched, gathering dust and cobwebs, abandoned like a finished chapter of life. Perhaps that is how it often happens: the relief of submission is so immense that one refuses to revisit the struggle. Yet destiny had other plans. The European Inter-University Centre announced the dates of the thesis defences, and suddenly I was forced to reopen those pages that I had mentally buried weeks earlier.

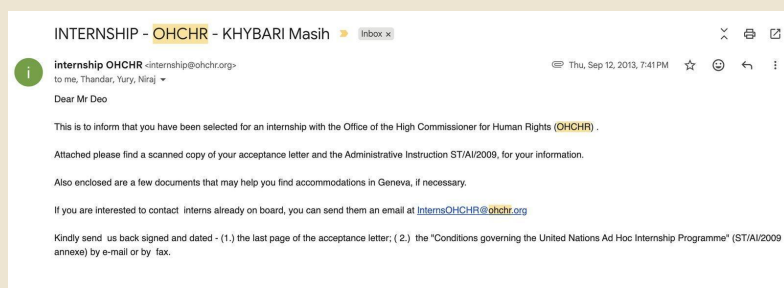
Strangely, I was not particularly anxious about the defence. I had written every page of that thesis with my sweat, perseverance, and determination. I knew every argument, every reference, and every conclusion because they had become part of my journey. Instead, my mind remained occupied with more immediate concerns: the United Nations internship application and the practical question of how I

would survive financially if I were selected. These were my final days in Italy, perhaps my final days as a student, and I tried to spend them meaningfully with my friends. Edith, Vlad, Annie, and Alex often gathered at our apartment. We cooked dinners together, watched films late into the night, and pretended that our lives were not about to diverge forever. Before my thesis defence, I even hosted three friends who had come to visit me in Padova.

One of them had come all the way from Poland. It was the first time I had seen her since the days at Sheffield. She was cheerful and a little plump, and her laugh was infectious enough to melt away anxiety. Driving back from the centre of Padova, we wrapped ourselves in stories, memories, and the rumours of our shared past. Time seemed to collapse as we remembered our student days in England. That afternoon, I prepared an Indian lunch for everyone. To my immense relief, they enjoyed it. Afterward, we went to Venice together, and we walked all evening through its timeless beauty. While they explored the city, I sat in a small coffee house, finishing and submitting one final essay. When I finally clicked the submit button, I experienced a freedom that only students can truly understand. We celebrated with warm food, snacks, and laughter.

Almost every day during those final weeks, I visited the University of Padova library. My routine had become mechanical: arrive at ten in the morning and leave around four in the afternoon. Most days, I carried my lunch; occasionally, I allowed myself the luxury of buying something small outside. Since our apartment lacked internet access, the library had become more than a place of study. It was my office, my refuge, and my window to the world. It was there that I checked my emails, prepared for my defence, and continued to plan for a future that remained uncertain. I was living on an extremely limited budget. My European journey was coming to an end, and perhaps another journey was about to begin, a journey to Geneva. Dreams cost money too, and I had very little of it.

Yet beneath this carefully constructed routine, anxiety quietly wrapped itself around me. I was waiting for the result of my United Nations internship application in Geneva, one of the most expensive cities in the world. To survive there, one required at least a thousand Swiss francs every month. I barely possessed a few scattered euros in my wallet. Nevertheless, I was determined that if selected, I would find a way. One morning, as I sat in the library, an email arrived from the human resources department of the United Nations. I opened it with trembling hands. I had been selected. I was expected to join the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on the first of October 2013.



The email that confirmed the internship: OHCHR, 12 September 2013.

For several moments, I could neither breathe nor think. My Polish friend sat beside me, and when she reflected what had happened, she was as joyous as I was. Without thinking, I embraced her tightly. We remained like that for several seconds before noticing that the entire library had fallen silent. Students around us stared in confusion, wondering what extraordinary event had provoked such emotion in a place dedicated to silence. We laughed awkwardly, but I knew deep inside that this moment represented the first rung of my Geneva ladder.

The euphoria lasted only briefly before reality asserted itself. I now had to arrange a visa, accommodation, transport, and enough money to survive in Switzerland. Then I discovered an even greater

problem: my passport was due to expire within a month. Without a passport valid for at least six months, obtaining a Swiss visa would be impossible. And without a visa, my dream of working at the United Nations would disappear before it had even begun. The nearest Indian consulate was located in Milan, and I had barely fifteen days left before I needed to arrive in Geneva. I had to act quickly.

Moving within Europe was not cheap for students, despite what many people believe. A return journey by train would have cost more than one hundred euros. Considering my financial situation, I chose the cheapest option available: a bus to Milan. The night before departure, I barely slept. My bus was scheduled for early morning, and I knew from experience that once I fell into a deep sleep, no alarm clock in the world could wake me. I set multiple alarms and somehow managed to wake up before dawn. Looking at the clock, I counted well that there was no room for hesitation. I jumped out of bed, hurried through my morning routine, and ran out of the apartment. The bus station was almost three kilometres away, and I was already running late.

Padova was still asleep. The streets were deserted. As I ran through the empty roads carrying my bag, I suddenly found myself thinking about India. Had the place been an Indian city, I would probably have been chased by stray dogs by now. Thankfully, Padova possessed neither stray dogs nor curious pedestrians. It was just me, running through the silent city in pursuit of a dream.

I reached the bus station with only minutes to spare. Soon after boarding, exhaustion overcame me, and I fell asleep. Three hours later, I arrived in Milan. After a short walk, I found myself standing in front of the magnificent Duomo di Milano. It was one of the places I had always dreamed of visiting. Standing there, looking up at its intricate Gothic architecture, I found it difficult to believe that I was

actually there. Construction of the cathedral had begun in 1386, during the height of European Gothic architecture, and for over six centuries it had remained a monument to faith, art, and human perseverance.

Eventually, I reached the Indian Consulate. The long queue outside felt strangely comforting. For a moment, it seemed as though I had been transported back to India, where waiting in lines is practically a cultural institution. After several hours, I submitted my application for passport renewal. The response shattered my optimism. The process would take at least sixty days. Sixty days. I had fifteen. The atmosphere inside the consulate felt deeply bureaucratic, and every service seemed to come with another fee attached. I walked out feeling defeated.

My heart sank with despair to depths I had never known before. Without a passport, there could be no Swiss visa. Without a Swiss visa, there would be no Geneva. Yet adversity has never weakened me; it has only sharpened my resolve. Gathering whatever courage remained, I walked to reach the Swiss Consulate. After a long walk through Milan, I arrived at a building so immaculate and polished that it resembled a luxury showroom more than a diplomatic mission. When my turn finally arrived, I explained everything to the counsellor: the internship, the expiring passport, and the visa letter from the United Nations. With folded hands and a voice that barely concealed my desperation, I asked for an exception.

The counsellor listened carefully. Then he took my passport and asked me to wait. I sat and waited. Every second felt monumental. I have always disliked passports. They symbolise the unequal distribution of freedom. The world speaks eloquently about human rights and equality, yet simultaneously creates systems that determine who may move freely and who must remain confined. Nations that once crossed oceans, conquered territories, and

colonised entire civilisations now defend their borders with suspicion and bureaucracy. Yet, sitting there in Milan, caught between hope and uncertainty, I was afraid of how fragile dreams can be and how persistently we pursue them, regardless of the obstacles we face.

Finally, the door opened. The counsellor called me forward. His expression revealed nothing. He began explaining that my passport lacked sufficient validity and, therefore. That word, therefore, struck me like an executioner's blade. Then came the rest of the sentence. Given the circumstances, the Swiss Consulate had decided to issue me a visa valid for one and a half months. For several moments, I simply stood there. Then I cried. Not politely. Not discreetly. I cried openly, tears streaming down my face as I thanked the gentleman with folded hands. Somehow, despite everything, God had brought me closer to my dream.

The victory, however, came with a warning. If I failed to renew my passport within those six weeks, I could be deported from Switzerland. Nevertheless, I had crossed the first major hurdle. Before returning to Padova, I once again visited the Indian Consulate and pleaded for an expedited passport renewal. The bureaucracy remained unmoved, but I left feeling lighter. I had not surrendered. That evening, while returning to Padova, I stopped at a small McDonald's because I was starving. Sitting there with my meal, I found myself reflecting on a strange truth: perhaps someone had been right when they said that McDonald's had become the modern cathedral, where millions gather every day to practise their own quiet rituals of survival.

I had fewer than ten days remaining before I would leave Italy. On the twentieth of September, I arrived at the university to defend the work that had consumed six months of my life. My stomach twisted with anxiety. Never before in my academic journey had I

encountered a thesis defence before an international panel of experts—a practice completely unknown in India.

This was my first true encounter with Western academia. When I entered the room and saw the distinguished professors seated before me, including Professor Novak, my confidence evaporated for a moment. My hands trembled. But gradually, as I began speaking, I found my rhythm. I spoke about discrimination in South Asia, about caste hierarchies, about educational exclusion, and about comparative experiences from Nigeria. For thirty minutes, I forgot my fear and simply spoke about what I knew.

When it was over, the panel smiled. I had survived. That evening, the EMA programme held a farewell celebration. I returned home, dressed carefully, and made my way back to the university campus before eventually joining my friends at Lido Beach. The night air carried a strange mixture of celebration and sadness. We laughed, we drank, and we pretended that nothing was ending. But deep down, I already knew: Italy had given me beautiful memories, while Geneva was ready to offer me a future.

The Price of a Dream

The days following my thesis defence felt strangely unreal. After years of constant pressure, I woke up free of assignments, deadlines, presentations, or examinations. I was, in every meaning of the phrase, a free bird. The rigid routines of academic life that had governed my existence across Sheffield, Venice, and Turku had finally loosened their grip on me. Yet freedom itself brought an unfamiliar anxiety. In less than two weeks, I was expected to begin my internship at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva. Caught between the joy of achievement and the fear of the unknown, I found myself in a curious state of emotional limbo.

I decided that before life propelled me into another chapter, I would surrender myself completely to Venice. No city in the world deserved to be rushed through. Venice was not merely a city; it was an emotion, a living museum floating on water, a civilisation suspended between history and imagination. Every morning I took the train from Padova to Venice, without any real destination in mind. Some days, I wandered through its labyrinthine alleys, losing myself intentionally among ancient buildings and forgotten courtyards. On other days, I sat for hours near the Rialto Bridge, watching gondolas glide beneath me while tourists from every corner of the world marvelled at the city's impossible beauty. Quite a few times I would take the vaporetto to Murano and Burano, admiring the vibrant houses and centuries-old traditions that had endured through the years. Occasionally, I simply entered a small wine shop, ordered a glass of local wine, and sat quietly, allowing Venice to reveal itself to me one moment at a time.

There was something profoundly melancholic about Venice. Beneath its beauty, one could touch its fragility. The city seemed aware of its mortality, as though it knew that one day the waters that sustained it might also consume it. Yet perhaps that very fragility made Venice so beautiful. It existed not in defiance of time, but in conversation with it. Walking through Saint Mark's Square at sunset, listening to distant church bells echo across the canals, I often found myself wondering how many millions of footsteps had crossed these stones before mine. Merchants, emperors, artists, lovers, and dreamers had all passed through this floating city. For a brief moment, I too had become part of its history.

Every morning, after allowing myself a few hours of wandering, I returned to Padova and headed directly to the university library. My friends believed that I was preparing for my internship. In truth, I

was preparing for survival. With every step to the library, my mind raced six months ahead. Geneva loomed before me like an impossible paradox. It was beautiful, prestigious, and terrifyingly expensive. Friends who had lived there had warned me repeatedly about the cost of living, and they had not exaggerated. Accommodation alone could consume a small fortune. Food was expensive. Transportation was expensive. Even the smallest pleasures seemed to require financial calculations. I found it strangely ironic that I was preparing to work at one of the world's most important institutions while simultaneously worrying about whether I could afford a cup of coffee.

I sat in the library with a notebook and began doing calculations. Rent, transportation, food, emergency expenses, and other unavoidable costs. I recalculated several times, hoping that mathematics itself might take pity on me. Unfortunately, numbers are cruelly honest. To survive six months in Geneva, I would require at least ten thousand Swiss francs. I opened my wallet and counted what remained of my savings. Five hundred euros. Perhaps a little less.

I remember staring at that figure for a very long time.

For once since receiving the internship offer, fear outweighed excitement. The possibility that I might never even begin the internship or, worse, have to abandon it halfway due to financial hardship filled me with an indescribable sadness. I had crossed too many borders, endured too many disappointments, and sacrificed too much to stop now. Yet dreams, however noble, do not pay rent.

I often laughed at the irony of my situation. I had somehow secured an internship in Geneva, the heart of international diplomacy and one of the world's largest financial centres, where trillions of dollars rested comfortably inside Swiss banks, untouched and invisible. And there I was, wondering how I would afford dinner.

Still, surrender was never an option because I knew that every cloud had a silver lining.

I sat in the library for hours, staring through the windows, gazing at the distant horizon. Somewhere beyond those clouds lay Geneva. Somewhere between Lake Geneva and the Alps, I would have to build a temporary life for myself. The question was not whether I would survive. The question was how.

Slowly, a plan began to form.

I decided to begin with my own country.

Armed with little more than determination and an unreliable internet connection, I opened Google and began searching for the contact details of Members of Parliament from India. I spent hours reading about them, studying their backgrounds, public statements, and philanthropic activities. I selected around twenty individuals whom I believed might understand the significance of a young student securing an internship at the United Nations. Then I drafted a letter.

I wrote carefully and honestly. I explained who I was, where I had come from, the nature of the internship, and the financial barriers that threatened to end my journey before it began. I explained that opportunities such as these were rare and that I was willing to work harder than anyone else if only I could survive long enough to prove myself. Then, one by one, I sent the emails.

When the final email disappeared into cyberspace, I sat back in my chair and felt a strange sigh of relief.

I will not mention names. Their identities are unimportant now. What matters is that those emails still exist in my inbox today, unanswered and unopened, silent monuments to hope.

Yet strangely, I was not disappointed.

I had never truly expected a response. But I knew that if I had not written those letters, I would have spent the rest of my life wondering whether one email, one conversation, or one act of goodness might have changed everything.

Having crossed that bridge, I expanded my efforts. I wrote to prominent industrialists, philanthropic organisations, influential public figures, and even the Chief Minister of Bihar. I explained my situation repeatedly, modifying each letter slightly while preserving the same underlying truth. I was not asking for charity. I was asking for an opportunity to survive long enough to fulfil my dream.

Again, silence.

But by then, I understood something fundamental about the world. Generosity often requires visibility. Compassion frequently seeks recognition. I possessed neither fame nor influence. I was not the son of a big politician, nor the beneficiary of institutional patronage. I belonged to no category that demanded attention. I was simply another young man from India carrying a dream larger than his financial circumstances.

Oddly enough, this realisation did not weaken me; it made me stronger.

I made a promise to myself that evening while walking alone through the streets of Padova. I would complete this internship, even if it meant sleeping on the streets of Geneva. Even if I had to survive on bread and water. Even if I had to endure scarcity, loneliness, and uncertainty. I refused to let financial barriers hold me back.

A few days later, a single response arrived. It was from the Reliance Foundation.

The message was polite, professional, and apologetic. Their corporate social responsibility policy, they explained, did not permit

direct support to individuals without a structured process. I read the email several times.

Then I smiled.

At least someone had replied.

At least someone had acknowledged that I existed.

I sent a thank-you email immediately.

The following day, I revised my strategy once again. This time, I looked beyond India. I wrote to international charities, missionary organisations, think tanks, foundations, and members of the European Parliament. I had heard stories about the generosity of European institutions and faith-based organisations. I refused to leave any possibility unexplored.

Days passed.

Then weeks.

Again, silence.

Only later did I confront a difficult truth. Perhaps I had been naïve. Perhaps compassion, like everything else in the world, often operates within invisible boundaries of identity, faith, and familiarity. For a fleeting moment, I even wondered whether declaring allegiance to a different religion might have altered my fate. The thought embarrassed me almost immediately.

Some things cannot be negotiated.

Some identities cannot be exchanged.

And some dreams must be pursued without compromise.

In the end, I put my faith elsewhere. No longer did I rely on politicians, institutions, or philanthropy. Instead, I chose to trust the universe, my God, and that mysterious, inexplicable force that had carried me this far. Throughout my journey, whenever every door

had closed, somehow another had opened. As I watched the sun set over Padova one evening, I comprehended that faith might simply be another word for refusing to give up.

Walking towards the Unknown

The days passed quickly, not because they were light or carefree, but because I kept myself relentlessly occupied. Every morning began with the same ritual, and every evening ended with the same unanswered questions. I was constantly searching for affordable accommodation, looking for a benefactor who might support my internship, and desperately trying to establish some footing in Geneva before I arrived there. On the surface, I appeared busy, almost optimistic. Beneath that carefully maintained routine, however, my heart was gradually sinking. Days had passed since I had written to Members of Parliament, industrialists, foundations, charities, and countless organisations across India and Europe. My inbox was painfully silent. I was equally disappointed with my experience of Couchsurfing and other hospitality platforms that connected voyageurs with hosts willing to provide free accommodation. I found the idea really interesting. It almost seemed too beautiful to be true that strangers would give their houses to voyageurs simply because they believed in humanity. But it did not seem that fate was inclined to try such generosity on my behalf. One by one, my requests were declined or simply ignored. Each rejection pushed me closer to an uncomfortable reality. I would soon be landing in Geneva without a confirmed place to stay. It was a reckless decision, one that felt like walking barefoot on the edge of a sharpened sword, yet I had reached a stage where uncertainty had become my only companion.

Almost every day I found myself returning to Padova railway station with my laptop tucked beneath my arm. The station had become my temporary office. Padova was a remarkably modern city,

and public Wi-Fi was available in many places, but nowhere was the signal as reliable as inside the station. I would find the same corner every morning, connect to the internet, and begin the familiar routine of searching rental websites, refreshing my inbox, sending applications, and hoping that somewhere, someone might answer. It was repetitive work, exhausting in its monotony, but hope often survives through repetition. Every new email carried the possibility of changing my future, howsoever unlikely that might seem.

It was during one of those ordinary mornings that an unexpected incident unfolded. I was completely absorbed in my laptop when I noticed a man, probably in his late forties, quietly take the seat beside me. At first, he appeared friendly enough. He asked where I was from, what I was studying, and how long I had been living in Italy. I answered politely, believing it to be nothing more than harmless conversation. Gradually, however, the discussion became increasingly personal. Without hesitation, he asked whether I had a girlfriend. Feeling uncomfortable discussing my private life with a stranger, I simply answered no.

His expression changed immediately.

A smile spread across his face, one that I failed to understand until it was too late. Within moments, I felt someone groping my hand. I turned instinctively and saw the man sitting beside me rubbing my hand in a disturbingly inappropriate way. I froze. For a few seconds, I could neither react nor fully understand what was happening. It was my first direct experience of sexual harassment, and I had no idea how to respond. I felt vulnerable, exposed, and strangely powerless. Gathering all my courage, I looked at him and firmly asked him to leave. The man stood up immediately and walked away without creating a scene. But as he left, he turned back and looked at me with a disturbing smile that lingered in my mind long after he had disappeared. For several minutes I remained seated in

silence, staring blankly at my computer screen without seeing a single word. Slowly, my thoughts drifted elsewhere.

They drifted to issues faced by women.

For years I had studied human rights, gender justice, and discrimination. I had read reports describing harassment, molestation, abuse, and sexual violence. I had listened to survivors narrate experiences that were impossible to imagine fully unless one had lived through them. That brief encounter at the station was insignificant compared to the horrors millions of women endure throughout their lives, yet for once, I experienced a faint glimpse of what it meant to have one's personal space invaded without consent.

The feeling refused to leave me.

I found myself thinking about the countless women who had experienced unwanted touches, harassment, intimidation, or assault at least once in their lifetime. I thought about how vulnerable public spaces often become for women, where an ordinary journey can suddenly transform into a frightening memory. As someone pursuing a career in human rights, the incident reinforced something I had always believed: dignity is perhaps the most precious human right, and protecting the dignity of women and girls remains one of humanity's greatest unfinished responsibilities. Reports by the United Nations and the World Health Organisation estimate that nearly one in three women globally experience physical or sexual violence at some point in their lives. Reading those figures in academic reports had once seemed like statistics. That afternoon, they became deeply human.

Lost in these reflections, I completely lost track of time. Eventually, a station employee approached me politely and informed me that the railway station was closing for the night. Unlike the bustling stations of India, which seem alive twenty-four hours a day, many European railway stations close during the night for cleaning and

maintenance. Passengers are expected to leave until the following morning. Gathering my laptop and bag, I quietly stepped outside and began walking back to my apartment through the peaceful streets of Padova.

That evening, I once again sat down with my notebook and began planning the days ahead. Time was slipping away quickly, and my departure for Geneva was approaching. Besides accommodation, another practical problem remained unresolved. I needed formal shoes, a shirt, and a decent pair of trousers suitable for working at the United Nations. Buying everything brand new was simply impossible. Every euro I spent now reduced my chances of surviving those first uncertain weeks in Geneva.

It was then that one of my friends suggested something I had never considered before.

"Go to the flea market," he said. "You'll find everything there."

Curious, I visited one of Padova's weekend flea markets. What I discovered surprised me completely. There were rows upon rows of jackets, shoes, shirts, trousers, books, furniture, bicycles, and countless household items, all in remarkably excellent condition. Many of these items came from families who simply no longer needed them. The proceeds from their sale often supported charities, elderly care homes, and community organisations. I found the idea both practical and deeply compassionate. Rather than allowing perfectly usable possessions to become waste, people gave them a second life while simultaneously helping those in need. It was sustainability and generosity working together.

After carefully searching through the stalls, I found a pair of formal shoes that looked almost new, along with a neatly pressed shirt and a pair of trousers. They cost only a fraction of what I would have paid in a regular store. Walking back with my purchases, I smiled to myself. Mostly survival is not about earning more. Majorly, it is

simply about learning how wisely others have built their societies.

Despite counting every euro, there was one purchase I could not resist making.

I wanted to carry something back home for my maa.

After much searching, I found it on Murano Island, famous throughout the world for its centuries-old tradition of handcrafted glass. It was a delicate glass ornament, shaped patiently by fire, breath, and extraordinary craftsmanship. Holding it carefully in my hands, I thought of my maa back in India. It was not expensive, but it carried something that money could never measure. It carried a part of Venice itself.

Then, almost without warning, the thirtieth of September arrived.

It was time to say goodbye to Italy.

As I packed my bags that evening, memories flooded my mind. Italy had given me much more than academic credits—it had offered friendships that spanned continents, conversations that broadened my perspective, and experiences beyond anything a classroom could provide. I had fallen in love with Venice, with its timeless canals and impossible beauty. I had admired the quiet dignity of Padova, where history and learning walked side by side. I had wandered through Florence, where every street seemed to breathe romance and Renaissance art. I had stood in Rome, humbled by centuries of civilisation, finally understanding why the world says that Rome was not built in a day.

That night, I cooked one final meal for myself, smoked salmon with potatoes, a simple dinner that had somehow become my favourite during my academic days. It tasted different that evening. Every bite carried the quiet awareness that tomorrow everything would change.

The following morning, I woke before sunrise. After checking my luggage one final time, I loaded everything into a taxi. The railway station was not particularly far from my apartment, yet the journey seemed unusually long. During those thirty minutes, my entire year in Italy unfolded before my eyes like scenes from an old film. I remembered my first nervous days in Venice, the laughter shared with friends, endless academic discussions, sleepless nights before examinations, train journeys across Europe, and quiet evenings spent watching the canals shimmer beneath the setting sun. Every street corner seemed eager to remind me that I was leaving behind far more than a place.

When my train finally arrived, I boarded without saying a word.

Normally, I would have reached for my phone immediately. Social media had become my digital diary, a place where every new destination and every milestone found its way into photographs and cheerful captions. On any other journey, I would probably have written something like "On my way to Geneva. A new chapter begins."

That day, my phone remained inside my bag.

Some journeys are too personal to share.

As the train gathered speed, Italy slowly disappeared behind me. Vineyards, villages, and distant mountains slipped past the window while my mind wandered through memories. When the ticket inspector arrived, I handed over my ticket almost mechanically. I could barely remember where I was. My thoughts drifted between excitement and fear, between gratitude and uncertainty. Somewhere along the journey, exhaustion finally overcame emotion, and I fell asleep.

I woke only briefly when Swiss customs officials entered the compartment after the train crossed the border. I handed them my

passport and visa without saying much. They examined the documents, nodded politely and returned them to me. I thanked them softly, leaned back against the window, and closed my eyes once again.

The train continued its journey to Geneva.

So did my life.

Neither of us knew what awaited at the next station.

The train raced forward, slicing through the landscape as I moved steadily closer to my destination. I have always loved getting around on European trains. They feel less like transport and more like a moving world, fully equipped with modern amenities, a refined restaurant car, and a digital screen that quietly tracks every kilometre like a living map.



A road sign pointing the way into Geneva.

As an Indian, I had never experienced such effortless precision. Back home, a train announces its presence loudly, with the whistle of the engine, the grinding rhythm of wheels, and the unmistakable stench of the toilet. Without these familiar sounds and smells, my mind struggles to recognise something as a train at all. What I was riding now felt like pure luxury. My mind refused to register it merely as a

train; it felt closer to a dream gliding on steel rails.

I had always fantasised about journeys like these, and now the fantasy had materialised. When I looked back at my life, I reflected that many of my dreams, once distant and improbable, had come true through persistence and relentless effort. I did not come from privilege. Every ambition I carried demanded hard work, sacrifice, and unwavering resolve. This journey to Geneva was meant to stand as proof of that resolve, of my determination, my thriving, and my faith in myself.

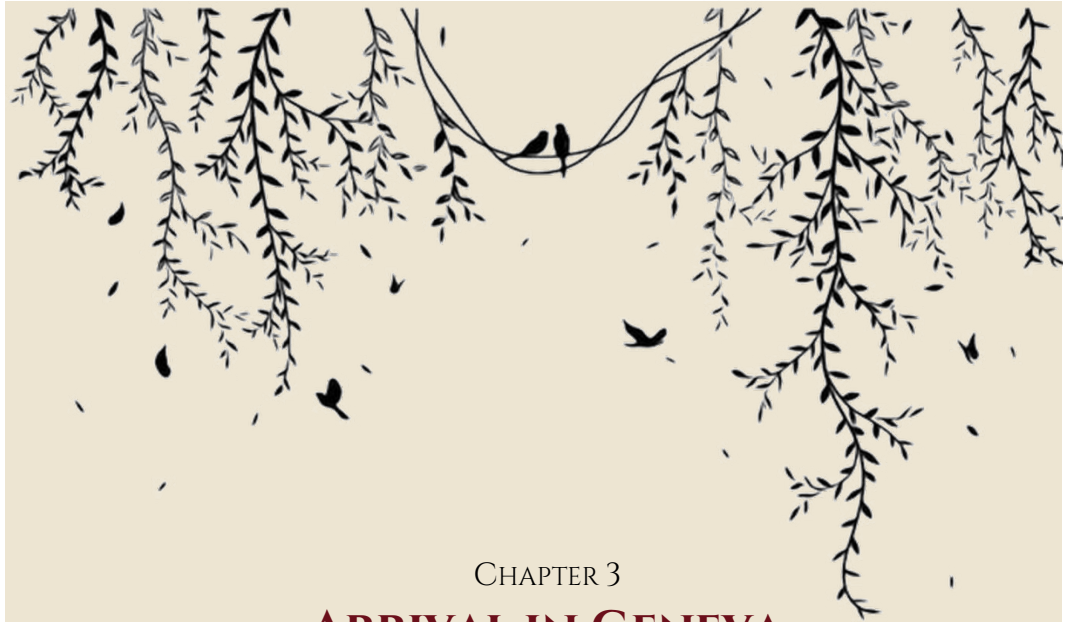
Yet, excitement had a shadow cast of uncertainty. In a few hours, I would arrive in a land completely unknown to me. I had no idea where I would stay or how I would survive in Geneva. The root of my anxiety was simple and brutal: money. I had no financial cushion to support my six-month internship. Still, my faith in myself was vast, standing taller than the Great Wall of China. And so, I refused to let fear paralyse me.

I leaned against the window, watching another train flash past, and imagined stepping outside into the biting cold. I wanted to harden myself, physically and mentally, for the trials that awaited me. Outside, rain lashed down relentlessly, as if the sky itself were warning me of the hardships ahead. Like a child, I began to entertain a foolish wish: that the train might be delayed by six hours. Arriving in Geneva at dawn would mean saving money on a night's stay and avoiding the cruel winter darkness.

But I knew I was deceiving myself. These trains were never late.

Lost in thought, I was startled by the announcement echoing through the cabin: we were approaching Geneva station. My heart raced. Excitement bubbled inside me; I was on the edge of my dreamland, finally arriving at a place I had imagined for years.





CHAPTER 3

ARRIVAL IN GENEVA

"A city does not open its doors to you. You have to keep knocking until your courage answers."

Looking for a Hostel

The train finally arrived, pulling me out of the labyrinth of my thoughts. I stepped onto the platform with sudden euphoria, dragging my luggage behind me. My eyes sparkled with disbelief, and my heart pounded wildly with excitement. I was in Geneva. It took a few moments, and a few cold raindrops on my face, for the reality to sink in.

I looked around. Rain fell steadily, and the streets beyond the station lay almost deserted. It was late, the hours when a city exhales and retreats into silence. I stood there in the rain, weighing my options, my mind racing. A tear welled up, partly because I had not yet recovered from leaving Italy behind and partly because the cold and rain seeped into my bones. The winter here was unforgiving,

squeezing warmth out of my body inch by inch.

I gathered what little strength remained and made a quiet promise to myself: I would not let this hostility defeat me. Staying at the station was not an option; I already knew, from Padova, that European stations do not stay open through the night. With nowhere to rest my head, I turned to Google for help.

The search revealed something astonishing: Geneva had only two hostels. I have been to many countries and cities, but never anywhere have I felt so unaccommodating. Worse, both hostels were outrageously expensive: thirty euros for one night. I observed that Geneva was the purest form of capitalism: efficient, but cold and merciless to those without money. Wealth was welcome; otherwise, one was left to fend. It was an open-world tax haven for fortunes and shadows, but I was neither rich nor powerful. I was just a weary stranger, all alone in the rain. The rain reminded me of Charlie Chaplin, who once famously said, "I always like walking in the rain so no one can see me crying," and it was an apt saying, as I was also unnoticed in the rain.

One hostel was a kilometre away and had only one bed left. The other was fully booked. I didn't hesitate. I began to run.

With heavy luggage in tow, I hurried through unfamiliar streets, my breath visible in the cold air. Finding the hostel felt like a Herculean task. The streets were eerily empty, save for a few drunks and loiterers drifting aimlessly. There was no one to ask for directions. I ran from corner to corner, soaked by rain, sweating despite the freezing winter.

At last, I reached the hostel. A guard stood at the gate. "Do you have a reservation?" he asked. "Yes," I replied quickly.

He instructed me to open the gate using the passcode sent during booking. My phone battery had died. The screen was black, useless.

The guard studied my face, weighing my words against my appearance. I told him the truth, half-broken and half-pleading: my battery had drained, and I couldn't remember the code. After a brief pause, he opened the gate.

I went straight to the reception on the third floor, dragging my luggage up with me. A man behind the desk looked me up and down. I was drenched, exhausted, and visibly defeated. Pity flickered in his eyes.

"What do you want?" he asked. "I need a bed for one night," I said softly.

He sighed and apologised. The last bed had just been booked minutes earlier. The hostel was full. Desperation took over. I explained my situation and had nowhere else to go. I begged him to let me sleep on the couch. I was willing to pay. He refused, gently but firmly.

The day had drained me completely, physically and emotionally. Once, my Maa would have stood beside me, steady and reassuring, facing every hardship together. I missed her gentle touch on my head and a pat on my shoulder. Tonight, I stood alone. There was no one to lean on, no familiar voice to comfort me. And yet, somewhere deep inside, I knew this was a moment I had to survive on my own and emerge stronger, no matter how unforgiving the night. Silently, I wished for nothing more than a bed for the night. Trusting the universe to guide me during my stay in Geneva, I suddenly noticed a man through the hostel's glass window. His appearance felt almost miraculous; he looked Indian. The sight itself felt like warmth in the freezing night. I felt a quiet peace within me, and with renewed hope I stepped inside.

International Youth Centre

I introduced myself and explained why I had come. Hesitantly, almost apologetically, I asked if I could sleep on the couch for the night. He listened patiently but shook his head. The city council, he explained, did not allow such arrangements. Every guest had to be provided with a proper bed, and violating the rule invited a heavy penalty. He couldn't help me directly, but he didn't turn me away either. Instead, he picked up the phone and called another hostel, International Youth Centre, to check availability. I watched his face intently as he spoke, silently praying. When he hung up, he looked at me and said, "There's been one cancellation. A bed is free." Then came the condition. I had fifteen minutes to reach the other hostel. If I missed that window, I would lose the bed and my last chance for a safe night.

I took a deep breath, grabbed all my belongings, and rushed downstairs. With a laptop bag slung over my shoulder, a backpack clinging to my back, and two suitcases in my hands, I began to run. The weight made every step harder, but I had no choice. I ran through the cold, through the snow, through my own panic. I couldn't tell whether my clothes were wet from melting snow or soaked in sweat. My mind shut out everything except one thought: reach there on time. The Youth Centre was much farther than I had expected, but somehow I made it five minutes early.

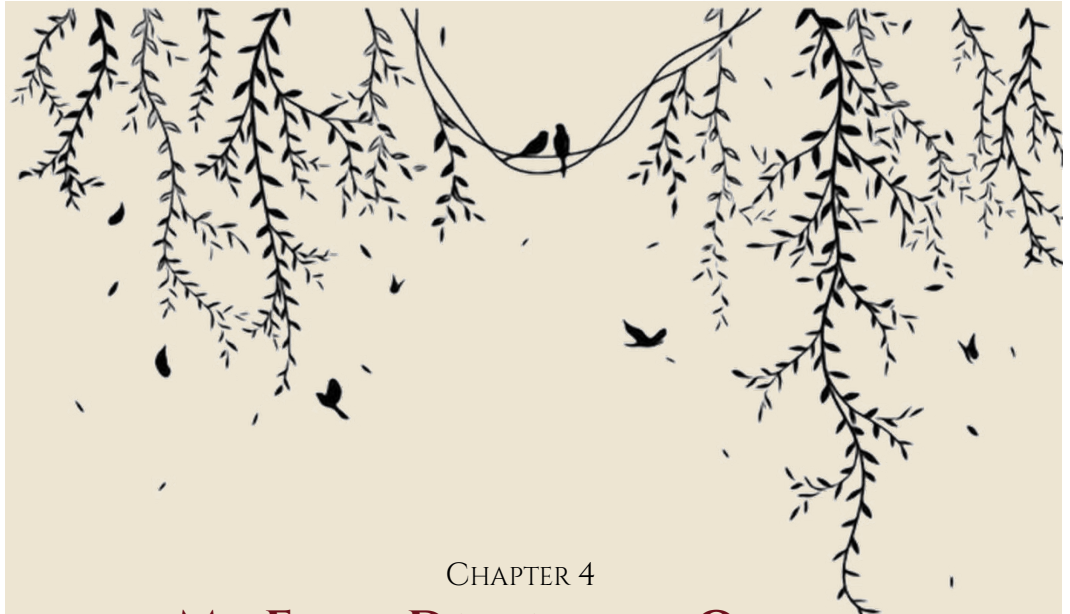
The receptionist greeted me with a smile that felt like a reward for survival. I made it. I finally had a safe place to sleep. I handed over my passport at the reception and collapsed onto the couch, gasping for breath. After a few minutes of rest, I completed the formalities, gathered my bags, and made my way to the dormitory.

All I wanted was to fall onto the bed and disappear. I was utterly drained. The moment I reached my assigned bunk, my body surrendered. Before sleep claimed me, I managed to send a single

message to Maa, letting her know I had reached safely. I knew she was waiting.

Then I slept, shoes on, sweater wrapped around me, like a dead man. I do not remember when or how sleep came. I only knew that I needed it desperately. I had not slept the previous night either; the city we had left behind had given us no time for rest, only for goodbyes.





CHAPTER 4

MY FIRST DAY AT THE OFFICE

"Fear walks into every new room first. Courage simply learns to walk in behind it."

I had to report to the office at 9:30 a.m., so I woke up on time and prepared myself carefully. Dressed in my formal attire, I appeared every bit the gentleman I wanted to be that morning. At the hostel, I had a simple English breakfast, enough to steady myself for the day ahead. I longed for a cup of Italian coffee before leaving, something strong and comforting, but the counter had none. I usually avoided starting my day with coffee, yet that morning felt different. I was nervous, visibly weary, and quietly anxious. With no choice left, I let the thought go.

Before stepping out, I paused. I whispered a short prayer, thought of my parents, and drew strength from their blessings. Then I stepped onto the streets of Geneva, my first true introduction to the city.

Geneva unfolded before me like a carefully curated painting. Tall buildings rose confidently against the sky, the roads were spotless, and luxury brand stores lined the streets with understated elegance. The air carried a sweetness I could not ignore, the aroma of freshly baked confections drifting from nearby bakeries, adding warmth to the city's polished beauty.

I have always had a weakness for croissants, and the scent was irresistible. Unable to resist, I stepped into a small shop and made my first purchase in Geneva. The croissant was exquisite, flaky, buttery, and comforting. I ate it slowly, breaking it into small pieces, unwilling to let the moment end too soon. With each bite, I continued my walk, savouring both the taste and the city.

After about twenty minutes, I found myself standing near the headquarters of the United Nations. A quiet thrill rushed through me as I looked at the building. I had dreamed of this moment for years, and now I was standing right there, close enough to touch a long-held aspiration. For a few seconds, it did not feel real. And yet, it was. I was in Geneva, standing before a place that symbolised everything I had worked for.

My happiness was limitless. Every struggle, every obstacle I had crossed to reach this point suddenly felt worthwhile. A satisfaction and contentment settled within me. That day, I understood something important about myself: I am easily pleased by excellence. Yet, at the same time, my soul is never done; it continues to search, quietly and persistently, for something better.

Searching the Office

My next task was to locate the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, OHCHR, situated slightly away from the main United Nations complex. I scanned the avenue lined with imposing

buildings. The headquarters of ITU³ stood proudly, WIPO⁴ gleamed nearby, and the familiar presence of UNHCR⁵ caught my eye. Yet the one building I was searching for remained elusive.

Even as I admired the architectural gravity of each institution, a quiet anxiety crept in. Time was slipping through my fingers. My reporting time was 9:30 a.m., and I had barely five minutes left. Just then, I noticed an elderly man walking, his posture dignified, his presence calm. I approached him and asked for directions, but fate refused to cooperate; he did not understand English. With gentle gestures and sign language, he pointed vaguely ahead, offering what little guidance he could.

I continued walking, my steps quicker now, and soon approached another gentleman. This time, fortune smiled. He listened patiently and gave me clear directions, and within moments I found myself standing before what felt like the cathedral of human rights. The building carried an aura of authority and quiet reverence. To me, it resembled the Vatican; after all, it was the seat of the High Commissioner herself.

I walked straight to the reception desk and asked the security officer for directions to the human resources office. He greeted me with warmth and ease. For him, welcoming new interns was part of a familiar rhythm, and he knew the process by heart. As he made a call to HR, I stood there absorbing everything around me. I felt like a child on their first day of kindergarten: wide-eyed, curious, and

³ The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) was founded on 17 May 1865 in Paris; in 1947, it became a specialised agency of the United Nations, and its headquarters moved from Berne to Geneva.

⁴ WIPO stands for the **World Intellectual Property Organization**, which was established on 14 July 1967.

⁵ UNHCR stands for the **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees**, and it was established on 14 December 1950 by the United Nations General Assembly.

mesmerised by unfamiliar wonders.

In those few minutes, I unconsciously mapped the entire ground floor in my mind. Every corridor, every sign, every movement felt significant. Just as I lost myself in observation, the security officer interrupted my thoughts. He smiled and asked me to take the elevator to the second floor; HR was waiting.

With a quiet surge of excitement, I walked to lift, offering him a grateful smile. The doors closed behind me, carrying me upward into the next chapter of my journey.

Meeting the HR

The lift moved swiftly, carrying me to the second floor in the blink of an eye. As the doors slid open, I found the HR manager seated directly opposite, as if she had been expecting me. She greeted me with a warm, reassuring smile and invited me to complete the necessary paperwork.

Though I was physically on the second floor, a quieter process of scanning and absorption had already begun within me. I have always been curious, eager to build a rapport with everything around me, living or otherwise. She handed me a thick stack of documents. I worked through them patiently, page after page, though my concentration was divided, and I was constantly thinking about where I would go in the evening. I was still deciding whether to go to the hostel or sleep in the garden. But for sure I was fully ready for all the adversaries.

Midway through the paperwork, my phone rang. The call was from India; my Maa just wanted to know if I had reached safely and on time at the OHCHR, and I had reassured her. After that, I took a moment to compose myself and then returned to the task at hand. The paperwork demanded attention and care, and I completed it diligently. Once finished, I was handed a few documents, a manual

and a notebook. The HR manager informed me that my *Permis de Séjour*⁶ would be issued in a few days, allowing me to stay in Geneva for the next three months without difficulty. She spoke politely, assuring me that I could approach her at any time if I faced any problems. Her warmth gave me a quiet confidence, an assurance that my stay here would be a pleasant one.

After everything was completed, I was asked to proceed to the third floor, where my department was located. I was to work with the Anti-Discrimination Section of the OHCHR, my den, for the next six months. The thought filled me with excitement. I was eager to meet my colleagues and start this new chapter. The moment I was told to go upstairs, I stepped back into the lift, my heart lighter than before, ready to begin.

Introduction with My Department

I stepped out of the lift into a vast hall where a large, circular workstation stood at its centre like a quiet command post. My eyes, however, searched restlessly for the anti-discrimination section. A modest board hanging in a corner finally caught my attention, and I instinctively moved.

From outside the open door, I peered in. A group of women was working inside, focused, calm, and unexpectedly warm. None of them appeared stern or unapproachable; instead, their faces carried gentle, welcoming smiles. That sight gave me the courage to knock.

Thandar, the administrative head of our department, called me in. She was Burmese, and for reasons I could not fully explain, her nationality immediately made me feel connected to her. There was something deeply warm about her presence. She greeted me with

⁶ *Permis de séjour* is French for a residence permit, which is an official document or card that allows a foreign national to live legally in a country like Switzerland or France.

ease and introduced me to the team, her warmth dissolving the nervousness I had carried with me.

She then led me to another woman, Lisa. From the very first moment, I saw an unmistakable aura of positivity around her. Meeting her filled me with a quiet happiness, as if I had stepped into a safe space without realising how much I needed it. Finally, Thandar took me to meet our section chief, Yuri. He was Russian, tall and composed, and he welcomed me in a thick Russian accent that somehow made his warmth more genuine. He asked about my well-being, and we spoke briefly before he excused himself, asking me to wait outside while he finished his work.

I returned to sit with Thandar and Lisa. They were curious, genuinely so, and wanted to know more about me. I spoke candidly about my background, my journey, and my motivation for joining the section. They listened with interest, and I could see their appreciation reflected in their expressions. Thandar added, almost proudly, that I was the only Indian who had ever interned in this section.

I felt pride, tempered by realism. I knew how much effort and money it took to reach a place like this. Internships like these were rarely accessible to people from developing countries, where governments and universities offered little or no financial support. Unless one came from privilege, survival itself became the first test. Our conversation flowed easily until Lisa asked, "Anand, where are you staying in Geneva?"

The room suddenly fell still. Every pair of eyes turned towards me. I understood their concern; they wanted to advise me to find accommodation closer to the office to save time and money. The intention behind the question was clearly innocent, but my silence lasted longer than expected. It stirred their curiosity, and they sensed that my answer would not be an ordinary one. I hesitated. I did not

want to reveal my vulnerability on the very first day, but there was no escape now.

"I'm staying at the train station," I said softly. "I don't have a place in Geneva yet." The silence that followed was heavy and pinching. They looked at one another, unsure how to respond. Even they seemed unprepared for such a truth. Feeling the weight of my words, I broke the stillness, assuring them that I would find a place soon, that the situation was only temporary.

Lisa then shared a story. Years ago, she said, another intern had arrived in a similar situation, and an elderly woman had taken her in. They bonded so deeply that the girl stayed with her for the entire duration of her internship. The story stirred a fragile hope within me, a reminder that miracles could still happen, even in a city built of stone and order. They asked me to wait outside again, this time for the chief's instructions. I sat quietly, holding onto that flicker of hope, uncertain of what lay ahead but no longer entirely alone.

The Badge, the Broken Chair, and the Beginning of Hope

I was sitting quietly, thinking about the evening when I would be spending one more night in Geneva. My only option was to return to the hostel, but I still needed a booking; otherwise, I would have been stranded again, as I had been the day before. I still had a few francs with me, but I had no intention of spending them on my accommodation. So I kept thinking about what else I could have done. I also thought of hiding in the office and sleeping on the floor, but being new, I was not familiar with the security system, so that idea was not very viable. I was lost in my thoughts, and suddenly I was pulled back by Lisa.

She informed me I needed to visit the United Nations office to get my identity card and mentioned she was heading the same way,

offering me a ride. I gladly accepted since I had no idea how to get there and it was convenient to go with her. We left the building, and she asked me to wait near the exit. Soon, she arrived in her fancy car; it was about to be my first ride in Geneva. I popped into the car, and I sat silently. Seeing me in a pensive mood, Lisa broke the silence and asked if I really did not have any place to stay in Geneva today.

I knew it was hard for anyone to believe that I had arrived in the city without any place to stay. Western people do not call it courageous; rather, they term it foolishness, while Germans call it craziness and cannot even visualise putting themselves in such a scenario. It was next to impossible for them. I replied politely, 'Yes, Lisa, I do not have any place to stay.' She looked at me with amusement, but she was really very sweet. She called her husband and said, "Brad, you know one guy has arrived from India to do an internship with their section, and he has no place to stay. So if he does not find any place to sleep, is it possible to bring him to our house for a few days?" I heard the conversation, and Brad replied, "If you think it is correct, you can do it." He really sounded like a gentleman, and now Lisa had some hope for me. I had no words to thank her. I was embarrassed, too, but I had no choice.

My heart knows; after hearing that call, I felt so relaxed and thanked God many times. At least now I know that if nothing works out I have a place to stay in the evening. In the meantime, we arrived at the UN, and Lisa told me where to go to get my ID card done. I was also told by her that once I am done, I have to come back to the office. I nodded and thanked her for trusting a stranger. I got down and made my way to the office. I showed them all my papers and credentials. After checking them thoroughly, the security guy asked me to stand near the camera. My picture was clicked, and I got a new identity card with a promising picture on it. It was my identity for another six months.

I was so delighted to have the UN ID card. It was a prestigious moment for me, and I immediately clicked the picture and sent it to my family. After putting up the ID card, I was feeling so proud of myself, and my family was very proud about that because I really worked hard to get the identity card on my chest. My dreams were slowly becoming a reality.

Now I had to go back to my new office, which was not far away, so I decided to walk. I started walking back to my office, and the first and most significant statue I saw was of Mr Gandhi. He was sitting there silently and watching all the rising civil unrest, violence and atrocities in the world. I felt as if Gandhi were becoming increasingly irrelevant in the present world. This world is driven more by money and profit. In all the wars, riots or attacks, wherever they were happening, the moot point was profit and loss. The United States is the biggest importer of arms, and the ongoing crisis in the Middle East is, *prima facie*, about the oil. Many countries and terrorist organisations are watching it closely and want to control it.

As it was my first day in the city, I did not want to brood over such complicated topics, so I just decided to admire the beauty around me. At the same time, I received a text from my loved ones, and they were pleased with my achievements. They had always been with me virtually during my journey from Italy to Finland and to Geneva.

My stroll was continuing, and then I saw one of the most iconic sculptures in the world. It was the broken chair. It had been implanted there in the commemoration of the victims of the land mines.

I kept on walking and crossed many big buildings before I reached my office. Now I had my own access card, so I did not need to request the security person anymore to open the gate. I swapped the card, and the gate was open for me. Straight away, I went to the third

floor and sat at my workstation that was placed in the middle of the floor.



The Broken Chair, Place des Nations, Geneva, is a monument to the victims of landmines.

Crossed Paths with Shyami

I had no idea that my arrival in Geneva, without any accommodation arranged, had already set off a wildfire of gossip across the entire OHCHR office. By the time I walked in, I had unknowingly become the centre of everyone's speculation. Some were amused, some baffled, and others genuinely worried for me. Yet I remained completely unaware of the stir I had caused. I was busy scanning the office doors, reading nameplates, and trying to get my bearings and orient myself.

As I looked around, a woman in the distance waved at me. I barely paid attention, not expecting anyone to notice or recognise me. But

as I continued to focus, a strange familiarity tugged at my mind. I knew her, but from where? I tried to exhaust all my memories, trying to place her face, but nothing clicked. She approached me, smiling, and asked, “Are you Anand?” Bewildered, I nodded, “Yes”. Before I could ask how she knew my name, she introduced herself as Shyamli. Suddenly, it all clicked when she said, “Don’t you remember? I taught you as a visiting faculty member during your master’s programme in Venice.” My amazement grew; I remembered her instantly. At that moment, the world felt incredibly small.

Memories flooded back. She had taught us the “Right to Development” during my time in Venice. She was from Sri Lanka; I was from India, and perhaps that proximity made me feel a quiet closeness during class. I had always enjoyed her company, and my warmth for her had been genuine, not forced, or pretended. Once classes ended on that first day, I accompanied her to her hotel. The walk was long but serene, giving us a chance to talk about the UN system. She seemed to enjoy the company too, grateful to avoid the lonely, secluded streets of Lido Island, where our college was located.

The next day, I walked her back again, and as it was the last day of her visit, I invited her for dinner at my place. I promised to cook a proper Indian meal and said I would be glad if she joined. She politely declined, explaining that she was staying with her husband and child. She even introduced me to them, and they were warm and courteous, clearly pleased by my gesture. Instinctively, I treated guests like gods; hospitality was part of my nature, a reflection of my upbringing and values. She promised that next time she visited, she would come for dinner. I thanked her and disappeared into the Venice fog, never imagining that fate would reunite us years later in Geneva.

Perhaps it is karma. Though I have never been a staunch believer, the universe seemed to mirror the happiness, peace, and generosity I spread in my life. From morning until now, small surprises and warm gestures had continuously unfolded around me. I've always shown genuineness without expecting anything in return; it's simply part of my USP, my unique strength. So when I saw her in Geneva, I was stunned. She explained how she had come to find me. Lisa, a colleague in the cafeteria, had brought up a conversation about an Indian intern arriving from Venice with no place to stay. Shyamli had immediately intervened, asking Lisa where the guy was, thinking she might be able to help. And that was why she had come, to verify that it was indeed me. In that moment, it got internalised that the world is smaller, kinder, and more connected than we imagine, and a significant trait is that life has a way of returning the joy we put out into it.

I asked her to sit on the next chair, and she immediately began talking, curious about how I had arrived there and what I intended to do in the office. I explained about my internship, but I could see the worry etched on her face. Through her, I learned that Lisa had been discussing my situation with all her friends, trying to find a solution. Time and again, I was impressed by her sincerity; her determination to help me was unwavering. Lisa was slowly becoming my saviour.

I couldn't help but reflect on the prayers I had whispered before leaving for Geneva. I had dared to come without accommodation or sufficient money, and in my heart, I had sought divine intervention. I have always relied on my hard work, yet in the toughest moments of my life, angels, sent by God, seemingly appeared to guide me. And now, in this office, the people I was meeting were turning out to be just that: my rescuers.

Seeing each other after such a long time brought a smile to both our

faces. Lisa said, "Okay, Anand, now I'm leaving. Let me see how I can help you." She left with that same warm smile, and I busied myself with some work, feeling a small spark of hope. Soon, Lisa returned. She told me that perhaps Shyamli could find a temporary place for me to stay and curiously asked how I knew Shyamli. I explained our college connection, and she smiled knowingly before leaving again. Relief began to settle on me, less worry about accommodation, and a feeling that the universe was quietly arranging options on my behalf.

Half an hour later, Shyamli reappeared and asked if I would be comfortable living with a Sri Lankan guy. I nodded without hesitation. She explained that he was part of their network team, and since his wife had gone to Canada, he could host me for a few days while I looked for a permanent solution.

Rendezvous with the Sri Lankan Guy

After a brief conversation to ensure I was comfortable, Shyami invited me to meet the Sri Lankan gentleman. As we walked, a mix of excitement and anxiety welled up inside me. What if he didn't like me or wasn't open to sharing his apartment with a stranger, even for a few days? With these thoughts swirling in my mind, I followed her to his room.

He was already waiting for us, and his faith was reflected in the unmistakable peace and gentle friendliness of his demeanour. His name was Wajira—a true gentleman and, as I would come to learn, a devout Buddhist. At that moment, I had no idea he would become my mentor and godbrother during my time in Geneva.

He greeted me warmly, welcoming me to Geneva, and asked about my situation. I explained honestly that I was searching for a temporary place to stay while I looked for longer-term accommodation for the next six months. When he enquired about

my budget, I mentioned 300 to 400 Swiss Francs, more than I truly had, but I hoped it would help my case.

After a moment's reflection, he shared that he would soon be flying to Canada to visit his family and that I could stay in his apartment for a week while he was away. That would give me time to find my place in Geneva. I nodded calmly, but inside, a surge of happiness erupted—I finally had a roof over my head, even if only temporarily, in one of the world's most expensive cities. He added that he would pick me up from the office that evening and take me home. Relief and gratitude filled my heart, and I silently thanked Shyami, my rescue ranger.

It felt almost surreal, like living in a dream. In today's world, encountering so much generosity in a single day, in a single place, is rare. Still, an overwhelming generosity surrounded me, as if spirits or angels sent from on high were leading me. News of my accommodation spread through the Anti-Discrimination Unit, and the atmosphere lifted—many colleagues smiled, visibly relieved and happy for me.

Moving from a hostel to an Apartment

In the evening, Wajira came downstairs and asked me to accompany him to his apartment. He stepped out and pulled the sleek BMW MUV. I could hardly believe it; on my very first day in this icy city, the journey was only my second ride in a car, and yet it felt like I was being handed the city on a silver platter. Fortune, it seemed, was smiling widely upon me, showering me with every comfort.

First, we went to the hostel to collect my luggage. I hurried inside, grabbed my bag, and we loaded it into his car. The ride was smooth and comfortable, and I found it to be mesmerising. It was my first introduction to the luxurious machine known as BMW. Every moment felt both comfortable and surreal. Wajira, who was really

polite and sensitive, asked about my family, my hometown in India and my journey so far.

Without me saying a word, he brought food from the nearby supermarket. Seeing it, I suddenly felt how hungry I was. I hadn't had a proper meal since morning. Worried about my accommodation and the lengthy paperwork, I had completely forgotten to eat. The burger and chips he handed me tasted heavenly; each bite filled me with relief and gratitude. I munched quickly while he looked at me with a knowing smile, as if he understood how hungry I was. I thanked him sincerely, not with words but with a glance. There was a calm satisfaction on his face; it was a simple gesture of compassion, and it meant a lot to me.

As we drove through the shimmering, sophisticated landscapes of Geneva, nearing the airport, I marvelled at the city. His apartment was in a posh neighbourhood, a world apart, and I soaked in every detail, wanting to imprint it on my memory. Once we arrived, he asked me to unload my luggage while he parked. I followed him inside, entering a building secured with a passcode. The elevator whisked us to the tenth floor, and the view from the ride itself felt cinematic.

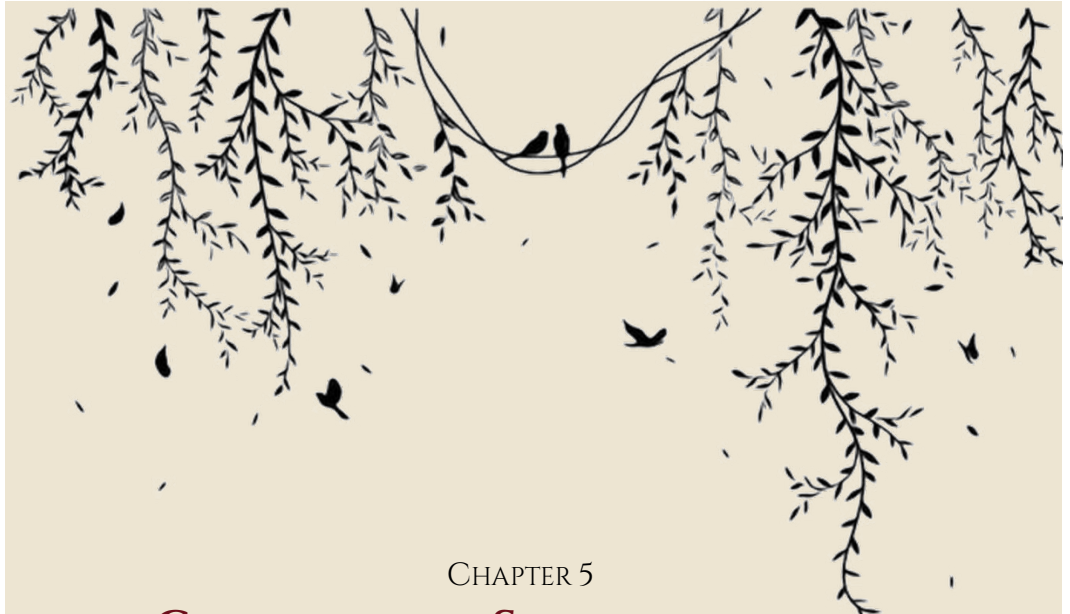
The apartment was spacious for a one-bedroom, with a large living room, kitchen, and a small store. Wajira showed me the folding bed that would be my room for the next few days. I thanked him again for his generosity, but he waved it off, saying it was his duty to help someone in need. His calm, selfless demeanour made me respect him even more; he insisted I use anything without hesitation and tried to make me feel completely at home.

I immediately needed the Wi-Fi password; I wanted to check my emails, as my eyes were still waiting for some replies or a confirmation for the accommodation. My parents, too, were curious, but I hadn't told them everything, so I finally called my parents to

assure them of my safety and sent a long message recounting the day's ups and downs.

My parents were relieved and overjoyed to hear about my tryst with destiny that secured me a clean bed and a roof over my head. My Maa's faith in God deepened with every word I shared, and I could acknowledge her immense gratitude for Wajira. Though her curiosity was boundless, I was too exhausted to tell the whole story, so I promised to share it with her the next day. I said goodnight to Wajira, thanked God for his guidance, and fell asleep on the cosy bed, utterly drained, feeling peace and safety, which I hadn't felt in months.





CHAPTER 5

CONTINUOUS STRUGGLE FOR A FLAT

"A roof is easy to find. A place that feels like yours is not."

Before leaving for Canada, Wajira made sincere efforts to help me find a place to stay in Geneva. He introduced me to many of his friends from the Sri Lankan community and clearly briefed them about my situation, that I was looking for accommodation on a very modest budget. His gesture gave me hope in an otherwise uncertain phase.

Geneva, however, was not an easy city for someone like me. There were student help agencies where one could register for accommodation and a few websites that supported students who could not afford high rents. But the waiting lists were painfully long, and the demand far exceeded availability. Finding a place through these channels felt almost impossible.

Wajira's friends, however, tried their best. After he left, they would occasionally drop by and take me to see rooms on the outskirts of Geneva. Although the rents there were comparatively lower, commuting to the office every day would have been a major obstacle. Each visit came with fresh hope, followed by quiet disappointment.

Yet, something beautiful emerged from this struggle. I began forming close bonds with the Sri Lankan community. They were warm, welcoming, and generous in spirit. Conversations flowed easily, most often revolving around cricket, the one language we all spoke fluently. Those moments of shared laughter and sporting debates gave me comfort and belonging.

Beyond cricket, I often felt that our connection ran deeper. There are ancient historical ties between India and Sri Lanka, dating back to the times of the Ramayana. Perhaps that shared past subtly shaped our camaraderie. Though I was still without a permanent roof over my head, I had found friendship, solidarity, and human kindness, things that made the struggle a little lighter and the city a little warmer.

Posting for Help on Couchsurfing

Office life had begun, and I was truly enjoying every moment of it. The work energised me, the people inspired me, and each day felt like a small victory. But as the clock inched closer to the end of office hours, a familiar unease crept in. With every ticking minute, my heart sank a little deeper, haunted by the fear that my days at Wajira's place were numbered.

I would pack my laptop, step out of the office, and resume the ritual of house hunting, at times with friends but alone as well. Geneva, beautiful as it was, felt unforgiving when it came to affordable shelter.

One day, my colleague Thandar introduced me to the concept of couchsurfing. She encouraged me to try it out, and that very night, I explored it for myself. To my surprise, I found the concept fascinating. It was built on trust and goodwill, a global community where like-minded people opened their homes to travellers free of cost for a few days. In return, hosts received stories, conversations, chocolates, or perhaps a bottle of wine and small gestures of gratitude and human connection.

Encouraged, I created my profile and began reaching out to several hosts, honestly explaining my situation and my urgent need for a place to stay. Days passed, but replies were slow in coming. Maybe I was too new to the platform, or perhaps Couchsurfing simply wasn't popular in Geneva. Still, the idea rekindled hope; it felt like a possibility that didn't demand money, only faith in humanity.

Meanwhile, time at Wajira's place slipped away like sand through an hourglass. His return was imminent. I knew that if he came back, he would insist I stay longer until I found a permanent place. Yet, I didn't want to impose on him any further. So I decided to move out before his arrival.

I booked a hostel, the same one where this journey had once begun, just to anchor myself temporarily. It wasn't a solution, but it was a pause. A small breathing space while I continued searching for a place I could finally call home.

Moving from Flat to Hostel

My office hours were from 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., which meant waking up early every day to make it on time. That particular morning, however, sleep completely eluded me. Anxiety kept me restless; the thought of leaving a comfortable place and moving into a hostel with all my luggage was on my mind. Finally, at 5 a.m. I gave up trying to sleep.

I got out of bed and began packing quietly, determined to leave before 8 a.m. I folded my clothes, gathered my belongings, and wrote a small note of gratitude for Wajira, thanking him for his kindness and generosity. With that, I stepped out and embarked on yet another uncertain chapter of my journey.

Since 8 a.m. wasn't check-in time at the hostel, I deposited my luggage in the storage room and headed straight to the office. Throughout the day, my mind wandered constantly, thinking about the changes ahead and how I would adapt to a new lifestyle, almost like living as a hippie, with minimal comforts and no surety of permanence. Yet my determination remained unshaken. I was not ready to give in to these challenges, nor was I willing to abandon my internship and run away. With each passing day, my beliefs grew stronger, and strangely, I began to enjoy the struggle. Pain and discomfort were no longer enemies; they had become my constant companions, walking alongside me.

I returned to the hostel around 6 p.m. and settled my luggage onto the bed that someone had assigned to me. I took a slow walk around the hostel to familiarise myself with it. My room was full; almost every bunk bed was occupied. Few of the backpackers had turned their bunks into tiny homes, hanging suits, stacking books, and storing food, cheese, and other essentials. A few greeted me with warm smiles, and I introduced myself. There were nine of them in total; I usually interacted with six or seven of them. Over time, we became friendly and often shared dinners and, occasionally, cigarettes together.

Food became simple and routine. The döner kebab near Genève-Cornavin was my favourite meal. The vendor there made the tastiest kebabs ever. Another daily staple was the freshly baked croissant from the Lindt supermarket—irresistible and surprisingly affordable. Slowly, the hostel stopped feeling like a place I stayed

and began to feel like a place I belonged.

There was free Wi-Fi, which allowed me to speak with my parents on Skype. I never showed them my bed, knowing the size of the bunk would only make them worry. In the meantime, I continued sending friend requests and messages online, still searching, still hopeful, and still moving forward.

Final Acceptance on Couchsurfing

One fine day, I received a confirmation message from H  l  ne, agreeing to host me for the weekend. I was overjoyed. Finally, someone had accepted my request, and it meant I would save nearly fifty euros over two days, a small amount perhaps, but a significant relief for me at that time. More than the money, it was the joy of staying in a new home with a new host, away from the cramped bunk beds of the hostel.

I began preparing eagerly for the weekend, imagining myself sleeping soundly on a proper bed, something my tall frame desperately needed. I carefully read through the Couchsurfing guidelines, noting the dos and don'ts, determined to be a respectful and considerate guest. Soon after, I made a request to H  l  ne for sharing her address. When she did, I was surprised because the destination wasn't in Switzerland at all. It was in France, in a city called Annemasse.

Annemasse lay on the outskirts of Geneva, right along the French border. And then life gives you what you once only dreamed of. I had always been fascinated by the idea of crossing international borders as part of everyday life, and now it was happening. I would be living in France, even if only for a weekend.

Curious, I began reading about the city. Annemasse was largely inhabited by immigrants, many from the Arab world. It was also home to people who worked in Geneva but chose to live across the

border because life there was far more affordable. I discovered that both buses and trams connected Geneva to Annemasse. The tram went only up to the border, requiring a bus change afterward, while a direct bus ran straight to my destination for just 3.5 euros. I chose the simpler option, the bus.

Armed with all the information, I felt a renewed ray of hope and excitement. I shared the news with Thandar and Karolina at the office, who were genuinely happy for me, having witnessed my constant struggle to find a place. I also informed the hostel staff that I would be checking out on Saturday, as I would be staying with Hélène.

My friends at the hostel were a little sad. In a short time, we had formed a strong bond, and there was a quiet understanding that we might not meet again. But that is life, always moving forward. As the French say, *c'est la vie*.

Going to Meet Helene

I lay in my bunk bed, turning from one side to the other and caught between happiness and a quiet worry about what lay ahead. Sleep came in fragments. I woke up early and decided to step out for a city walk, something I had made into a small ritual. Almost every morning, I felt drawn to Lake Geneva.

The experience never failed me. The crisp morning air, the soft chirping of seagulls, and the breathtaking view of Mont Blanc shimmering in the distance felt almost unreal. Joggers, cyclists, and tourists filled the promenade, especially on weekends, giving the lake a lively yet peaceful rhythm. That morning, I bought a croissant, some grapes, and cheese and sat near Hotel President Wilson, one of the most expensive hotels in the city. Sitting there, gazing at the horizon, always brought me a deep calmness. It was my time, my space for reflection, where the world slowed down and my thoughts settled.

Reluctantly, I pulled myself away from the view and returned to the hostel. After a quick shower, I prepared to leave for Annemasse. From Geneva city centre, I boarded the bus to my host's place. Crossing the border into France felt oddly romantic. Many of my dreams of Europe had been shaped by *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*⁷, where the protagonists roamed freely across countries, and in that moment, I felt like I had stepped into one of those scenes.

As the bus moved deeper into the town, I followed the instructions Helene had sent me. Almost everyone around me was speaking French, a language I barely understood. I struggled for directions, though one elegant lady gently guided me. I finally got off at the correct bus stop, but the real challenge was finding the house. No one seemed able to help with the address. It was the weekend, and the roads were calm, filled with a chilly breeze and streets blanketed in maple leaves, a scene of overwhelming beauty. Yet, my patience was wearing thin as I struggled to find the place.

At last, I spotted a slightly old white building. I walked up to the gate and rang the bell. Once. Twice. The door creaked open, and an elderly lady with gentle wrinkles on her face appeared. Smiling warmly, she asked who I was. "My name is Anand Priya Deo," I said, "and you had kindly agreed to host me for the weekend."

She looked amused and laughed softly, admitting that she had expected a girl, not a boy. The confusion, she explained, came from my name because Priya sounded feminine to her. I held back my racing emotions and asked, nervously, whether I should leave. She paused, then smiled again and said that since I had already come all this way, I could stay for two days.

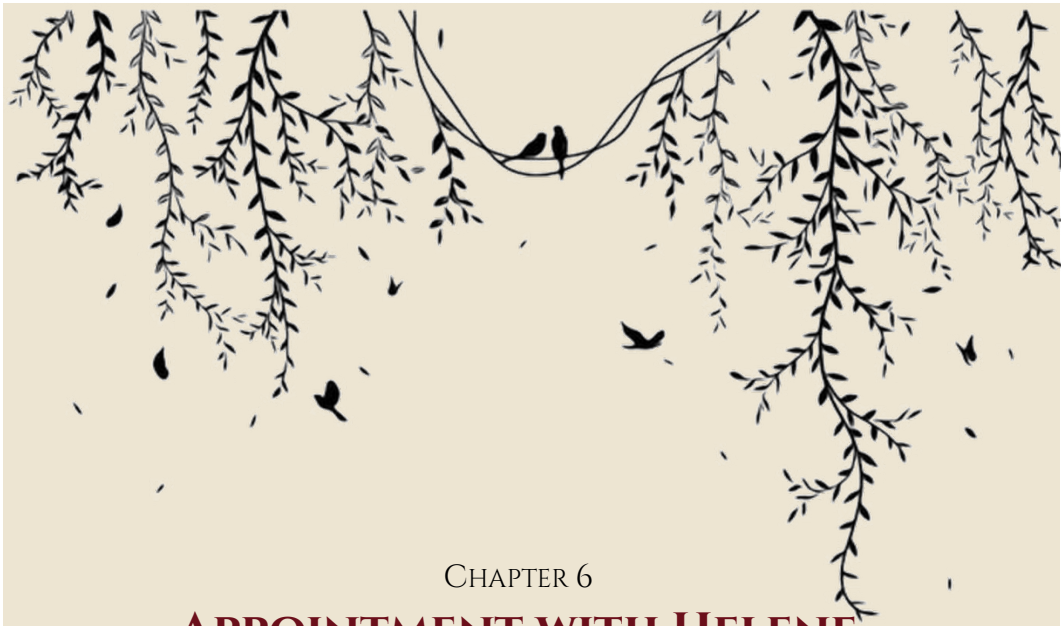
A relief settled within me. She welcomed me in and showed me the

⁷ *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ) is a timeless Bollywood romantic classic about love, family, and following your heart. Released in 1995, it became one of Indian cinema's most iconic and enduring love stories.

room where I would be staying, handing me a sleeping bag. I had never used one before, and my hopes of settling into a comfortable bed quietly disappeared. Still, I was grateful. She also told me I was free to use the kitchen if I wished. There was a supermarket nearby, so I went out and bought rice, chicken, spices, and a bottle of wine for her.

After a long time, I was finally going to cook my favourite Indian curry. Since hospitality is part of our nature, I invited Helene to join me for lunch, and she gladly accepted. I cooked with joy, and we shared a warm meal filled with pleasant conversation and laughter. Exhausted from the morning's hustle, I slipped quietly into the sleeping bag after lunch and soon fell asleep with peace, content, and free of worry for two nights.





CHAPTER 6

APPOINTMENT WITH HELENE

"Sometimes the family you were not born into is the one that teaches you how to belong."

First Week with Helene

She was a teacher, and at the same time she was good at her music skills. She had her piano, which she used to teach students and to train her friends for performances at local festivals. That piano was kept in my room, and I must say I was fascinated by that beautiful machine. I never told Helene, but on the very first day in her absence, I tried to fiddle with a few of the keys of the piano, and I must say I was a complete disaster. At first, Helene looked tough and unapproachable, but watching her roll cigarettes and make circles of smoke made her look really cool.

Anyway, it was Sunday evening, and the next day I had to leave the place, and also I had to leave for my office; therefore, I decided to invite her for dinner cooked by Chef Anand :). I knocked on

her door and asked if she was doing well and told her that I would like to invite her for dinner; it would be Indian food.

She abruptly declined my offer by saying that I was not her servant; hence, there was no need to cook. I wanted to reply to her a little harshly, then I decided to brief her about Indian hospitality. In India it was not considered good if I cooked and ate alone. It looks very selfie-ish, and I love hosting people. I have inherited this trait from Nana Ji. Almost every day, he used to host people mirthfully. So if I was planning to cook for her, that didn't mean that I was a butler; rather, it was part of our hospitality. "Sharing is Caring" evolved in India. She said, 'Ok', with a wry smile. I prepared a lovely chicken curry, rice, tomato chutney and raita. I have learnt that culinary art from my Maa, so it was a good display of her tacit training. We both had dinner together, and I poured a bottle of wine in her glass. I knew she loved wine, so I especially bought red wine for her and some cheese too. Without cheese, the food was never complete for French people. Over the dinner table she started asking about me. My religion, why I was in Geneva, what my plan was, and, moreover, how I was going to survive after that couchsurfing journey. I briefed her that I was there to do my unpaid internship with OHCHR and I didn't have enough money to rent a fancy flat in Geneva; hence, I was looking for some space where I could have stayed for the remaining six months. Our conversation kept meandering from politics to religion, French culture, feminism, and the gruesome Nirbhaya rape incident of Delhi. After dinner, while eating cheese, she said the food was tasty and thanked the chef. I said Bon Nuit and went to my room, where I had to slide into the sleeping bag. It was like my oyster, where I had to stay calm all night.

The next morning I got up early and packed my stuff for the office. Perhaps Helene was sleeping because she'd stayed up late. I could hear laptop noise, so I knocked gently and waited for her reply. Dead

silence, so I gathered all my courage and knocked again; this time, I heard a creak and her reply that she was coming out.

She opened the door with sleepy, balmy eyes. Her hair was in disarray, and she was gently rubbing her wrinkled face, trying to shake off the heaviness of a late night. It was clear that she had slept very late, and my early knock had disturbed her rest. Yet, I felt compelled to wake her. The lessons of Indian hospitality and cultural upbringing would never allow me to leave someone's home without thanking the host. It was clear she was not pleased to be awake so early. Still, gathering my words carefully, I said, "Ma'am, I am leaving now. I just wanted to thank you for hosting me over the weekend."

She stood silently for a moment, lost in thought. The pause felt longer than it probably was. I wondered if I had made a mistake by disturbing her so early. Then suddenly, something unexpected happened, something I had neither anticipated nor prepared myself for. She looked at me and said slowly, "I found you to be a gentleman, and I feel you deserve some help. I have decided that you may stay here for another six months, of course, with some clear rules and restrictions."

For a moment, I was speechless. It took me a few seconds to even understand what she had said. Gratitude flooded my mind, but words struggled to come out. Finally, I managed to thank her. She simply nodded and said, "Now go to your office. We will talk more in the evening."

I stepped out of the house and hurried to catch my bus so that I could reach the office on time. But inside, I was almost running with joy. My heart felt light, my steps were quick, and I was practically galloping with happiness.

Started Living with Helene

It was a regular day at my duty station, yet something inside me was quietly celebrating. Every now and then, a smile would appear on my face, broad, uncontrollable, almost childlike. I tried to hide it, but the more I tried, the more it escaped. My colleagues noticed. They kept asking what good news had suddenly filled me with such joy.

Finally, I could no longer contain it. Almost shouting with excitement, I told them, "I am no longer an orphan!" In no time, the news spread across the office. Messages started pouring in, and many of my colleagues felt relieved, joking that Anand was no longer living in Geneva like a homeless man.

That day I wanted to finish my work on time. Usually, I stayed late in the office, but that evening I left sharply at 5 p.m. My destination was Annemasse, a small town on the outskirts of Geneva, technically in France, just across the border. Many refugees and workers lived there because life was far cheaper than in Geneva.

At the bus station, I bought a ticket from the vending machine. It cost €3.50, which was, of course, expensive for my modest budget. After a bus ride and nearly fifteen minutes of walking, I finally reached Helene's house. I had been given the door code, so I quietly entered without ringing the bell.

I slipped into the small room that would now be mine for the next six months. The happiness I felt was indescribable. After a long while, I could finally unpack my suitcase without worrying about repacking it again in a few days. Slowly, I arranged my clothes, books, and shoes. I even wiped the floor, preparing the room as if I were about to host a small house-warming party.

I rolled out my sleeping bag and prepared my bed. It was my first experience sleeping in one, but I was ready for this six-month journey. While arranging the room, suddenly it struck me how late

it was and how hungry I was. I rushed to a nearby supermarket and bought rice, mushrooms, chicken, and a few sweets. Soon, my favourite chicken curry and rice were simmering on the stove.

That night, the meal tasted extraordinary, perhaps because it carried the flavours of relief and belonging. I ate slowly, savouring every bite.

Helene was not at home that evening; she had gone to attend a music concert. After washing my utensils, I returned to my room. I felt utterly exhausted after a long day; I slipped into my sleeping bag, grateful for the roof above my head. Before drifting into deep sleep, I silently thanked God and Helene for giving me a place that, for the next six months, I could finally call my own.

Comfort Came with Conditions

It had been a long and tiring day at the office. I was working closely with the head of the unit, who was preparing to lead an important delegation to Egypt. My responsibility was to finalise a report that would support her visit, and the work stretched late into the evening. By the time I wrapped up and stepped out of the office, it was already around 8 p.m.

On my way home, I stopped at my favourite place, Lidl, the German supermarket that had become a familiar part of my routine. Ever since I had lived in Finland, I had developed a fondness for freshly baked croissants. Lidl made some of the best ones, and I could never resist picking a few up after a long day.

While I was there, I also remembered something from the morning. Earlier that day, I noticed we were running out of essentials: there were no tissues left, and even the toilet paper was gone. Since I was living in the house too, I felt it was my responsibility to contribute and make sure I took care of these things.

So along with my croissants, I added a few practical items to the basket: tissue paper, bathroom cleaning wipes, dishwasher supplies, and toilet paper. It felt like a small but necessary contribution to the household. When I finally reached home, I placed everything neatly in the kitchen. Despite the long day, I found quiet satisfaction in doing these little things: buying fresh croissants for the evening and making sure the house had what it needed. Rarely, even the simplest routines bring comfort after a demanding day; it was one of those days.

I began preparing dinner, quietly excited as I waited for Helene to arrive. I imagined she would be pleased to see that I had tried to contribute, even in a small way, to the household expenses. To set the mood, I played my favourite Hindi song, “Karoge yaad to har baat yaad aayegi.”⁸

The chicken with mushrooms simmered gently on the stove, filling the room with a comforting aroma, while I savoured my croissant, bite by bite. It took me less than an hour to get everything ready, and once the food was done, I couldn't resist my temptation and almost devoured the delicious meal. Good food, soulful music, and a calm ambience brought a much-needed warmth to my mood. Just then, the doorbell rang. I walked over and opened the door, its soft creak breaking the silence. Helene stood there, smiling. I greeted her warmly and welcomed her in. She gently closed the door and went straight to her room. I returned to mine and continued eating, though my attention was at the kitchen, half-expecting her to call me any moment.

Suddenly, my name echoed sharply through the house. Helene was calling me, her voice unusually loud. Startled, I rushed to the kitchen, fearing something had gone wrong. She had noticed all the

⁸ Bollywood movie named ‘Bazaar’ of year 1982.

items I had bought. Looking at them, she asked, almost sternly, “What made you think I couldn’t have bought these myself?”

I replied calmly, “No, of course you could have. I just thought they were finished, and I wanted to contribute something to the house.”

Her response caught me completely off guard; I hadn't anticipated it. She told me she was an environmental activist and consciously avoided using products like tissue paper, kitchen wipes, or detergents. To her, these were symbols of unchecked capitalism, products that harm the planet, contributing to environmental degradation and even the gradual depletion of the ozone layer. I was astonished by her perspective; it was undeniably true, yet something we had rarely paused to consider. Over time, people had quietly replaced simple, sustainable practices like using cotton mops with disposable paper napkins.

She explained that people in France were deeply conscious of nature and their surroundings. With a witty smile, she added a touch of sarcasm, saying that if people in the United States started living like the French, the planet’s garbage could be reduced sixfold. According to her, American lifestyles contributed heavily to waste, whether through CFC⁹ emissions, food wastage, or electronic trash; everything seemed to exist in excess.

She then carefully walked me through the house rules: how to use water and food mindfully, how to dispose of waste, and even how to clean utensils. I was asked to use reusable cotton mops instead of paper products. While washing utensils, I had to place a small bucket in the sink to collect the used water, which would later be reused in the toilet instead of flushing fresh water. All biodegradable waste had to be stored separately and was eventually transported by her to her farmland, which was about 45 kilometres away. I was

⁹ Chlorofluorocarbon

taken aback by these practices, but I understood that I had little choice. My circumstances didn't allow me the luxury of finding another place, so I prepared myself to adapt and follow her rules. Still, I must admit that using stored, used water in the toilet every morning instead of a simple flush was never easy. Yet, I made sure to follow through without needing reminders.

Gradually, I became an integral part of the household, and Helene began to trust me more. She no longer doubted my abilities or my intentions. Still, I made sure to adapt carefully to her ways. I would always take my shower before she woke up, as she wasn't particularly fond of bathing every day, whereas for me, starting the day without a shower felt almost impossible under normal circumstances. I was also careful to leave no trace behind, especially ensuring that not a single strand of hair remained in the bathtub, or I might have been called out for it.

At the office, my colleagues were endlessly curious about my living situation and how I was managing. Whenever I shared my stories with Thander or Lisa, they would burst into laughter, even as they sympathised with the challenges I faced.

Morning Walk in the Snowfall

I stayed at Helene's place for over a month, and gradually, I fell into a routine. My days began early. I woke up, made a light sandwich, and left for the bus stop by 7:30 a.m. It was winter, and almost every day brought fresh snowfall. Walking on snow-covered roads each morning felt treacherous. My shoes weren't meant for such conditions, so I was always worried about slipping, which made me tread carefully.

Yet, the walk itself wasn't the hardest part. The real struggle was getting out of the warmth of my sleeping bag, slipping out quietly, and stepping into the dark, freezing, snow-filled morning. At times,

my heart would sink, especially when I had to run to catch the bus on those slippery paths where one wrong step could send me crashing.

And one morning, it did. I slipped and fell, bruising my knee and ankle. The first word that escaped my lips was 'Maa'. I sat there for a moment, holding back tears, instinctively looking around for help, but there was no one. Gathering myself, I got up and hurried towards the bus stop again. Missing the bus would have meant being an hour late for work, something I simply couldn't afford.

To save a couple of euros each day, I walked a little extra and caught the bus from Annemasse Round Square, which went directly to the Geneva train station. Those small savings mattered because they funded my lunch. Most days, my meal was simple: a croissant, a banana, and an orange. Buying lunch at the Geneva canteen was beyond my budget. But Thursdays were different. That day, I made sure to be the first in line at the canteen to enjoy the much-awaited Sri Lankan lunch, a small indulgence that broke the monotony of my otherwise frugal routine.

By the end of my workday, I was always extremely hungry, almost desperate to eat something. Yet, I can hardly recall ever buying anything for the evening. A single meal outside could easily cost as much as two or three days' worth of dinners at home. So, once I reached Annemasse, I would stop by the supermarket and pick up my usual essentials: chicken, mushrooms, rice, and sometimes salmon. Cooking at home was not only economical and healthier but also something I genuinely enjoyed.

I remember one particular incident vividly. One evening, famished, I rushed into a supermarket, quickly grabbed my items, paid, and stuffed everything into my backpack. The moment I stepped out, I began hurrying to reach home. Suddenly, I heard someone shouting behind me, and a security guard was running after me. At first, I

didn't realise he was calling out to me, but soon it became clear that I was the one he suspected.

He stopped me and asked to check my bag. Then he demanded to see the receipt. Luckily, I still had it with me that day, unlike most days when I would casually throw it away. After verifying the bill, he seemed embarrassed. He had assumed I had stolen the food and was trying to escape, while in reality, I was simply rushing home, driven by appetite.

To me, it felt like a clear instance of racial profiling where my appearance made me a subject of suspicion. It was the second time I had experienced something like this. The first had been in the UK, when a group of boys bullied me. Life, meanwhile, revolved around the daily rhythm of catching buses from morning to evening. In the mornings, fear of being late kept me rushing, and in the evenings, routine hunger drove me to get home as quickly as possible. The struggle was constant: finding balance, staying on my feet, and moving forward without slipping, both literally and in life.

The Spanish Guy, My Next-Door Neighbour

Life in Switzerland was a constant struggle to maintain balance. While I no longer had to worry about finding a place to stay, other challenges remained, such as securing a residence permit, waiting for responses to job applications, and the unsettling uncertainty of whether I might have to return to India. This ambiguity weighed heavy on my shoulders. Amid these storms of thoughts, I never really found the time to fully explore Helene's house. On one of those quiet afternoons, I suddenly heard faint whispers and subtle movements coming from beyond the wall while lying in my sleeping pod. It struck me that there was another room in which the door was always shut. But that day, it seemed occupied. I was already running late for work, so I had to leave in a hurry. Still, curiosity lingered, and I decided to find out who the mysterious occupant was

once I was back.

That day, I had an interview with the CEO of the Cairo Institute of Human Rights. Going by my Scorpion trait, I wanted to be fully prepared, so I skipped lunch and focused entirely on getting ready. The interview was scheduled for mid-afternoon, at 2 o'clock, and it started on time. As soon as it concluded, I returned to my work and immersed myself in my assignments. Yet, somewhere at the back of my mind, the Catch-22 was about the mysterious occupant of the other room.

By half past five in the evening I had wrapped up my work and decided to leave the office on time, a rare event, as I usually stayed back to finish pending tasks. When I got home, Helene told me another tenant would be sharing the flat. He was from Spain, his name was Jorge, and he would be staying in the room next to mine. She complemented it with additional information that his girlfriend might visit occasionally.

I felt ease and happiness. Finally, there would be someone around to talk to, perhaps even spend time with. His arrival felt like a breeze of fresh air in my not-so-mundane but otherwise routine life. Jorge was warm and friendly, and we quickly became close friends. Sometimes we cooked together, and he would teach me how to prepare Spanish dishes. He owned a Mazda, and occasionally we would go out together, driving to nearby places like Chamonix, Annecy, or even Lyon.

One evening, while I was in my room working on an assignment, he invited me for a walk in the garden. I agreed and joined him. After a long and relaxed stroll, we sat down, and he pulled out some tobacco to roll in a cigarette. Soon, I knew it was not just tobacco but a joint. A few drags were enough to make me feel unusually light and euphoric. I found myself smiling, laughing, and reacting more than usual to everything he said.

Though I was clearly overwhelmed, I felt too shy to admit it. After a while, I quietly asked for his permission to leave and went back to my room, where I laid down and drifted to sleep.

Days passed, and our companionship grew stronger with time. One day, Jorge's girlfriend invited me to join a Latino party in the suburbs of Geneva. It would be my first time at such a gathering, and I was both curious and excited. I arrived on time, and Jorge introduced me to everyone. They were warm, polite, and welcoming, which immediately put me at ease.

I was especially drawn to the vibrant Latino culture; the food from Peru, Guatemala, Argentina, and beyond was simply delightful. Amidst the lively crowd, I found myself captivated by an elderly yet charming woman. She appeared to be in her early sixties, gracefully engaging with everyone around her. Gathering my courage, I approached her to learn more about her and her work.

She was kind and open, and we soon found ourselves in a long and meaningful conversation. She was particularly interested to know that I was interning with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and working on Dalit rights. In turn, she shared that she ran a Peru-based NGO and organised fundraising initiatives for children at Christmas. Just as our conversation was getting more engaging, my friend called out that it was time to leave. We exchanged our digits, and I bid her goodbye.

On our way back, Jorge's girlfriend joined us, and the three of us set off towards Annemasse. The car sped through the night, its headlights slicing through the darkness. An eerie silence surrounded the road, occasionally broken by the sight of foxes darting across our path. After a while, Jorge took an unexpected turn, and a quiet unease began to settle within me.



An evening out in Geneva.

When I asked him about it, he explained that his girlfriend did not have a valid permit to stay in France, so he was taking a countryside route to cross the border that was usually unmanned at that hour. I was tense the entire time, especially since we had all been drinking. The risk felt real, and the silence in the car grew heavier as we approached the border. But once we crossed safely, the tension broke instantly. Soon after, we reached a roundabout that had a massive statue that was at least 30 feet tall. In a burst of excitement, Jorge stopped the car and invited me to step out. Without hesitation, he began climbing the statue in celebration.

Caught up in the moment, I followed him. Before we knew it, we were both on top of the statue, laughing, shouting, and being photographed by his girlfriend below. It was sheer madness, reckless, spontaneous, and completely out of character. But in that moment, it was also pure joy. A night of chaos, laughter, and unforgettable memories.

As winter deepened, the days grew shorter and shorter with

Christmas approaching. The streets of Geneva and Annemasse sparkled with festive lights, giant Santa statues, and sale banners hanging across shops. Supermarkets buzzed with excitement, children picking out gifts, chocolates, and Advent calendars, filling the air with joy and anticipation.

Amidst all this, I too had my reasons to feel delighted. A colleague informed me that we would soon have a Christmas break, a long-awaited vacation. The thought of a European excursion filled me with excitement. I began counting the days like a child tracking an Advent calendar, eager to break free from my routine through new roads and photowalks. Yet, I could not ignore a quiet loneliness. Just a year ago, during my master's in Venice, life was a vibrant mosaic of nearly ninety students from across the world, each carrying stories, cultures, and conversations that made every day feel alive.

One evening, on my way home, I received a call from an unknown number. Curious, I picked it up. "Hello Anand," a familiar voice greeted me. For a moment, I was puzzled, but then she introduced herself; it was Laila from Peru, the graceful woman I had met at the Latino night. Instantly, everything came back.

She told me she had secured permission to set up a stall inside a well-known gift shop in Lausanne. The idea was simple: volunteers would help with gift wrapping during the festive rush, earn tips, and at the end of twenty days, the total would be shared among everyone involved. She asked if I would be interested in joining.

I immediately said yes. I needed the money to sustain myself in Geneva for a few more months, and I also dreamt of making a tour to Turkey. This opportunity felt like a blessing, almost as if it had arrived straight from Zenith, exactly when I needed it. I was asked to report to the Lausanne office on the 20th of December at 10 a.m., and of course, I was instructed to wear formal attire.

Started Working in Lausanne

I had developed a warm bond with Helene, so I was excited to share the news with her, especially since she often seemed a little concerned about me. I brought along a bottle of wine and some cheese for her. When I got home, she wasn't there, so I left the gift on her table and went into the kitchen to start cooking.

As I cooked, I found myself distracted, as if I were missing something. There was a certain familiarity with the name Lausanne that I couldn't place precisely in my head. After thinking for a while, it finally struck me. For many Indians, Lausanne is first encountered in history books or newspapers. It is the place where Kamala Nehru, the wife of India's first prime minister, passed away in 1936 while undergoing treatment for tuberculosis. She was also cremated there. The thought lingered, and I found myself reflecting on how, even decades later, many still go abroad for medical treatment, raising questions about the gaps in our systems and trust-building.

Lost in thought, I suddenly returned to reality when Helene called out to me. I went to her room, and she warmly asked about the wine and cheese. I shared the news about my Christmas job and told her about Lausanne, where I would now be commuting daily for work. She seemed genuinely happy for me.

We opened the bottle of wine and enjoyed it with some fine French cheese, celebrating the moment together. As we talked, we also made Christmas plans. Helene invited me to her countryside home to celebrate the festivities. The idea of experiencing Christmas in this way, complete with a festive cake and a traditional turkey dinner, felt truly special. It was something I was genuinely looking forward to.

The day I had been eagerly waiting for finally arrived. I woke up early, though in truth I had barely slept the whole night, too excited about visiting a new city and starting a new job. I reached the train

station, where someone handed over a ticket to Lausanne. The journey was about an hour long, but I was so deep in thought that I hardly noticed the train entering the Lussane station.

Once there, I had no clear idea of where I needed to go for work. My phone's battery and the data were both running low, so I began asking strangers for directions, piecing my way through the unfamiliar streets. Eventually, I reached the bookshop, a massive place combined with a toy shop, glowing with Christmas lights and festive charm.

I met the lady in-charge, who briefed all of us on our roles. We were expected to be there from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. every day, with a short half-hour break. One comforting detail was that she provided lunch, home-cooked, so we had no expense for food.

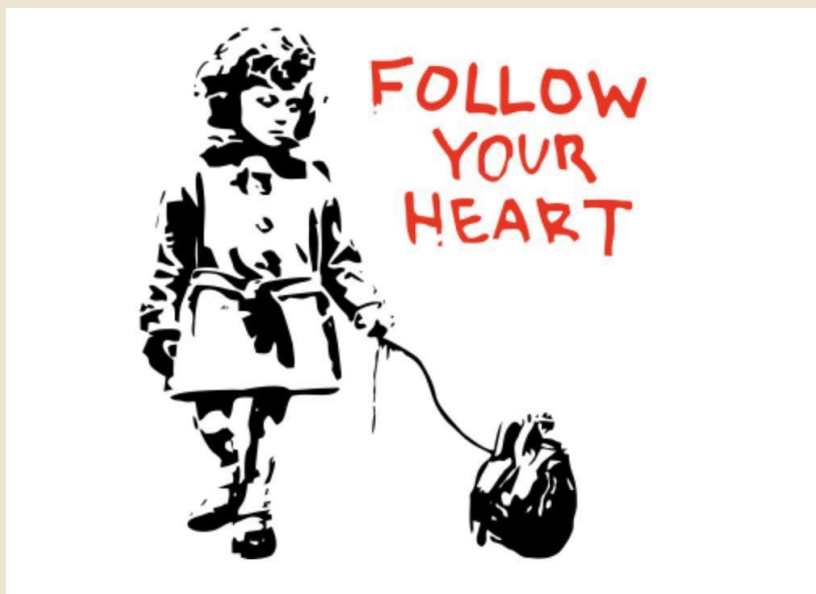
The first day felt long and a bit sluggish. I was just beginning to learn the art of gift wrapping, something I had never done before. Compared to others, who worked swiftly and skilfully, I struggled to pace up. It took me nearly half an hour to wrap my very first gift, and the customer stood there watching my clumsy attempts.

Noticing my difficulty, she gently asked if it was my first day. I nodded. She smiled warmly and even left me a tip. She was trying to encourage me, and it worked. That small gesture boosted my confidence, and slowly, I began to improve, gradually mastering the craft with each passing day. One thing that was constant was that my eyes were constantly searching for new customers who walked in to get their gifts wrapped, hoping they would leave a tip. I knew that the more tips we collected, the higher each person's share would be in the end.

It was an exciting one-hour journey from Geneva to Lausanne every day, followed by long hours of standing and wrapping gifts. Though I had crossed the age for such work long ago, having graduated in 2002, I had consciously chosen this path, a chance to reset and

rebuild my life. And so, I embraced it wholeheartedly, finding joy in the simplicity and purpose in what I was doing.

When life shapes us not so much by choice but by circumstance, we find deep satisfaction in facing challenges head-on. I had grown disillusioned with the corporate world, increasingly. While it offered financial stability, it often came at the cost of personal freedom. Sales roles, in particular, felt relentless and demanding constant availability, where even asking for leave felt like a transgression. Eventually, I decided to step away and pursue what truly resonated with me.



Follow your heart.

I firmly believe that one should follow their heart rather than succumb to societal expectations or peer pressure. I still remember my days in Padova, Italy, when a simple sticker on a market mirror read, “Follow Your Heart.” That message stayed with me, reinforcing my conviction.

The days were physically demanding. I would often return from Lausanne exhausted and hungry, with just enough energy to cook a simple meal before slipping into my sleeping bag. Lunch was provided by the elderly lady at work, and buying extra food was expensive, so I chose to save wherever I could. It was not an easy phase, but it was deeply transformative. In the process, I not only lost 13 kilograms but also gained clarity, resilience, and a sharper self.

My work was going well, and I could table that by the end of my volunteering period I would receive a reward for my efforts. The crowd was fast swelling with Christmas at hand. The increased foot traffic meant larger tips, but it also meant I had to wrap gifts way too quickly. My fingers were sore, but I had to admit, I was getting excellent at wrapping gifts. The tip box was always filling up and eventually had to be replaced with a fresh jar. It was a collaborative effort, but after eight years in the corporate world, I felt a sense of ownership and wanted to make the endeavour more engaging to generate even more support.

I placed a small note near the tip box announcing a cultural evening the next day to support Peruvian children so they too could celebrate Christmas with joy. The response was heartwarming. Families arrived with their children, and we created a lively atmosphere with a Romanian dance performance, shared folklore and organised a painting competition for the kids. All participants were appreciated and given small awards.

One drawing, however, stayed with me. It showed Santa distributing chocolates, but his clothes were stained. Curious, I asked the young boy about his inspiration. He shared that he was a Syrian refugee who had fled violence, crossing the sea in a small boat where life felt uncertain at every moment. He spoke of friends who often went without food and said he wished Santa could bring them

not just chocolates but hope that a new dawn would follow the darkness. It reminded me, 'Hope is beautiful, my friend.'

His words deeply moved me. It reminded me how often we overlook our privileges, the ability to celebrate with joy and security. Moments like these are precious and must be valued. That evening, we raised 450 euros, but more than that, it left us with a lasting impression of impetus and reflection.

Started Teaching Hindi

I had no idea Helene was quietly observing my hard work and persistence in the bookshop in Lussane. She never said anything but was always concerned about my finances. After a busy evening in the bookshop, I got home that evening, and I could feel the exhaustion written over my face.

As soon as I entered my room, Helene called out to me. There was a noticeable excitement in her voice. I went to her room, curious to know what new thing she was going to shoot at me. It felt as if there was yet another surprise waiting for me. She told me she had some exciting news. A few of her friends were interested in learning Hindi and were willing to pay 20 euros per hour. I would need to teach them for two hours each session. For a moment, I was speechless, trying to process what she had just said. Quietly, I began calculating how much I could earn from this opportunity.

Helene smiled and explained that she wanted to help me and make my Christmas more joyful. She had convinced a few of her friends from her musical group to learn Hindi and Indian culture. Two of them would come for classes every evening at 8 p.m. for ten days. By the time she finished, I had already done the maths; I would earn around 800 euros in just ten days. It felt incredible.

I immediately agreed and thanked her profusely. That night, I was so excited that despite being hungry, I could hardly eat. My mind

was filled with dreams of a small vacation, some savings, and the possibility of buying gifts for my family back in India. With these thoughts, I drifted into sleep, and the alarm rang the next morning, waking me up.

I left for work, but I spent the entire day wondering how I would teach Hindi as a subject. Although my maa is a professor of Hindi literature, I had never taught it myself, so I kept thinking of different approaches. By evening, I decided to prepare properly. I took printouts of the Hindi alphabets and created a simple plan outlining what I would teach my students over the ten days.

I reached home and quickly got ready, skipping dinner in anticipation of my first class at 8 p.m. Soon, the doorbell rang. I opened the door to greet my students, who welcomed me with warm smiles. I began with a brief conversation to understand their motivation for learning Hindi in a French-speaking region. One of them shared that she had visited India twice and had developed a deep appreciation for its culture. She was keen to learn Hindi to read books and to better understand Indian traditions and religious texts.

Discerning their interest, I had set the context and shared my teaching plan for the coming days. I encouraged them to ask as many questions as they liked, as I wanted the sessions to be interactive and engaging. I handed them the printouts and began with the basics, teaching the Hindi alphabets and guiding them to practise writing.

The class turned out to be so engaging that I couldn't keep track of time and didn't even notice how quickly those two hours had passed. They were full of curiosity and apprehensions, which I could gauge from their questions about Indian culture, religion, and even Bollywood. At the end of the session, both of them handed me 40 euros each, making it 80 euros for the evening. I

was filled with tremendous joy. I rushed to Helene to thank her and even tried to offer her 20 euros, but she gently refused. She said it was my hard work and that I deserved it, advising me to spend it wisely.

Money may not be able to buy all happiness, but it can certainly bring some of it. That night, as I lay in my sleeping bag, I kept turning from side to side, unable to sleep. The excitement of earning a good amount filled my mind with endless thoughts: what gifts I could take back for my parents, siblings, and friends in India. After all, I would be returning home after one and a half years. I even started making a long list of things I wanted to buy for everyone.

Despite a long and exhausting day, I found no sleep. My eyes remained wide open, while my senses picked up the sound of strong winds outside, which had company, accompanied by gentle snowfall. It felt surreal. I had seen such Christmas scenes only in Hollywood movies, where everything looked magical, and now, I was living that moment myself. Amidst all these thoughts, I made a decision. I would visit Istanbul to celebrate this New Year. I had heard so much about this mesmerising city on the Bosphorus, which is a bridge between two continents. Its rich history and the iconic Hagia Sophia had always been my pinboard place to visit, and now it finally felt within reach.

I woke up early, as it was my last working day at the bookshop. I could hardly believe how quickly the days had passed. I got ready and reached the bookshop on time. Being Christmas Eve, the crowd was at its peak. We worked tirelessly, our hands moving almost like machines, wrapping gifts one after another. The tip box kept filling up, nearly overflowing by the end of the day.

There was a rush of excitement among all of us. Each person at the gift wrapping counter carried their own dreams and plans,

and it felt like those were about to come true. We worked until 9 p.m., our fingers numb from the constant motion, yet our spirits remained high. Over those ten days, we had formed a bond that went beyond just colleagues.

I especially remember a Romanian girl who had performed a dance during our cultural evening. She was always curious about Bollywood. One day, she shared that her grandmother believed Indian women were always beautifully dressed in traditional attire and adorned with jewellery, influenced by what she had seen in films and on television. She wanted to know if it was true, and I smiled, gently nodding in agreement.

Eventually, it was time to say goodbye to everyone, including the store manager. I left for Annemasse, feeling sad. On my way to the train station, I received a call from the elderly lady who had organised everything. She asked if I could meet her briefly at the Geneva station, and I agreed. As I boarded the train, I carried with me a bag full of memories along with mixed emotions of joy, gratitude, and belonging. Working with people from different nationalities has shown me that, despite our differences, the essence of being human remains the same: kind hearts and shared empathy.

The journey from Lausanne to Geneva felt unusually short that day. When I stepped out of the station, I saw her waiting for me, holding a box and wearing her ever-graceful smile. She wished me a Merry Christmas and handed me the box, saying it was a gift for me. I was deeply touched; it was the first Christmas gift I had ever received.

Then she handed me an envelope with some cash, mentioning that she had to meet other volunteers and would have to leave soon. We hugged, promising to stay in touch. As she walked away, I opened the envelope. Inside were several euro notes.

When I counted them, it was prodigious and far beyond what I had expected, close to 1000 euros.

Christmas Dinner at Helene's Place

I was brought up in Ranchi, Jharkhand, a city with a significant Christian population, and even my school was run by Christians. Yet, I had never attended a church mass or received an invitation to a Christmas dinner. As a result, I had little idea how people organised such celebrations or what dishes they traditionally served.

So when Helene invited me to join her Christmas dinner at her countryside home with her family and friends, I was genuinely thrilled. It felt like an opportunity for a beautiful cultural exchange, and I was also looking forward to enjoying a hearty meal after a good time. In our Hindu festivals back home, my maa would prepare various sweets and festive dishes, and we would wait eagerly for the moment when the food was finally served.

At last, the day arrived. Helene and I got ready in the evening to leave. I was dressed smartly, trying to look my best, while Helene looked elegant in her own effortless way, despite having little interest in dressing up or wearing makeup. I knew that exchanging gifts was an important Christmas tradition, so I had quietly bought a few gifts for her without telling her in advance.

After driving around 50 kilometres, we reached a small town and headed straight to her friends' house. They all came outside to welcome us warmly. Helene introduced me as her Indian friend who was staying with her and interning with OHCHR. Everyone was kind and gracious, making me feel immediately at ease.

Inside, the dining table was beautifully laid out with cheese, wine, cookies, ham, olives, bread, and my favourite croissants. I was invited to help myself, so I poured a glass of fine French red wine and picked some baguette, cheese, and red grapes. As I ate, I quietly

observed everyone around me, trying to understand their customs, traditions, and the unique way they celebrated Christmas.

At night, everyone gathered to play puzzle games. Most of the guests were elderly, and I was easily the youngest among them. The Christmas spirit was everywhere. People were laughing, singing, playing games, and occasionally dancing as well. I had already eaten more than enough and was merrily full of delicious food, chicken, salami, and plenty of wine. It was a joyful and memorable evening.

Before leaving, I was told that I must return the next day at 12 p.m. for the Christmas lunch, where everyone would gather again. I said goodbye to the group and left with Helene for her family home. Her elderly mother, who was unwell and must have been in her nineties, occupied the house. She looked at me and offered a warm, contented smile. Helene then showed me the room where I would sleep, and I think I fell asleep almost immediately the moment I touched the soft, clean bed.

But before I had knocked out that night, I felt like a free man. After many days, I was finally not sleeping inside a sleeping bag. I comprehended then that freedom is deeply personal and subjective. For someone deprived of rest, a peaceful sleep can itself feel like freedom. It is often said that man is born free, yet everywhere he lives in chains. Many people still do not have the freedom to speak openly, practise the religion of their choice, or marry the person they love. Across the world, the struggle for freedom continues. In some places, women have only recently won the right to drive. In parts of Africa, girls still face genital mutilation, while in India many young girls are forced into child marriage.

We speak of human rights as matters of dignity and pride, rights that no one can take away. Yet in reality, millions remain deprived of them. While the world celebrates Christmas with lights and joy, countless people continue to suffer in silence. More than gifts, what

they need is health, safety, equality, and the freedom to choose their lives. Lost in these thoughts, I did not realise when sleep quietly carried me away into a deep slumber.

The next morning, I woke up early, excited to explore the new town. I stepped outside and went for a peaceful walk along the lakeside. Birds were chirping, and the snow spread all around the lake, creating a breathtaking scene. Naturally, I took out my camera and began capturing those beautiful moments through my lens.

After taking a few satisfying shots, I had returned home to join Helene and her mother for a cup of English tea. I noticed that Helene's mother was unable to speak, though she seemed to understand everything being said around her. Helene explained that her mother was ancient and had suffered a fall at home, leaving her unable to move freely and mostly confined to bed.

I was curious to know how her mother managed in Helene's absence, since there seemed to be no one else in the house to care for her. Helene told me that the French healthcare system was very supportive. A nurse had been assigned to her mother and would come every day, spending several hours helping her bathe and eat and even taking her for short strolls in a wheelchair before leaving at night. I had another question in mind, so I asked what would happen if an emergency arose during the night. Helene explained that her mother had been given an emergency alert switch. If she pressed it, medical services would respond immediately and send assistance without delay.

I found the arrangement deeply humane and reassuring. It reflected a society where people were cared for with dignity and respect. Unlike systems where healthcare can become a privilege reserved for those who can afford it, this model felt rooted in social responsibility. Despite the pressure of globalisation and modern economic competition, France and several other Western European

countries had managed to preserve a strong social fabric, where quality education, pensions, and healthcare remained accessible to ordinary people.

Very interesting discussions were unfolding on Christmas Day, but they came to a sudden halt, like a speeding car hitting a speed bump. Helene reminded us that it was time to get ready for our Christmas lunch. She was absolutely right, so we adjourned our gathering and excitedly began preparing for the much-anticipated meal.

The moment we entered the dining room, a bustling festive atmosphere welcomed us. Christmas jingles and lively music filled the air, perfectly complementing the beautiful decorations and the mouthwatering aromas wafting around us. The cherry on top was the dining table, which was laden with a jaw-dropping feast that we could not wait to devour. Sitting proudly in the centre was a magnificent turkey, which was undoubtedly the highlight of the lunch.

Before we dug into the food, another cherished ritual began to unfold: the exchange of Christmas gifts. I had been looking forward to this moment, holding Helene's gift close, unsure of when the right time would be to give it to her. As the gift-giving commenced, I watched everyone's expressions closely. Receiving a gift has always been an emotional experience for me; growing up, I cherished the presents from my parents and siblings, and I would always eagerly await my birthday just to receive something special.

The ambiance was thick with emotion, accompanied by a chorus of "so sweet", "aww", and "I love you". Suddenly, a voice caught my attention; it was Helene calling my name. I was completely surprised to find that she had brought me a gift, and I vividly remember receiving a wonderful deodorant and a high-quality leather belt. Deeply moved, I gathered the courage to surprise her in return. I presented her with a bottle of wine, some gourmet cheese, and fine

chocolates. She was not expecting it at all; her face lit up with a joyful expression, and she warmly thanked me with her eyes.

Time was moving quickly, and before we comprehended, it was already 2 p.m. We wrapped up our warm conversations and got ready for lunch. By then, everyone was focused on the meal, and the hosts had certainly prepared a feast that did not disappoint. The table was filled with baguette, soup, wine, salad, and many other delicacies. I could make out everyone was hungry, as people began eating with great enthusiasm. The aroma of the food itself was enough to create a delightful, nearly intoxicating experience.

In the middle of the lunch, the gracious lady of the house brought out the turkey, the true showstopper of the feast. I thoroughly enjoyed the taste and told everyone that it was my very first introduction to turkey. It was a heartfelt experience, and I truly appreciated it.

One thing I found especially familiar was how naturally political discussions emerged around the dining table. It seemed to be one of the favourite subjects for the older members of the group. At that time, three major issues dominated the conversation: the conflict in the Middle East and North Africa, the economic instability affecting Europe, especially Spain and Greece, and the growing debate over surveillance and privacy, particularly the famous Edward Snowden case.

Gradually, and not at all to my surprise, the conversation began circling around Napoleon Bonaparte. The French guests admired him greatly, describing him as a true warrior and statesman, and some even remarked that if he were alive today, many of Europe's present troubles might never have existed. Modern French society, I believe, still regards Napoleon as a complex and towering historical figure, admired both as a visionary state-builder and as a military genius. He is remembered as the architect of many modern French

institutions, including the Civil Code, the prefectural system, and advanced public education.

Yet we often forget that his rise began from humble origins. His success was not merely the product of hard work and disciplined labour but also of consistent effort guided in the right direction. It reminded me that when we remain unwavering in our devotion to our goals, no obstacle can truly prevent our progress. And perhaps that is how, eventually, someone becomes Napoleon.

The atmosphere of admiration and lively conversation continued to grow, accompanied by constant refills of wine and generous servings of delicious French cheese. Gradually, the day faded into darkness, and it was time to return to Annemasse.

We bid a warm farewell to our hosts and to Helene's mother, then set off on a pleasant drive back. The roads were lined with snow, and the Christmas decorations added a magical charm to the journey. The silence of the evening was occasionally softened by gentle music playing from passing cars, where couples were celebrating Christmas in their own joyful way. The scene reminded me of Venice, where we had once celebrated Christmas with such enthusiasm. I still remember that unforgettable night when, on our way back, a few of our friends jumped into a boat parked in the canal and spent hours laughing and enjoying themselves.

Lost in those memories, I suddenly felt our car take a sharp turn, and the headlights reflected off a nearby wall, and we had finally reached home. As the car came to a stop, I thanked Helene many times for the unforgettable memories, the wonderful Christmas lunch, and the thoughtful gifts. Meeting her mother and her friends had been a truly warm, surreal, and beautiful experience.

Hosted a Friend from Russia

The warmth of the Christmas lunch lingered, and I found myself deeply immersed in the earlier conversation about the meteoric rise of Napoleon. There was no doubt that he was a brave man and a charismatic leader. One of his famous quotes, “A leader is a dealer in hope,” stayed with me, and I found myself strongly resonating with it.

As someone who also aspired to enter politics in India, I felt that if I were ever to lead, I too should become a dealer in hope, but never a seller of empty dreams. Suddenly, the ringing of my phone interrupted my thoughts. It was a call from my friend Alex from Russia, who had been my classmate in Venice. She told me that one of her close friends from Russia was coming to Geneva to attend a seven-day seminar at the United Nations headquarters and asked if it might be possible for me to host her during that period.

I explained that I was living as a guest and sharing the accommodation with Helene, so I could not make any commitment without first asking her permission. I told Alex that I would speak to Helene the next day and then get back to her with an answer.

Alex was one of my closest friends from the EMA programme in Venice, and around that time I had received, by what I can only call God’s grace, a place to stay for six months. Because of that blessing, I could grasp responsibility within me. It seemed only right that I should explore whether Helene might allow Alex’s friend, who was planning to come to Geneva for a conference, to stay with us for seven days.

That evening, when I returned from the office, I found Helene seated with her laptop, absorbed in what seemed to be a card game. I went and stood silently near the door, sure she would notice I was preoccupied. As expected, she soon looked up and gently asked whether I wished to speak to her. I nodded and explained that a

friend of my friend was coming to Geneva for a conference and was searching for a place to stay. I asked whether, with her permission, she might stay with us in the living room for a week. Helene responded with her usual calm kindness: "Anand, if you know her, and if she can stay here and obey the house rules, she is welcome." I felt deeply grateful for the trust she placed in me, and I immediately conveyed the good news to Alex. She was overjoyed and told me that she would soon send me her friend's itinerary and contact number.

Work at the office was going well, and I was starting to feel like one of the senior interns. During this time, I became close friends with a German girl named Ana, who was very fond of me. Sometimes after lunch at the café, we would go for pleasant walks near the Motta building.

Ana was highly creative, and her imagination often became the centre of our conversations. On most topics, she carried an entirely different perspective and an unusual way of looking at things. Her thoughts often captured my attention, and many times I found myself trying to see the world through her lenses as well, which was both surprising and refreshing. That evening, I received an email informing me that Alex's friend would be arriving in Geneva on January 15th. Interestingly, her name was also Alex. I then shared all the necessary details with her, including the address of the house and directions on how to reach home.

Evenings were always the toughest part of my day. I often skipped lunch altogether or survived on just an apple or a brownie, which was certainly not enough to sustain me through the day. By evening, hankering for the meal of the day would take over, and I would rush to get back to Annemasse as early as possible so I could cook a proper meal and satisfy my appetite.

From the office to Geneva train station, I passed cafés, restaurants,

and supermarkets lining the streets. The aroma of fresh coffee, warm croissants, and baked pizza would drift through the air and tempt all my taste buds. Yet, I would deliberately turn my head the other way and keep walking down the station, focused only on getting home.

Since it was the weekend, I felt relieved that I would not have to repeat the same routine the next morning. It meant I could sleep longer, which during those bitterly cold days felt like a true luxury. I never wanted to crawl out of my sleeping bag in the freezing early hours to go to the office, yet every day I had to force myself to do so. That afternoon, while taking a stroll with Ana during lunch, she told me that on Monday there would be a performance at the Grand Théâtre de Genève and invited me to join her for the play.

I was quietly thrilled at the thought of going to the opera at the iconic Grand Théâtre. It would be my first encounter with this art form, and I had heard so much about the theatre's grandeur that I was sure the evening would be unforgettable. On Monday, during lunchtime, Ana and I met, and she once again confirmed that I would be joining her for the performance. With a grin I reassured her that I would come, though from that moment onwards I found myself glancing at my watch again and again, as if time had suddenly decided to stand still.

Yet no conspiracy of the universe can delay an awaited hour forever. At last, the clock struck five. I closed my laptop with a feeling of release and hurried to the second floor to meet Ana so that we could leave together for the theatre. Usually, I would walk to Geneva train station on my way home, but that day was different; we chose to take Tram No. 15, which would drop us almost at the doorstep of the Grand Théâtre. Even that small journey felt touched with anticipation, as if the city itself were escorting us in route to something beautiful and unknown.

The opera we went to watch was *Madama Butterfly*, and it began exactly on time. The hall was stunning, and to my surprise, it was filled largely with young people. Only after the performance ended did I fully understand why it had drawn such a crowd. It was a story of love, betrayal, honour, and the terrible fragility of human hope. In the first act, love appeared almost like an illusion. Pinkerton, the male protagonist, regarded marriage as something temporary, almost like a contract that could be ended at will, while Butterfly embraced it with complete faith and sincerity. In the second act, she waited for him with heartbreaking devotion for three long years after he left for America. Though she was offered the chance to marry a Japanese prince, she remained loyal to the man she loved, even as he had already remarried. Then came the final blow of tragic reality: Pinkerton returned to Japan with his American wife, intending to take away their son, and Butterfly, shattered by dishonour and despair, chose death with her father's dagger, upon which was inscribed the unforgettable line: "To die with honour when one can no longer live with honour."

It was a deeply tragic work, one that laid bare the painful struggle between love, loyalty, and modern pragmatism. To me, it felt as though the opera were mourning not only Butterfly's fate but also the erosion of human feeling in a world increasingly shaped by selfishness and convenience. When we walked back afterward, both Ana and I were unusually silent, carrying the sadness of the performance within us. I could not stop thinking about Butterfly, her waiting, her faith, her conviction, and the cruel defeat of all three. Long after the curtains had fallen, her sorrow lingered in my heart, and it became one of those few stories that do not merely entertain us; they embrace us and never leave.

After the opera, Ana and I had planned to have dinner together and continue our conversation about the play. The emotions of *Madama Butterfly* were still alive within us, and it felt as though the evening

deserved to be prolonged a little further through quiet reflection, warm food, and thoughtful conversation. But just as we were about to settle into that plan, my phone rang. An unknown number flashed across the screen. I was not used to receiving voice calls, so I answered it with curiosity.

On the other end was a woman speaking in a Russian accent. She introduced herself as Alex and, with a tone of growing distress, told me that she was unable to find her way home. For more than an hour she had been wandering from place to place, confused and exhausted. The call felt like a cry for help, almost an SOS reaching me in the middle of an otherwise beautiful evening. In that instant, the mood changed completely. I had to cancel our dinner plan. I apologised to Ana with genuine regret and immediately turned my thoughts to getting home.

Even if I had hired a cab at once, I knew I would not have been able to reach Alex in less than an hour. So I told her, as calmly as I could, to wait for me somewhere safe, perhaps in a park or near a familiar public place, and assured her that I would call again as soon as I arrived. As I made my way back, I carried a strange mixture of emotions within me: the lingering sorrow of the opera, the disappointment of an interrupted evening, and, above all, a sudden sense of responsibility for someone lost and waiting. Life, I had learnt once again, often changes its script without warning; just when one believes the night will end in beauty and reflection, it instead demands presence, duty, and care.

I took the bus to return home, though that evening my only wish was to reach it as quickly as possible. Usually, the bus ride was my favourite part of the day, for it gifted me an hour of sleep, a small luxury in those tiring times. But today, sleep refused to visit my eyes. They remained wide open, fixed upon the passing milestones, as if each one might somehow shorten the journey. Yet I knew well that

no desire, no impatience, could bend time. Home was still one and a half hours away; after the bus, there remained the long walk through the cold streets.

After an hour, I reached Annemasse and began striding swiftly for my place. Alex was waiting for me anxiously outside, braving the snowfall and the biting cold. As I neared the house, the streetlights were dim and uncertain, but in their pale glow I could make out a slender figure of medium height. What stood out most were her blue eyes, shining brightly even against the darkness of the night.

I called out softly, "Alex?"

With a burst of warmth and relief, she answered, "Yesssss, it is me!"

In that moment, she seemed like someone reunited with a long-lost friend, suddenly rescued from loneliness and the winter chill. We entered the house together, and I showed her the place where she would stay in the living room, furnished with a couch and a table. In a city as expensive as Geneva's shadow, it was more than enough for a guest staying a week, and she received it with gratitude. I also showed her the washroom and explained the household customs. She was free to cook, of course, but she would have to obey Helene's sacred rules of water conservation and brief showers. That made her smile, though she knew she had little choice but to comply.

As I settled down, an old quote I had once read during my college days returned to me, attributed to Benito Mussolini: "The League is very well when sparrows shout but no good at all when eagles fall out." It made me reflect on how often citizens of poorer nations seem voiceless in global affairs, unable to shape the rules that govern them. And when they dare to resist, pressure, interference, or upheaval often meet them. It seemed that the strong too often wrote the rules for the weak.

I thought with a smile that this was much like Helene's household.

To live under her roof, one had to follow her rules. On that lighter note, I laughed at my wandering thoughts, using them to keep my spirits cheerful against the long winter night.

On her very first day, Alex was accompanied by me to the Motta Building, where she had some office work before later proceeding to the United Nations headquarters. It was the easiest route for her to come along with me, sparing her the trouble of navigating the city alone, and we agreed to meet again in the evening near the famous Broken Chair before returning home together.

As we walked, she began teaching me a few French words and helped me frame simple everyday sentences. In return, I told her an old story from my student days. During my college years, I had studied in a class of nearly forty-nine nationalities, among them several French students. One day, a mischievous friend urged me to repeat a sentence to a French girl in the corridor, assuring me it was harmless. The phrase was “Voulez-vous coucher avec moi?”

I, innocent of its meaning, repeated it faithfully. The girl looked startled for a moment, then quickly could conclude I had been made the subject of a prank. With a playful smile and a graceful shrug of her shoulders, she replied, “Oui.”

Moments like these taught me how enriching a multicultural environment can be. It widened my mind, taught me tolerance, and gifted me a more liberal outlook on life. Had I uttered such words in India without understanding them, I might have invited outrage or worse. But there, it ended in laughter and a light-hearted lesson.

As we continued talking, Alex asked about my birthday. I told her it was only four days away. Her face lit up instantly, and with childlike enthusiasm, she announced that on the day she would cook a Russian delicacy for me. The thought filled me with unexpected joy. Suddenly, what would have been another ordinary and lonely birthday seemed destined to become something warm and

memorable, celebrated by Alex and, surely, by Helene too.

Birthdays always carried a touch of homesickness for me. No matter where I was, I missed Maa and family most on that day. Back home, Maa always made sure to mark my birthday with love, laughter, and her homemade delicacies. Even now, despite time and distance, she still tried to keep the tradition alive.

After the first day, Alex began returning home on her own. She would quietly enter the house, go straight to her room, and immerse herself in her world, either occupied with work or endlessly speaking to her boyfriend over the phone. I paid little attention to her routine, for it was her life and her way of spending her free hours. Yet beneath that calm surface, something invisible was simmering, something she herself perhaps could not perceive.



A moment of celebration with Helen.

Helene, meanwhile, had grown accustomed to warmth, lively conversations, shared meals and those small gestures of affection that make a house feel alive. As a host, she deserved such kindness, and I always tried to offer it. Cooking was something I loved, and I

always shared the food I prepared with her. Slowly she had developed a fondness for my spicy & aromatic dishes, especially when accompanied by her sparkling wine.

But there was a noticeable contrast in Alex. She rarely spoke to Helene, never invited her to join a meal, nor seemed inclined to spend even a few moments in conversation. Helene felt slighted, though she never openly complained, perhaps because Alex was there through me. Yet I could see her growing displeasure. Maybe it was a Western habit of privacy, of not intruding upon others. Maybe Alex believed she was staying only a few days and more profound bonds were unnecessary. Whatever the reason, a certain chill had entered the house, and I too found myself counting the days until her departure.

Then came my birthday. From morning onwards, messages and wishes poured in from friends and family across the continents. At lunch, my friend Ana brought a cake, and we celebrated in the cafeteria. To my surprise, many people came in just to wish me, and I shared slices of cake with each of them. Their warmth touched me deeply, softening for a while the ache of being far from my people. I also carried a piece to my favourite colleague, Thandar, who worked in the Anti-Discrimination Unit. She was a permanent staff member there, but to me she felt like a mother figure. To my delight, she had brought a lovely gift for me.

After the celebration, I was eager to return home, for Alex had promised to cook my birthday dinner. All the way back, curiosity accompanied me. What would she prepare?

The moment I entered the house, my senses awakened to a feast of aromas drifting through the air. The kitchen was glowing with warmth, and there stood Alex, flushed and drenched in sweat despite the freezing weather outside. She had cooked an entire banquet and even baked a cake. There was pelmeni, borscht, blini,

pirozhki, and more, and each dish was carefully prepared to suit my tastes. No beef or pork had been used, knowing well that I neither ate them nor wished to cross certain boundaries of faith and upbringing. Though I was never rigidly religious, there were some beliefs I quietly carried within me, and she had respected them all.

I was utterly overwhelmed. Her kindness seemed to fill every corner of the room, and my face could not hide its joy. I invited Helene to join us, and she arrived carrying her beloved French wine. Together we cut the cake, laughed, ate, and celebrated late into the evening. We finished nearly everything, saving only a little for the next day.

I thanked Alex countless times for the effort, the thoughtfulness, and the affection hidden in every dish. As a small token of gratitude, I gave her a box of chocolates. It was hardly necessary, but gratefulness often seeks some form of expression. It had been a full, complete and beautiful day. At last, exhausted and contented, I longed only to fall into bed so that I could stick to my routine and wake up in time for work the next morning.

At last, the day arrived when Alex was to return to Russia. I had promised her that I would come home early that evening so I could see her off properly. Her conference in Geneva had already ended, so she remained at Helene's house for the day, packing her belongings and preparing for the journey ahead. When I entered the house that evening, I immediately made out something was wrong. Alex, usually composed, looked pale and restless. Anxiety had tightened her every facial line.

"What happened?" I asked.

She turned to me, her voice trembling. She explained that her flight was from Lyon, and to reach Lyon, she first had to catch a train departing from Geneva Station at nine o'clock. But there was no public transport available, no buses, and no taxis, and time was slipping away like sand through open fingers.

I quickly gave her the numbers of a few cab companies and asked her to keep trying. I also suggested checking if there might be another bus from some nearby point. She made call after call, but nothing moved. The clock had already struck half past seven. With every passing minute, her fear deepened. She knew she was on the verge of missing the train, and with it, perhaps the flight too.

At last I said, "Speak to Helene. She is the only hope left now."

Alex hesitated. She had never built any warmth with Helene and perhaps knew it. Yet desperation leaves little room for pride. Gathering courage, she went to Helene's room and explained her situation. I remained in my room, waiting in silence for the answer. I already knew what the answer would be.

And indeed, a few moments later I heard raised voices. Helene had refused. She said she was occupied with important work and could not drive her to Geneva station. Soon after, I heard the muffled sound of Alex crying. She was trapped now, with no transport, no solution, and very little time.

I could not remain silent. I walked to Helene's room and knocked on the door.

A sharp voice came from inside. "Why are you knocking?"

"I need to speak with you. Please open the door."

She opened it, visibly annoyed. I calmly explained Alex's situation once more and requested her, as sincerely as I could, to help by driving her to the station. Helene's anger poured out like a long-held storm. She said Alex had been discourteous from the day she arrived. She had never spoken to me properly, never shared a meal, never once invited her to sit or talk. Instead, she treated the house like a hotel rather than a home, spending all her time on the phone with her boyfriend. She cooked alone, ate alone, and lived sealed inside her shell.

I listened quietly, then folded my request into gentler words. "Please, it would be a real kindness if you helped her now." Helene looked at me for a long moment. Then she sighed and said, "Fine. I will take her. But she must pay for the fuel."

Alex agreed immediately, relief washing over her face.

Within minutes we loaded her bags into Helene's car and set off to Geneva through the dark winter roads. Snow glimmered on the roadside under the headlights. Silence filled the car until Helene finally spoke. "If Anand had needed to go even to Lyon, I would have taken him happily," she said. "But taking you is difficult, because you were never polite."

Her words were blunt, but they were honest. Helene had never possessed the art of sugar-coated speech. She spoke as she felt, and one always knew where one stood with her. We reached Geneva station before nine. Alex would catch her train after all. On the platform we were embraced warmly. She handed fifty euros to Helene, thanked her sincerely, and hurried inside with her luggage. Soon she disappeared into the crowd.

On the drive back, Helene and I spoke deeply about people, expectations, and the unseen rules of human relationships.

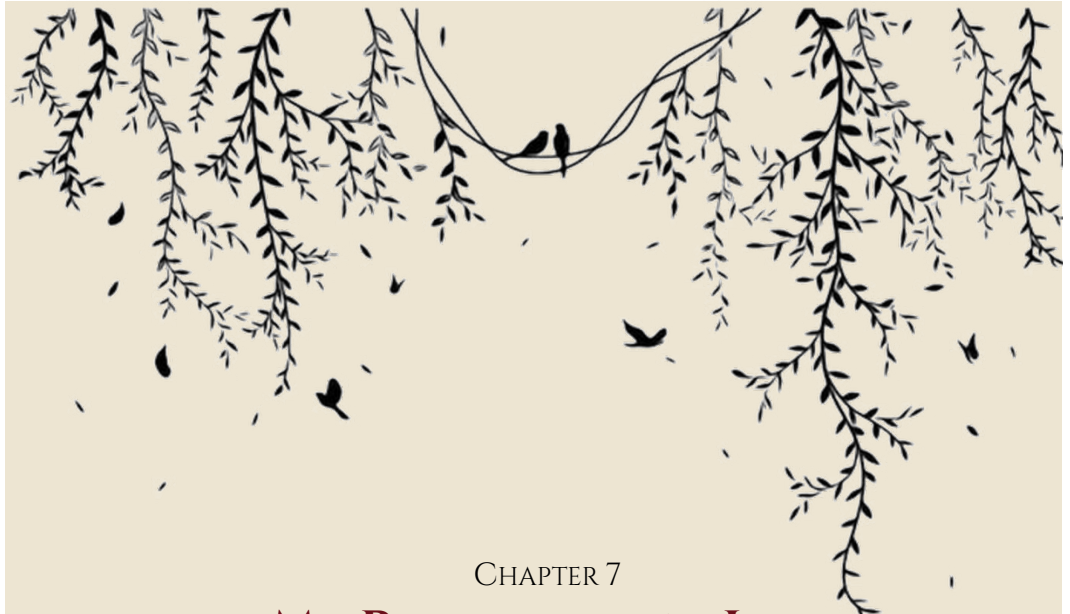
"I could have taken her without charging anything," she admitted. "But I wanted to teach her something. When someone hosts you, you must not behave like a stranger hiding in a shell. One must learn basic civility and courtliness and how to live with others."

I nodded quietly.

That night, as the car moved through the sleeping streets, I understood something simple yet profound: human hearts are the same everywhere. Whether European, African, or Asian, the heart understands one language above all others: the language of love, affection, and respect. Human hearts open to kindness and close to

indifference. The bond between Helene and me grew stronger not because we were alike, but because it was built on those very foundations. Love, gratitude, and mutual respect.





CHAPTER 7

MY PROFESSIONAL LIFE

*"We remember countries by their landmarks,
but we remember our lives by the people who let us in."*

Thander Tun

It had been quite some time now, living under the same roof as Helene, and somewhere along the way she had quietly become one of the strongest pillars of my life. Her support was never loud, never demanding acknowledgement, yet it was constant and unwavering. In a foreign land where survival itself often felt like an achievement, her presence brought a position of grounding, as if I had found a small island of belonging amidst an ocean of unfamiliarity.

Yet, Helene was not the only soul who shaped my journey through Geneva. There were others, faces, voices, and hearts that became indispensable in my story. Each of them, in their own unique way, contributed to both my professional growth and personal evolution.

Looking back, I often feel that without these anchors, the vibrant chapters of my Geneva life would have remained incomplete, perhaps even directionless.

And when I begin to trace those names in my memory, one rises above the rest, Thandar. She was not just a colleague; she became a source of guidance during my time there. I still remember the very first day I met her during the office introduction. There was something inexplicable in that moment, a quiet, almost spiritual connection, as if two distant threads had finally found their ends and intertwined. It felt less like an introduction and more like a reunion long destined by time. Perhaps the universe had already written that meeting into our lives, waiting patiently for the right moment to unfold it.

As days turned into weeks and weeks into months, our bond deepened into something far more profound. It reminded me of a powerful scene from the iconic film *Deewaar*, starring Amitabh Bachchan. In the film, one brother boasts of wealth, power, and success, asking the other what he possesses in comparison. The reply is simple yet eternal, “I have a mother.”¹⁰ That moment defines the essence of love and belonging, surpassing all material wealth.

In many ways, Thandar became that presence for me in Geneva, a figure of warmth, guidance, and quiet strength. What began as a professional acquaintance gradually transformed into a relationship that carried the tenderness of a mother and the trust of a child.

My days in Geneva had quietly settled into a rhythm of their own. Every morning began with the familiar bus ride from Annemasse to Geneva, cutting through the stillness of the countryside like a silver thread stitching two worlds together. Outside the fogged windowpanes, nature unfolded herself generously, vineyards asleep

¹⁰ Mere pas maa hai!

under the winter mist, cottages wrapped in silence, distant hills painted in soft shades of snow and sunlight. No matter how exhausted or anxious I was, my eyes never forgot to admire that abundance of beauty spread carelessly across the landscape. It felt as though the countryside was whispering a prayer every morning to those who were willing to listen.



Thandar, sharing a meal together.

Most days I left home in great haste. Breakfast was a luxury I could rarely afford in those frantic mornings. At best, I would snatch an apple or a banana before rushing to the bus stop. Yet somehow, despite the chaos, I always managed to reach the office on time.

Perhaps I carried within me an invisible determination. I had often heard people joke that Indians were never punctual, and somewhere deep inside, I wanted to challenge that stereotype with my silent discipline. To my surprise, almost every morning I would find something waiting for me on my desk: a fruit, a sandwich, and occasionally a small pastry wrapped neatly in paper. The first time it happened, I was puzzled. I looked around the office, wondering who could have left it there. But from the next day on, my curiosity made me more observant. Before touching the food, I would casually scan the room with a discreet glance, pretending not to search for anyone. And then one morning I caught her looking at me. It was Thandar. Our eyes met for a fleeting second. She immediately lowered her gaze, while I smiled gently and thanked her with a playful wink. She responded with a soft, deeply satisfying smile, the kind that carried warmth without demanding words. Gradually, it became a ritual between us. Every morning she brought something for me to eat, and every morning I acknowledged it with silent gratitude.

Near my desk sat another intern named Karolina. Every day she watched this little exchange with amusement. One morning, while I was happily devouring a pear, she laughed and said, “You are the most spoilt intern. Everyone seems to be taking care of you.”

I simply smiled because, in many ways, she was right.

Then came a strange morning.

I arrived at the office and found my desk empty. No fruit. No sandwich. Nothing. Instinctively, my eyes began searching for Thandar across the office corridors. It surprised me how restless I suddenly felt. It was never really about the fruit. Somewhere amidst those tiny gestures, an invisible bond had formed between us, a bond woven quietly through smiles, concern, and unspoken affection. That morning I experienced how deeply her presence had

become stitched into my days. I missed her smile before I even missed my breakfast. That moment stayed with me, internalising the emotion that we count our blessings in the people we miss and feel in their absence. People stay more in their 'leaving' than in their presence.

Around the same time, another worry had been consuming me. Before coming to Geneva, I had received only a three-month visa because my passport was due to expire within six months. The consulate had advised me to renew my passport first and later apply for an extension. Since then, I have been trapped in an endless exchange of emails between the Government of India and the Milan Consulate, desperately trying to expedite the process. But bureaucracy, indifferent as ever, moves at its own pace; unmoved by human anxieties. Thandar knew about my struggle. She listened patiently whenever I spoke about it; offering advice was her rare choice; she simply used to listen in silence. Then one afternoon, an email finally arrived. My passport had been renewed and was ready for collection in Milan. Relief washed over me like sunlight after weeks of rain.

I immediately went to Thandar's chamber and requested a day's leave so I could go to Milan and collect the passport. She nodded gently in approval. I thanked her, came out of the room, picked up my backpack, and hurried to catch the lift, already calculating train schedules in my head. Just as I was about to step inside the elevator, I heard someone call my name.

I turned around. Thandar was walking towards me hurriedly. Without saying much, she placed a hundred Euros into my hand. "You are going to Milan," she said softly. "You will need money."

I protested instinctively, telling her that I already had enough. But she insisted with a firmness only affection can carry. She knew very well that the journey to Milan was expensive and that I was

constantly trying to survive on the smallest possible budget.

For a moment, words abandoned me. I simply hugged her.



Geneva's Cornavin railway station.

As I left for Geneva Station that evening, my heart felt unbearably full, full of gratitude, tenderness, and emotions too profound to be translated into language. Some kindnesses in life are so pure that they do not merely help you survive; they restore your faith in humanity itself. My internship still had two more months left; Thandar seemed more anxious than I was. She knew that the moment my internship ended, I might have to pack my dreams and return to India if I failed to secure a job in Geneva. I had applied to countless organisations, knocked on many doors, and sent my resume into the silent corridors of institutions, but my nationality often became an invisible wall standing in my way.

It felt ironic that I was living in a city that proudly housed the custodians of human rights, where conferences echoed with grand declarations about dignity, equality, and justice. Yet, with every passing day, I could feel my rights shrinking quietly beneath the

weight of immigration rules and sponsorship barriers. Geneva often appeared to me like a beautifully decorated glass palace where compassion was discussed eloquently inside warm conference halls, but outside, many dreams froze silently in the cold air.

A few civil society organisations offered me opportunities. Their words carried hope, and for brief moments I allowed myself to imagine a future in that enchanting city. But eventually every conversation stumbled upon the same obstacle, visa sponsorship. They admired my work, appreciated my passion, but could not sponsor my stay. Appreciation, I understood, could not replace paperwork.

During our coffee breaks, I would sit with Thandar and update her about yet another rejection email. She listened quietly every time, her face wrapped in sadness and helplessness. I knew that she genuinely wanted to help me, but there are certain battles where affection alone cannot defeat systems.

There was also a policy within the OHCHR that prevented interns from immediately joining the same unit without completing a six-month cooling-off period, a measure designed to avoid conflicts of interest. Rationally, the rule made perfect sense. Emotionally, however, it felt cruel. In a city as expensive and regulated as Geneva, surviving without sponsorship was almost impossible.

Slowly, I began to feel as though life itself was tightening its grip around my aspirations. Every passing day carried a strange heaviness, like sand slipping endlessly through my fingers. And somewhere between policy papers, coffee cups, and rejection letters, both Thandar and I were learning the painful truth that even the most well-meant intentions are powerless before rigid systems.

Reaching Geneva itself had felt like an impossible dream for an ordinary young man with no financial backing, no scholarship, and no government sponsorship. Yet somehow, against the tide of

uncertainty, I had reached there and continued to survive. Every day felt like rowing a fragile boat through violent waters. I knew that if I stopped paddling, I would drown beneath the weight of helplessness and obscurity. So I kept swimming, even when my arms ached with exhaustion and my heart had begun to lose hope.

What pinned my existence the most was that even after acquiring valuable academic qualifications and meaningful professional experiences from different parts of the world, I was still struggling to find a platform where I truly belonged. It bruised my spirit quietly. Most of the interns at the United Nations came from privileged worlds. Some arrived with the confidence of inherited wealth, while others were officially sponsored by their governments to gain first-hand exposure to diplomacy, international negotiations, and the sophisticated corridors of global power. The United Nations, despite its noble ideals of equality and justice, often appeared to me as a polished arena dominated by the privileged nations and privileged classes. It showed in the accents echoing through the hallways, the expensive suits, the ease with which people carried themselves, and the confidence with which they spoke about the future.

And then there was me, a homeless intern from India, surviving from one day to the next, carrying dreams far heavier than my empty pockets. Had it not been for Thandar's kindness and silent protection, many of my nights in Geneva would have collapsed into complete despair. She became like an invisible lighthouse during my darkest days, guiding me gently without ever making me feel small for needing help.

The thought of returning to India had already started looming over me like a dark cloud hovering above the mountains. Yet one thing inside me had become crystal clear: I would never return to the suffocating life of the corporate world again. I no longer wished to

sell my time, my sleep, and my freedom in exchange for salaries that could never nourish my soul. Somewhere deep within, a stubborn fire kept whispering that I had to carve my path, no matter how uncertain or lonely it appeared.

Almost every morning, Thandar would forward me emails containing job opportunities, fellowships, or conferences. Occasionally she added nothing more than a small smiley face at the end of the mail, but even that tiny gesture carried warmth, hope, and an unspoken assurance that perhaps life had not given up on me yet.

Lisa Neddoff Smith

Lisa was another remarkable presence in the office, a woman who carried an effortless grace about her. There was always a luminous smile resting upon her face, the kind that could soften the harshness of even the most exhausting day. She possessed that rare charisma that did not demand attention yet naturally drew people to her warmth.

I met Lisa on my very first day at the Motta building, though little did I know then that she would eventually become one of the most important people in my Geneva journey. Fate had quietly assigned her the role of a saviour in my story. At that moment, however, she was simply a kind colleague asking an ordinary question. "Where are you staying?"

A story that started with a simple question, "Where are you staying?" to Lisa, who became my saviour in finding a roof during my initial days, later became a source of inspiration. Lisa was as humane as one could be but with rational views on every sensational issue. By now we know she gave me the first car ride; on our way back, we had a touchy discussion on illegal immigrants. I knew she had empathy, but at the same time she had a strong, harsh stand on how people influxing the cities of Europe were creating a situation

of chaos for them, whereby I could not resist but intervene that developed countries had no idea how developing countries deal with the pressure of illegal migrants. Coming from India, and that too from Bihar, I knew that the situation of Rohingyas and cross-border illegal migration from Nepal and Bangladesh had been a common topic of discussion at home.

The pain of living in the conflict of struggles along our porous borders and of providing emotional support for people feeling stateless. It has always been debated why India has not ratified the UNHCHR treaties, but the government implements all the principles in toto, and the UN has its wing functioning in the country. In every polite way I could, I tried to make Lisa understand our plight, but it was not easy. The moment reminded me of a saying in Hindi we use back home: "Sabki nazron me apna dukh bada lagta hai" (To everyone, their misery stands the toughest). Though we did not concur with each other in that moment because somehow I believed that borders could not be closed at the cost of humanity. It was imprinted in my mind that *"We will not enjoy development without security, we will not enjoy security without development, and we will not enjoy either without respect for human rights."*¹¹ But such words cannot be explained or imposed; they can only be internalised through a cognitive setup. We left that moot point there, and I was feeling indebted for the help she had offered. I was immediately pulled back to my situation, and since then I had just been there, listening to every word in disbelief. It felt as though the universe itself was placing invisible hands upon my shoulders, preventing me from collapsing. Until then, Geneva had seemed intimidating and impossibly distant, but suddenly humanity revealed itself in the form of a compassionate stranger. Our conversation faded as we

¹¹Summary, page 2; 'In larger freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all', Report of the Secretary-General; A/59/2005/Add.3.

approached the grand gates of the United Nations headquarters. Further, during my stay in Geneva, such discussions and moot points became our string of connections. We both took the opportunity to refine our views whenever we could.



The Palais des Nations, home of the United Nations Office at Geneva.

Lisa asked me to get down since I still did not possess an official pass to enter with her vehicle. I stepped out slowly, my eyes instinctively staring at the magnificent building standing before me. For years the United Nations had existed only in my imagination, a symbol I had encountered in books, speeches, and dreams. Yet now I was standing before it with my own shadow falling upon its grounds. For a few moments I remained frozen, completely overwhelmed. The world around me blurred into silence as I stared at the historic structure. It felt unreal, almost sacred.

A sudden car horn pulled me back to reality. I moved aside awkwardly and proceeded to the security office to complete the formalities. The officers collected my documents, took my

photograph, scanned my fingerprints and carefully verified my passport. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, they handed me my United Nations badge.

The moment I placed that badge around my neck, an indescribable pride surged through me. It was not merely a card; it was a doorway into a world I had once believed belonged only to diplomats, world leaders, and extraordinary people.

I entered the lush green UN campus with a strange lightness in my steps. My legs seemed to float rather than walk. Like an excited child, I wandered through the pathways, taking photographs from my old Nokia phone to send back home. I wanted my family to see proof that their son had somehow reached this extraordinary place.

For a long time, I sat quietly near the office building, admiring the architecture and imagining the countless historic decisions that had once echoed through those corridors. My heart was drowning in pure rhapsody.

But reality has a habit of interrupting even the most beautiful dreams.

It was lunchtime, and my gut slowly began tightening its grip on me. I had started my day before dawn and had been running around completing paperwork since morning. My pockets held very little money, and after searching around for a while, I checked I could not afford to eat at the expensive cafés nearby.

Eventually I entered the main conference building, where several international meetings had just concluded. To my surprise, tables outside the conference halls still held untouched sandwiches, fruits, cheese platters, coffee, and cold drinks that attendees had left behind. Diplomats and delegates casually picked up snacks while discussing global policies and humanitarian crises. For a few moments I hesitated. Then gathering all the courage I possessed, I

quietly picked up a sandwich and poured myself a cup of coffee.

That simple meal felt like a royal feast. It did not merely satisfy my appetite; it restored my spirit. Holding the warm cup in my hands, I walked back to the OHCHR office with renewed energy. On the way, I crossed the famous statue of the Broken Chair, the powerful symbol standing tall before the United Nations, representing resistance against war and violence. I had missed noticing it earlier while driving with Lisa, but now I stopped for a moment beneath its shadow. The cold Geneva wind brushed against my face, yet inside me there was warmth, gratitude, and the fragile beginning of hope.

My steps moved slowly towards the Motta Building, and the entire surroundings seemed wrapped in an unusual serenity. The morning air carried a strange calmness, the kind that often descends upon life just before an unforeseen storm. Little did I know that beneath that silence, destiny was already arranging the next chapter of my survival in Geneva.

I entered the premises with my newly issued access card clutched carefully in my hand, as though it were not merely a card but a fragile permission to belong in that magnificent world of diplomacy and human rights. The glass doors opened with mechanical grace, and I stepped inside the towering structure that had become a dream for thousands across the world. Taking the lift to my unit, I sat quietly at my assigned desk, waiting for instructions, trying to conceal the uncertainty that was constantly churning inside me.

Over the months, I worked closely with Lisa on several assignments. One of the most memorable among them was the annual commemoration of Nelson Mandela International Day on July 18 at the OHCHR. The event honoured Mandela's extraordinary legacy of peace, reconciliation, and human dignity. Along with Thandar, Yuri, Neeraj, and several others, we spent days coordinating discussions, arranging logistics, and preparing for the evening screening of a film

dedicated to his life and struggle. The atmosphere that evening felt almost sacred. Diplomats, scholars, activists, and dignitaries filled the hall, including the vice president of South Africa. The entire event unfolded beautifully, and for a brief moment I felt as though I too had become a tiny thread woven into the larger fabric of global humanity.

Lisa was always kind to me. There was warmth in her conversations and an effortless generosity in the way she treated people. One evening she invited me for drinks with her friends from OHCHR, and her husband joined us as well. The evening flowed gently with laughter, office gossip, political discussions, and stories from different corners of the world. It was during that gathering that I learned Lisa originally had roots in Syria before eventually migrating to the United States. Perhaps displacement had taught her the language of empathy.

During our conversation, I mentioned my passion for photography and showed her two photographs that had once been recognised by UNESCO and the European Council. One of them had also been published in the annual magazine of the International Dalit Solidarity Network. Lisa looked at those pictures with genuine admiration. Without saying much, she quietly walked out and went to the office gallery and pinned both photographs onto the notice board for everyone to see.

It may have appeared like a small gesture to others, but for me it was monumental. In a city where I was constantly struggling for belongingness, recognition, and survival, that moment felt like validation. Geneva often tested my endurance, but people like Lisa became small lamps in that unfamiliar city, illuminating the darkness just enough for me to continue walking forward.

More than these discussions, what stayed with me was her belief system about companionship and her relationship with her

husband, Brad. How important it is in life to find your person. At the same time, I could not help but adore how Brad trusted her intuitions and perception of a new intern. Back in my country, even epics and scriptures have stories of companionship in the names of Shiv-Shakti and Ram-Sita, but somehow the institution has been diluted with time. We talk more about counselling than about building trust in relationships. Nonetheless, I loved to watch love and companionship being celebrated, just as I have been reading and watching since forever back home.

Lisa, the feminine energy, had become a source of light on ordinary, dull days, full of energy and enthusiasm. She was living her kind of vivid life, which brightened the world around her. By the time the Geneva chapter got to a closure, Lisa had brought a few extra smiles to my face every other day.

Bashar Jamal

There was another intern at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, though he belonged to a different section. Occasionally, during lunch hours, he would drift towards our table, carrying with him the aroma of tobacco, the fatigue of exile, and stories soaked in the dust of the Middle East. His name was Bashar, and he came from Palestine. There was a strange magnetism in the way he spoke, softly, almost poetically, yet every sentence carried the weight of centuries of conflict and displacement.

Gradually, our acquaintance turned into friendship. Almost every evening, we began to return home together, walking from the imposing Motta building to the Geneva train station. Those walks soon became my informal university for international politics, pain, music, and memories of the Middle East.

My years in Europe had already introduced me to many students from Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Lebanon, and other Arab nations

during my master's programme. Through them, I discovered that these civilisations were rich in culture, hospitality, poetry, and pride. To me, the Arab world never felt entirely foreign. Their songs carried the same melancholy as Indian ghazals; their food carried familiar fragrances of spices; and their emotions echoed values we held close in India: family, honour, sacrifice, and faith. Even language betrayed our shared histories. So many words in Hindi had quietly found their way from Arabic and Persian into our everyday speech: 'Kitab', 'Kanoon', 'Kalam', 'Mohabbat', 'Sultan', and 'Halwa'. Civilisations, after all, leave their fingerprints on one another.

Maybe that was one of the reasons Bashar and I found common ground so easily.

Being Palestinian, he carried within him an immense tenderness for migrants crossing into Europe. Almost every day, European newspapers screamed headlines about boats capsizing in the Mediterranean or desperate migrants arrested at borders. But Bashar never called them "illegal migrants", nor did I. To us, they were dream hunters, people chasing dignity, bread, and the possibility of a safer tomorrow for their children.

One incident I vividly remember happened when I was in Milan for my visa application. Near the heart of the city, close to the **Duomo di Milano**, I saw a Black man lying unconscious on the ground. Perhaps he was an immigrant. I could not tell whether he was a legal or undocumented immigrant, but he was surrounded by police officers and the gentlemen of Milan, yet no one seemed to show much care or concern.

The scene made me think about how easily immigrants and vulnerable people can be overlooked. I could not stop thinking about him, so I bought a bottle of water and helped him drink it. For me, the important thing was not that I gave him a bottle of water. What stayed with me was the thought that our world needs to be kinder

and more caring to humanity, regardless of a person's race, caste, or creed. I often felt Europe was witnessing the delayed echo of its own colonial greed. Nations once plundered, divided, and impoverished, they were now knocking on the doors of their former empires, seeking survival. History, perhaps, always returns like an unpaid debt, as said, 'tables always turn'.



A gathering outside the Duomo di Milano

Our daily walks soon acquired another ritual. The moment we stepped out from the office gates, Bashar would light a cigarette. One cold evening he offered a packet to me. I politely refused, but with a playful smile he replied, "Never say no to an Arab man."

I laughed and accepted.

That single cigarette became a silent treaty between us. We would walk through the chilly Geneva evenings, smoke curling into the winter air, while discussing wars, religion, migration, literature, and the hypocrisy of global politics. Bashar told me about Ramallah, his hometown, a place where ordinary life itself had become an act of courage.

He spoke of checkpoints that could delay a father returning home, of schools suddenly shut, of weddings interrupted by fear, and of families sleeping every night with uncertainty pressed beneath their pillows. He said that the greatest human rights violations often hide inside mundane routines. The world noticed missile strikes and bombed buildings, but rarely the invisible violence of daily humiliation.

“Hope and despair live together in Palestine,” he once told me while staring into the smoke rising from his cigarette. “Somehow, people continue living.” When he left Palestine for Cyprus to pursue his studies, his family had wept not only because he was leaving home but also because distance perhaps increased his chances of survival. Education, for many Palestinians, was not merely ambition; it was escape, resistance, and hope stitched together.

One evening Bashar invited me to a small gathering in Geneva where activists and students were meeting to discuss Palestine. I agreed almost instantly. I agreed partly because there would be snacks, which my perpetual craving appreciated, and partly because I genuinely wanted to hear different perspectives on the conflict.

The room was filled mostly with Europeans and Swiss citizens. As discussions unfolded, I could observe the sharp division in opinions. One group passionately defended Israel, speaking about security, history, and the trauma of persecution. The other group spoke with equal intensity about Palestinian suffering, occupation, dignity, and human rights. Late into the evening, the debate stretched on, layered with emotion, ideology, and historical wounds. I sat quietly, absorbing every argument, every pause, and every sigh.

When the meeting ended and people slowly disappeared into the cold Geneva night, it struck me: conflicts may be political on maps, but in reality they are deeply human. Somewhere between speeches, slogans, and borders, ordinary people simply long to live without fear.

I never knew how much truth lay beneath Bashar's stories, but the way he narrated them could make an entire room burst into laughter. His face would remain utterly serious, as if he were reciting verses from some sacred scripture, while the absurdity of the tales slowly unfolded before us. Perhaps that contrast itself made his stories unforgettable.

One evening, while sipping tea in the dimly lit kitchen, Bashar began speaking about the Kingdom of Jordan. According to him, the policing there was so strict that fear itself walked through the streets like an invisible soldier. His words reminded me of Austin and Hart, particularly in how sanctions and the internalisation of law function and have shaped society for eternity. He claimed that if someone merely walked into the royal court and accused his neighbour of insulting the King or speaking ill of the kingdom, the accused would vanish behind prison walls before sunset. "People there do not talk too much in public," Bashar said, lowering his voice theatrically. "Everyone suspects everyone."

His eyes widened as if he himself had escaped such a prison only yesterday. I could not help but laugh, though a strange curiosity also lingered within me. Bashar had a peculiar gift for wrapping fear and humour together in the same cloth.

Then came another tale. He told us about a prisoner who was ordered to pluck out every strand of his beard before morning. If he failed, the guards would shave him with a blunt blade that would slice his cheeks open and leave them bleeding. Bashar demonstrated the scene with his fingers, mimicking a man desperately tweezing hair after hair throughout the night. By the time he finished, tears of laughter had already rolled down our faces.

But Bashar was not done yet. Leaning closer, as though revealing a state secret, he narrated the story of another prisoner who was handed an egg by the guards and commanded to place it inside his

body without breaking it. According to Bashar, the poor man spent the entire night struggling with the impossible task, terrified of what punishment might await him at dawn.

Whether these stories were real, exaggerated, or entirely born out of Bashar's fertile imagination, one could never discover. Yet, in those cold foreign nights, his bizarre tales gave us something precious and scarce: laughter. And occasionally, when life itself felt unbearably uncertain, laughter was the only warmth we possessed.

The United Nations was not merely a place of diplomacy and endless conferences; at times, it transformed itself into a vibrant mosaic of cultures, music, and human emotions. Very often, evenings at the UN were illuminated by gatherings hosted by member nations celebrating their festivals, traditions, and heritage. One day it was the joyous occasion of Navroz, another day an African cultural evening, and at other times the fragrance of the Middle East drifted through the majestic corridors of Geneva.

One such evening, Bashar informed me that a Syrian cultural night was being organised after office hours. His eyes sparkled with excitement as he whispered, "There will be plenty of Middle Eastern food. We must go." For two interns surviving on modest meals and careful budgeting, the invitation sounded no less than a royal feast. Yet, beyond the appeal of the food, there was another reason we were drawn there: the chance to see an unfamiliar culture unfold before us.

The moment we entered the hall, the aroma of spices, roasted meat, olive oil, and freshly baked bread embraced us. It felt as though a slice of Damascus had descended upon Geneva for one magical evening. Long tables were adorned with dishes I had only read about: kibbeh, yabrak, kebab Halabi, fattoush, shawarma, falafel, and countless delicacies whose names I could barely pronounce, but their flavours danced effortlessly upon the tongue. Nearby, an

Egyptian counter served traditional cuisine accompanied by soft red wine, and people moved from one stall to another with laughter echoing in every corner.



A glimpse of a market stall that made my eyes lighten up with contrasting shades.

Soon the lights dimmed slightly, and the musicians took the stage. One artist began playing the qanun while another gently strummed the oud. It was the first time in my life I had heard those instruments being played live. The melodies carried something ancient within them, an ache, a longing, and at the same time a strange serenity. The music did not merely tap on the ears; it sailed directly into the soul. During the evening I met an Egyptian lady, and to her utter surprise I began using colloquial Egyptian expressions I had picked up over time: "Fil Mish Mish", "Gamousa", and "Magnoouna". She burst into laughter, astonished that an Indian intern from Bihar knew words spoken mostly in the crowded alleys of Cairo. Our conversation flowed effortlessly, stitched together by humour, curiosity, and the universal warmth of strangers meeting far from home.



An evening performance on stage.

Amidst the laughter and music, I suddenly noticed Ana standing near one of the corners. The moment she saw me, her face lit up. Bashar joined us with glasses of wine, and before long the three of us were swaying to the hypnotic rhythm of Arabic music. There was something intoxicating about that evening beyond the wine itself. Perhaps it was the music, perhaps the freedom of youth, or perhaps the strange beauty of being lost among people from different corners of the world yet feeling completely connected.

We danced like carefree wanderers until sweat drenched our clothes and exhaustion finally overtook us. Ana, slightly more sober than the rest of us, leaned gently against my shoulder as though trusting the silence between us was more than words themselves. By then Geneva had slipped deep into the night, and returning to Annemasse was nearly impossible. I hesitantly asked Bashar whether we could stay at his apartment for the night. Fortunately, his landlord was away from town, and after a brief pause he agreed on the condition that we would leave before six in the morning.

We gratefully accepted and collapsed onto the mattresses like weary travellers after a long journey. Sometime around four in the morning, a loud alarm suddenly shattered the silence of the room. Ana and I woke up in terror, convinced the landlord had unexpectedly returned and discovered us. My heart pounded wildly until I conceived it was merely an alarm clock screaming into the darkness. I hurriedly silenced it, and we fell asleep again, only for Bashar to wake us precisely at six.

The night's intoxication lingered within us as we stepped out into the pale morning of Geneva. The city looked entirely different at dawn, quiet, tender, almost dreamlike. Ana and I stopped near the lake for coffee, holding the warm paper cups against our freezing hands while a crisp gust of wind brushed against our cheeks. The early sunlight shimmered upon the waters of Lake Geneva like scattered golden dust.

For once, we were walking through the streets together so early in the morning, with no deadlines chasing us, no office corridors waiting, and no burdens of identity or ambition weighing upon our shoulders. It felt as though time itself had paused for a brief moment just to let us breathe.

We strolled silently beside the lake, occasionally exchanging smiles that said far more than conversations ever could. And before parting ways for our respective homes, we embraced each other warmly. A lingering embrace, infused with the intoxication of music, wine, youth, and the fragile beauty of fleeting companionships, enveloped us.

One subject that unfailingly surfaced in every long conversation between Bashar and me was the intricate machinery of the United Nations, its systems, its silences, and the invisible walls hidden behind its polished corridors. The more we experienced Geneva, the more disillusioned we became with one bitter reality: the United

Nations, the very institution that spoke endlessly about dignity, equity, and human rights, continued to survive on the labour of unpaid interns.

To survive in Geneva was itself a battle. The city was breathtakingly beautiful, but beauty in Geneva came at a formidable price. Every cup of coffee, every tram ride, every loaf of bread seemed to remind us that idealism alone could not fill the gaps in human needs. Perhaps fate had been unusually merciful to both of us; we had found shelter where rent was not demanded from our fragile pockets. Had that not happened, our dreams of working at the UN might have dissolved long before they began.

Often, while returning from the office or sitting quietly beside the lake, Bashar and I would question the system's morality. How could an organisation advocating global justice normalise unpaid labour from young people who came from distant nations carrying hopes larger than their suitcases? For interns from Europe, the struggle, though difficult, still carried some softness. They did not need visas to return. Geneva remained accessible to them like an old familiar doorway. But for interns like us from developing countries, Europe became inaccessible once the internship ended.

There was no clear pathway for promising interns to enter the organisation permanently. No performance matrix. No structured transition. No mechanism where hard work alone could guarantee continuity. It often felt as though the internship was a beautifully illuminated tunnel leading into a black hole from which no one truly ever could return. After six months, one simply disappeared into uncertainty unless one possessed powerful references, invisible patronage, or what people casually called a "godfather". Merit alone rarely seemed enough.

Yet, despite these unsettling realisations, we continued to work sincerely. Somewhere deep inside, hope still breathed stubbornly.

The people in my unit appreciated my work, and that gave me quiet confidence. During those days, I introduced Bashar to the man I often called my godfather in the UN, Mr Wajira from Sri Lanka. Wajira possessed a rare warmth that made people feel protected in a city otherwise dominated by formal smiles and diplomatic distance. Gradually, Bashar too became comfortable in his company, and occasionally the three of us would spend evenings together, talking about politics, migration, war, and the fragile dreams that had carried each of us to Geneva.

Wajira Ranasinghe

Wajira remains one of the most significant protagonists in my Geneva story, a man whose presence became synonymous with shelter, warmth, and survival. As I mentioned earlier, meeting Wajira was nothing less than serendipity, but remaining connected with him was pure fortune written by destiny itself. Through Shyami, our paths crossed unexpectedly, and within days my journey transformed from that of a homeless intern wandering through uncertainty to someone living in a beautiful apartment nestled in one of Geneva's elegant, lush neighbourhoods.

What amazed me most was how naturally I settled into his space. The apartment never felt borrowed; gradually it began to feel like my own home. Wajira carried an unusual affection in his personality. There was kindness in his silence and compassion in the way he observed people. Evenings became sacred for both of us. After the exhaustion of the day, we would sit together for hours discussing philosophy, culture, migration, spirituality, and life itself.

Wajira was a deeply devoted Buddhist, and in India we revere Lord Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu. That shared spiritual ground created an invisible bridge between us. Conversations about Buddhism, suffering, detachment, and karma often stretched late into the night while the cold Geneva winds brushed softly against

the windows of the apartment.

One evening, while speaking about faith and destiny, I confessed to him how uncertain my journey from Padova to Geneva had truly been. I had boarded the train without knowing where I would sleep, how I would survive, or whether the city would even accept me. Never before in my life had I surrendered so completely to God. Deep within, there was a quiet belief that perhaps life eventually returns kindness to those who selflessly spread it around the world.

I remembered a line from Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* which says, "There is only one way to learn, and it is through action. Everything you need to know you have learnt through your journey." That sentence resonated deeply with my life in Geneva, where every uncertainty, every struggle, and every unexpected kindness had become a lesson in itself. My maa often warned me about my simplicity. She used to say that the world was too clever for people like me, and one day someone would certainly deceive me. Yet her fears never changed my nature. Helping people has become instinctive, almost like breathing.

I narrated to Wajira an incident from my days at Airtel that had remained etched in my conscience forever. One evening, while returning from work, I saw a man lying injured on a national highway after a terrible accident. Vehicles sped past him mercilessly, while people merely slowed down to stare before disappearing into the gathering darkness. It was around six in the evening, and everyone seemed desperate to return home after a tiring day. I could understand their exhaustion, yet the sight of blood streaming down the stranger's forehead made me hesitate.

With the reluctant help of a bystander, I lifted the injured man into my car. He was drifting in and out of consciousness but somehow managed to whisper that his village was nearly forty kilometres away. In those days mobile phones were not common, and there was

no way to contact his family. So I simply drove. The highway slowly dissolved into darkness as the night deepened around us. Fear accompanied me throughout the journey. A thousand thoughts stormed my mind: What if he died on the way? What if the police accused me? What if helping him became my undoing? Yet despite the fear, I continued driving.

Around eight-thirty at night, I finally reached his village and handed him over to his anxious family. Their eyes overflowed with gratitude as I explained everything that had happened. I urged them to take him to a hospital immediately and quietly left before they could even thank me properly. By the time I had reached home, it was very late. My parents were deeply worried, but beneath the exhaustion there was an indescribable peace within me. That night I slept with the strange satisfaction that humanity survives not through grand revolutions, but through small acts of courage performed quietly in the dark.

Among the many unforgettable memories of Geneva, one thing I can never forget about Wajira was his unspoken generosity wrapped in the aroma of Sri Lankan food. It is inevitable to acknowledge Wajira was an extraordinary human being, the kind of person whose gentleness never arrived with noise or announcement. He persuaded a few Sri Lankan colleagues to buy lunch from a Sri Lankan lady who was struggling to sustain herself in the expensive city of Geneva, providing her with much-needed support. Thus, every Thursday became a small festival of warmth, friendship, and spices for me.

Every time, Wajira would order an extra packet for me. Sometimes, sensing my perpetual battle with finances, he would even bring two packets so that I could carry one home for dinner. He knew I often skipped lunch because eating regularly at the office cafeteria was a luxury that I could not afford during those days. Yet he never made

me feel pitied. His gesture carried no trace of charity; it was pure affection, offered with the grace of an elder brother.

That Sri Lankan meal soon became the brightest event of my week. From Thursday morning itself, I would keep glancing at my wristwatch every few minutes, convinced that the clock hands had suddenly slowed down just to test my patience. The idea would begin dancing inside me long before lunchtime, and almost ten minutes before the break, I would quietly walk to the cafeteria and wait like an eager child awaiting a festival feast.

The food always arrived wrapped delicately in banana leaves, and the moment the parcel was opened, the fragrance would rise like poetry into the air. There would be steaming rice, fiery chutney, perfectly cooked fish, and spices so familiar that they carried echoes of home. In that foreign land, thousands of miles away from India, those meals tasted like memory itself. The flavours were bold, comforting, and unapologetically close to the palate I had grown up with.

Even today, when I think of Geneva, I do not merely remember conferences, diplomacy, or the grandeur of international institutions. I remember a banana leaf unfolding slowly in a cafeteria, the aroma of spices escaping into the air, and a friend named Wajira whose compassion nourished my soul.

Wajira had stood beside me through every storm and every silence of my life in Geneva. In a foreign land, where loneliness often wrapped itself around my evenings like the winter fog over Lake Geneva¹², he appeared more like an elder brother sent by destiny than merely a colleague. His was like a river nourishing the earth without demanding recognition.

On the final day before my departure to India, he called me into his

¹² Lac Lemman

chamber. There was a strange calmness in his eyes, as if he already understood the heaviness hidden behind my smile. Without saying much, he handed me a small envelope and gently instructed me to open it only after reaching the airport. I nodded silently, respecting the tenderness of his request.

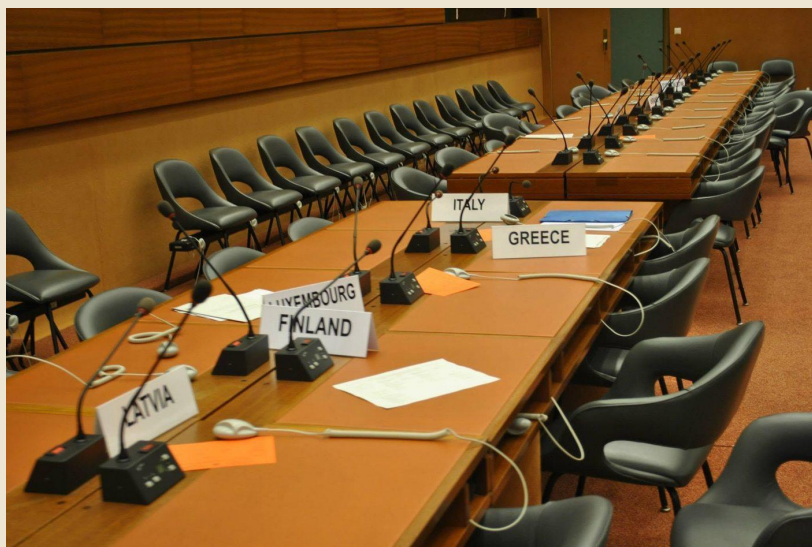
Later, amidst the bustling corridors of Geneva Airport, while waiting for my security clearance, my fingers accidentally touched that same envelope inside my bag. Curiosity and emotion intertwined within me, and I slowly opened it. To my utter astonishment, there were one thousand Swiss Francs neatly folded inside, along with a small handwritten note.

The note simply read that I might need some money once I returned to India and that this was a token of love for me. For a few moments, the noise of the airport faded away. My eyes filled with tears instantly. I stood there motionless, overwhelmed not by the money, but by the depth of affection hidden in that simple gesture. In a world where relationships are often measured through convenience and profit, Wajira had given me something far more precious, the reassurance that humanity still breathes through certain hearts.

Unable to control my emotions, I immediately sent him a long message of gratitude. Yet deep inside, I knew words could never truly repay such warmth. I had always called him my big brother, and that day he proved the sacredness of that bond once again. As my flight finally took off from Geneva, I did not know whether I would ever see him again. But I carried with me a treasure far greater than souvenirs or photographs, the unforgettable memories of Wajira, stitched forever into the fabric of my journey.

An Old Lady

As an intern, I was entrusted with the responsibility of helping to organise my first intergovernmental dialogue on discrimination at the United Nations headquarters in Geneva. For a young man who had arrived from a distant corner of the world with dreams that stretched beyond his arms, it was an exhilarating opportunity. The prospect of interacting with ambassadors, mission heads, representatives of intergovernmental organisations, and members of civil society filled me with equal measures of excitement and nervous anticipation.



Inside a conference room at the UN.

My day began before sunrise. Geneva still held the silence of the early morning as I made my way to the conference hall. There was something sacred about entering an empty hall before the delegates arrived. The rows of neatly arranged seats, the microphones waiting patiently for voices from around the world, and the flags standing proudly in the background seemed to possess a quiet dignity of their own.

I carefully arranged the conference materials and checked every detail. As I walked past the podium, my eyes fell upon a small nameplate bearing my name. It was a simple thing, yet it filled me with immense pride. For a brief moment, I stood there smiling like a child who had received an invitation to a world he had only read about in books. I was particularly pleased with my appearance that day. I wore my favourite blue jacket, a treasured purchase from Padova, Italy. It gave me the confidence I desperately needed among the distinguished diplomats and seasoned experts who would soon fill the room.

The conference hall gradually came to life. Delegates trickled in, exchanging greetings and handshakes. Yet among the arriving guests, one figure immediately caught my attention. She was an elderly woman, perhaps in her late eighties, moving slowly with the aid of a walker. There was nothing outwardly extraordinary about her appearance, yet I found myself unable to look away.

What I remember most vividly, even today, was her cap. It sat gently upon her silver hair and somehow gave her an almost childlike charm. She looked incredibly endearing in it. Coupled with her warm smile, it created an aura of gratefulness that instantly drew people's attention. There was a softness in her expression, the kind one often witnesses in people who have spent a lifetime caring more for others than for themselves.

With measured and deliberate steps, she made her way across the hall and settled into a seat at the far end of the room.

Though surrounded by diplomats, activists, and seasoned professionals, she carried herself with a quiet dignity that commanded attention without demanding it. There was something about her presence, a calm strength forged through years of experience and compassion, that fascinated me. Throughout the morning sessions, my eyes would occasionally drift to look at her.

She listened attentively to every speaker, jotting down notes with remarkable concentration. Unlike many others who appeared eager to voice their opinions, she seemed content simply to observe and absorb.



An old lady, remembered fondly.

The more I watched her, the more curious I became. Who was she? What journey had brought her to this conference on discrimination? What stories were hidden behind those gentle eyes and that reassuring smile?

By the time the morning session ended, my curiosity had grown impossible to ignore. I resolved that during the lunch break I would gather enough courage to walk over, introduce myself, and discover the story of the remarkable old woman in the cap.

When the lunch recess was announced, the hall emptied rapidly as delegates headed to the cafeteria. Soon only two people remained in the vast conference room: the elderly woman and me. She sat alone, carefully writing notes in a small notebook. I waited patiently for her to finish. Then, summoning my courage, I approached her. “May I

sit here?" I asked politely. She looked up and nodded with a warm smile.

I introduced myself and, unable to contain my curiosity, asked which organisation she represented. The years have blurred many details, including her name, but I remember our conversation with remarkable clarity. She told me she was a Swiss citizen and the last surviving member of her family. Yet instead of surrendering to loneliness, she had devoted her life to serving others. She ran a modest shelter for immigrants, offering temporary accommodation and helping raise funds to provide them with food and basic necessities.

As she spoke, her face seemed to glow with purpose. There was no trace of self-pity in her voice, only compassion. She spoke passionately about the discrimination immigrants often faced. Despite the existence of international conventions, national laws, and countless declarations promoting equality, many newcomers continued to live on the margins of society. "They come searching for safety, dignity, and hope," she said softly. "Yet too often they are met with suspicion and exclusion." There was sadness in her eyes, but there was also realism.

She acknowledged that the issue was far more complex than it appeared. Every nation had limitations. Governments could not always provide unlimited support to every undocumented migrant without placing additional pressure on public resources and taxpayers.

I found myself, perhaps unexpectedly, witnessing a perspective that balanced compassion with practical reality. She neither romanticised immigration nor demonised it but viewed it through the lenses of human dignity. As I listened to her, I realised that true humanitarianism was not about slogans or grand speeches; rather, it was about ordinary people quietly dedicating their lives to helping

strangers. Sitting across from that remarkable woman in the almost-empty conference hall, I was learning something far more valuable than what was being discussed at the podium. Now it was my turn to speak.

She looked at me with curiosity and asked about my story. I told her that I came from India and had arrived in Geneva after completing my master's degree in Venice. Like thousands of dreamers before I had come with a backpack full of hopes and an ambition to build a career in the development sector, having switched from the capitalist corporate world. It was not an effortless transition. I had accumulated years of professional experience, but it belonged to the corporate world, a world governed by profits, targets, and balance sheets. The development sector spoke a different language, one of empathy, inclusion, and social change. In many ways, I had to begin again from scratch.

I narrated my struggles in Geneva, particularly the endless search for affordable accommodation. A gentle smile appeared on her face. She understood immediately. Having worked closely with a shelter home, she knew that finding a budget-friendly place to live in Geneva was almost impossible. Our conversation flowed effortlessly. Time passed until I noticed her discreetly glancing at her watch. The lunch break would end in less than half an hour. Not wanting to take up more of her time, I excused myself and suggested that she should enjoy the sandwich she had brought from home.

Instead, she smiled warmly and invited me to join her for lunch. Embarrassed, I admitted that I had not brought anything with me and would probably make do with a piece of fruit later. She gently asked me to sit beside her and handed me an orange from her bag. That simple gesture touched me more deeply than she could have imagined.

My routine was simple: skip lunch, save every franc possible, and

cook a modest dinner at home. Yet I never told her any of these details. Somehow, she sensed it. Before we parted that day, she casually mentioned that she would bring lunch for me the next day. I was speechless.

Sometimes kindness arrives so quietly that it takes a moment for your heart to fully recognise it. The conference lasted three days, and during that time our friendship blossomed naturally. Every lunchtime we sat together, sharing meals and conversations that wandered across continents, cultures, and histories. She was endlessly curious about India. One day she wanted to know about Hindu gods and mythology; another day she asked about the caste system, the condition of Dalits, and the legal safeguards against discrimination. Her questions were thoughtful, direct, and often difficult.

I frequently found myself in an uncomfortable position. As an Indian abroad, I felt an unspoken responsibility to represent my country with dignity. It was never easy to discuss its shortcomings in front of a foreign audience. Yet honesty demanded nuance. I explained that while the caste system had long been abolished under the Indian Constitution and numerous laws existed to combat discrimination, centuries-old social practices could not disappear overnight. Culture has a remarkable ability to outlive legislation. Behaviours woven into traditions, beliefs, and social structures often linger long after they have lost their legitimacy. Change, though constant and consistent, moves at its own pace.

She listened attentively, was never judgemental, and was always eager to understand rather than criticise.

When the conference finally came to an end, we promised to stay in touch and meet again someday. Unfortunately, life had other plans. She lived far away from the city, and our paths never crossed again. Emails became infrequent, and eventually silence settled between

us. Yet even today, I regret not making a greater effort to remain connected with that gentle soul.

Some people leave their mark on the world through power, wealth, or fame. Others leave it through simple acts of kindness that quietly transform someone's life. She belonged to the latter category, a category that, in my eyes, was infinitely more noble. Years have passed since that conference, but I still remember the orange she offered me on a day when I had nothing and the compassion she showed without asking for anything in return. The memory remains untouched by time, glowing softly in the corridors of my life like a candle that never quite burns out.

Yuri, My Supervisor¹³

Yuri was a blue-eyed, sharp-featured Russian whose presence carried an air of quiet authority. He was my supervisor and the head of the Anti-Discrimination Unit. On my very first day, after the formalities of joining had finally concluded, I was ushered into his office and introduced to him.

He welcomed me with a warm smile and a firm handshake. In his calm, measured manner, he explained the mandate of the Anti-Discrimination Unit and outlined the role I would be expected to play during my six-month internship. He then showed me to my workstation and handed over a stack of documents that would serve as my initiation into the complex world of human rights and discrimination law.

What struck me most was his English. It carried a distinctly Russian cadence, deliberate, elegant, and somehow musical. I found myself enjoying every conversation with him, often listening as much to the rhythm of his speech as much as the content itself. The following

¹³ Yuri Boychenko- The then Chief of the Anti-Discrimination Section of OHCHR

morning, I arrived at the office earlier than usual. Geneva was wrapped in a cold embrace, and the morning air had that crisp freshness that only European winters seem capable of producing. As I was settling into my desk, I noticed Yuri walking down the corridor. He waved casually and said, “Ça va?” before disappearing into his office.

I stared blankly after him.

Not knowing what he had said, I turned to a fellow intern named Karolina.

“What did Yuri just say?”

She laughed. “He said, ‘Ça va?’ It means ‘How are you?’ in French. You're supposed to reply, ‘Bien, merci.’” That day I learned my first practical French lesson. From then onwards, every morning followed the same ritual. Yuri would walk past my desk and ask, “Ça va?” I would confidently respond, “Bien, merci,” feeling increasingly French with each passing day. When I first landed in Geneva, I could barely understand a word of French. Now, at least, I could survive a greeting.

Yuri soon noticed that I was usually the first intern to arrive at the office. Every morning, without fail, he would find me already seated at my workstation. Punctuality became a personal mission for me. Indians often carried the unfair stereotype of being late, and during my six months in Geneva, I wanted, in my small way, to challenge that perception.

Those early mornings gradually built a rapport between us. Yuri began trusting me with increasingly important assignments. In return, I made sure I never needed reminders. Any task I received became my highest priority until I completed it.

Perhaps I owed this habit to one of the finest supervisors I had ever worked under, Mr. Gaurav Tandon. On my first day under

his leadership, he taught me two lessons that remained etched in my mind forever. “Never walk into my cabin at the end of the day and tell me why a task couldn't be completed,” he had said. “Come and tell me that it has been completed.”

His second lesson was equally powerful.

“Never come to me with a problem. Come with a solution.”

These principles guided me throughout my professional life, and without realising it, they also helped me earn Yuri's confidence. One evening, I was working on documentation related to the Fellowship for People of African Descent. It was nearly half past six. Most of the office had begun winding down for the day, but I remained glued to my computer screen. Yuri was still in his office as well. A few moments later, loud laughter erupted from the adjoining room where Thandar, Lisa, and several other staff members sat. “Anand! Come and join the party!” someone shouted. I glanced up but quickly returned to my work. I still had a long journey home ahead of me and wanted to finish the assignment before leaving. A few minutes later, Yuri himself appeared beside my desk. “So,” he said with a mischievous smile, “you want to show me how hard you're working; that's why you're not coming?”

I was instantly embarrassed.

“No, Yuri, that's not the reason at all.”

He laughed.

“Then come. The work will survive without you for twenty minutes.”

I surrendered and followed him.

The moment I entered the room, I was very well aware I had stepped into an entirely different world. The room buzzed with

laughter and conversation. On the table stood an enormous bottle of Russian vodka, towering above everything else like a monument to celebration. Yuri had just returned from the Russian mission and had decided to treat the team. He moved around the room pouring vodka with unrestrained enthusiasm while encouraging everyone to eat.



Friends, gathered together.

The spread was magnificent: caviar, cheeses, fruits, pastries, wine, and several delicacies whose names I could neither pronounce nor remember. It was my first encounter with caviar, a delicacy I had only heard about before. To my surprise, I found it absolutely delicious. The evening unfolded beautifully. Stories were exchanged, laughter echoed through the corridors, and for a brief moment the formal walls of the United Nations seemed to dissolve into something far more human. The next day, I narrated the entire experience to Karolina. “You were invited?” she exclaimed, horrified. “Yes.” “I work in the same unit and wasn't invited!” The envy in her voice was unmistakable.

It was incidents like these that earned me a peculiar reputation among the other interns. The title of the “spoilt intern of OHCHR” grew even more reinforced, and others were puzzled about how I got invitations to the places where others were never invited.

Christmas arrived in Geneva like a gentle snowfall, quiet, luminous, and capable of bringing people together in unexpected ways. That year, Karolin and I were at the centre of the celebrations. We became the unofficial architects of the office Christmas party, collecting song requests from colleagues and carefully curating a playlist that reflected the diverse cultures and personalities that made up our little United Nations family. While others prepared dishes from their homelands, I joined the culinary effort by cooking chicken, and by evening the office had transformed into a warm sanctuary filled with laughter, aromas, and festive cheer.

One of the highlights of the evening was the Secret Santa exchange. Everyone had brought a gift for someone else, carefully concealing their identity behind the spirit of the season. Yet what touched me most was not a gift from my assigned secret Santa but one from Yuri. He had brought something for me despite not being obliged to do so. It was a small gesture, perhaps, but fondness often reveals itself in the smallest acts.

Winter deepened after Christmas. Each morning I arrived at the office wrapped in the same thin jacket, stubbornly believing it was sufficient for Geneva’s unforgiving cold. It was not. The icy winds pierced through the fabric as though it did not exist at all.

One morning, Yuri noticed.

He said nothing. Not a word.

The following day, however, he arrived carrying a modest paper bag. With his characteristic simplicity, he handed it to me and

said, “This is for you.” Inside was a warm winter jacket.

For a moment, I was speechless. It was not the cost of the gift that overwhelmed me but the thought behind it. In a world where people are often too busy to notice one another’s struggles, Yuri had paid attention. He had seen what I needed before I had even acknowledged it myself.

As the months went by, my internship came to an end. On my final day, Yuri organised a farewell gathering for me. To my surprise, he stood before everyone and confessed that it was the first farewell party he had ever arranged for an intern.

“You truly deserve it,” he said.

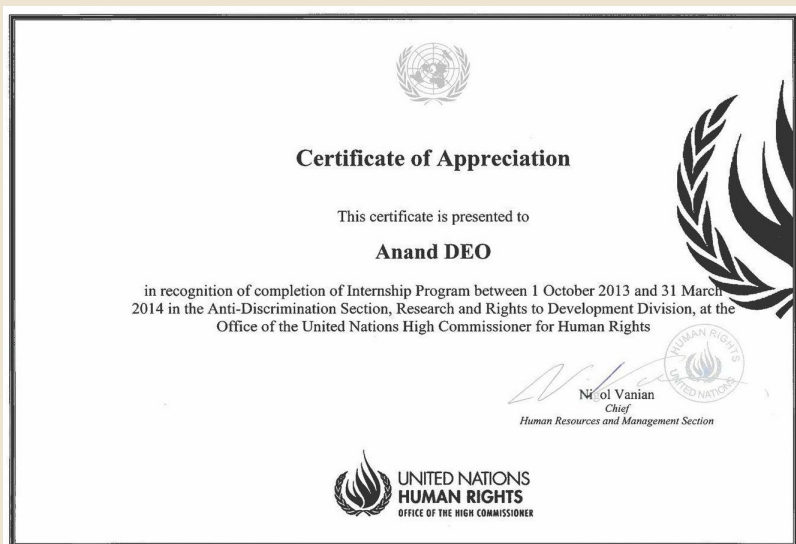
Then he handed me a beautifully crafted Swiss fountain pen, a gift that symbolised not only remembrance but also faith in my future. Alongside it, he presented me with a certificate of completion, formally recognising my six months with the Anti-Discrimination Section, which was signed on behalf of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. I felt an overwhelming lump in my throat. In India, when someone occupies a place of profound respect in your life, the instinct is to touch their feet as a gesture of gratitude. For a fleeting second, I wanted to do exactly that. But I stopped myself, knowing that such customs belonged to my world, not his. Instead, I carried that reverence silently within my heart.

What saddened me most was not the end of the internship but the realisation that I was leaving behind people who had become family. Over six months, Geneva had ceased to be merely a city. It had become a home. The office corridors, the shared lunches, the casual conversations, and the celebrations and challenges they had all woven themselves into the fabric of my life.

Now, with a single flight ticket, I was expected to cut those ties and

return to India. I did not know whether I would ever see many of them again. With a heavy heart, I thanked everyone for the farewell, for their friendship, and for making me feel valued in a place thousands of miles away from home.

Years later, when I think of Yuri, I remember more than his generosity. I remember his philosophy of life. He worked with remarkable dedication, but he also understood the importance of celebration, friendship, and joy. "Work hard and party harder" could easily have been his motto. Looking back, I realise that my bond with Yuri was never about professional favouritism or special treatment. It was about something far rarer. In an institution as vast, structured, and formal as the United Nations, genuine human connections were precious treasures. Through sincerity, punctuality, and a willingness to learn, I had found one of those treasures in Yuri. And some treasures, no matter how many years pass, never lose their shine.



The Certificate of Appreciation was presented by Yuri on my final day at OHCHR.

Karolina Saviova

Among the many people who crossed my path during my Geneva journey, Karolina occupies a special corner of my memories. She was an intern from the Czech Republic and sat at the desk right next to mine. If there was one thing that immediately distinguished her, it was her ever-present smile. She carried herself with an effortless elegance, always looking composed, cheerful, and approachable. There was a warmth about her personality that made people feel comfortable in her company.

Beneath that charming exterior was a remarkably intelligent young woman. Karolina was a polyglot, effortlessly navigating between languages in a way that always fascinated me. Coming from a country where mastering even one foreign language is often considered an achievement, I admired her ability to switch between several languages as naturally as one changes lanes on an empty road.

Although I do not have dramatic stories to tell about her, friendship is not always built upon extraordinary events. Occasionally it is forged through countless ordinary moments shared over coffee breaks, walks home, and conversations that quietly become precious memories. Karolina and I became close friends, and some of my fondest recollections of Geneva involve her.

The Christmas season brought us even closer. Together, we took charge of organising the office Christmas party. We walked from desk to desk collecting song requests from colleagues representing every corner of the world. Soon our playlist became a miniature United Nations in itself, Latin songs blending into Indian melodies, English classics followed by Eastern European tunes. It was a celebration of cultures, identities, and friendships.

One evening, before the party, we gathered at her apartment to

prepare food. We cooked chicken together, shared a bottle of wine, and finalised the details for the celebration. The apartment was filled with the aroma of food and the sound of laughter as we debated songs and exchanged stories from our homelands.

Karolina had an incredible sense of humour, and one particular conversation still makes me smile. One evening, while returning from work, she narrated an incident that had recently happened during her journey back to Geneva from the Czech Republic. She told me that border officials had detained her for questioning. Naturally, she called her father to inform him about the situation. Instead of expressing concern, his response was utterly unexpected. "Perhaps," he said, "the border guards thought you were a hooker. That's why they detained you." For a moment she was stunned. "Who says something like that to their daughter?" she exclaimed.



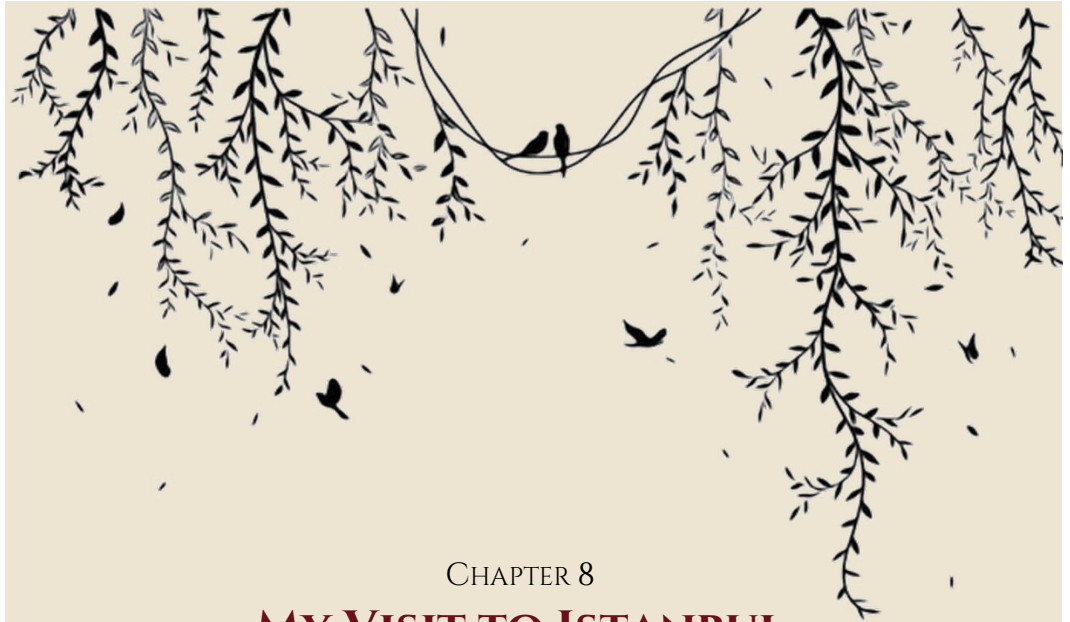
Memories from the road and from home.

The absurdity of the remark was so unexpected that neither of us could contain our laughter. We laughed all the way back home, tears

forming in our eyes. It was one of those moments that needed no explanation and no context, just pure, unfiltered amusement. Many evenings, we walked back together after work, sharing stories about our countries, cultures, childhoods, and aspirations. Those conversations were simple, yet they revealed how similar people can be, even when they were born thousands of kilometres apart. Through Karolina, I learned more about Czech culture, and through me, she discovered fragments of India.

When I look back now, I remember Karolina not because of any grand event but because of the joy she brought into ordinary days. She represented a certain lightness of spirit, a reminder that friendship does not always need profound declarations. At times it is found in shared responsibilities, laughter over silly stories, evenings spent cooking together, and the quiet companionship of someone sitting at the desk next to yours. In the vast mosaic of Geneva, Karolina was one of those bright colours that made the whole picture.





CHAPTER 8

MY VISIT TO ISTANBUL

"Every reunion is a rehearsal for the goodbye that follows it."

Ana completed her internship and departed for Germany, carrying with her a suitcase full of belongings and, perhaps unknowingly, a small part of my heart. The day of her departure remains etched in my memory with a clarity that time has never managed to blur.

I went to her apartment early in the morning to help her with her luggage. The room that had once echoed with her laughter now seemed strangely quiet, as though it too understood that a chapter was coming to an end. Bringing her belongings down the stairs, we headed for the train station. The journey was filled with ordinary conversations and small remarks about the voyage, weather, and future plans, but beneath those words flowed an unspoken current of sadness that neither of us dared to acknowledge.

When the train finally arrived, reality stood before us in steel and

glass. Ana placed her luggage inside and then turned to me. There was a peculiar look in her eyes, one that carried both hope and sorrow. We both knew that life had a habit of scattering people across continents, and there was every possibility that the moment could be our final goodbye. Yet neither of us was willing to surrender to that thought. Our hearts rebelled against the idea of a permanent separation.

Instead of speaking about endings, we smiled. We winked at each other and made a casual promise to meet again soon, as if distance and time were trivial inconveniences. The train doors closed. Slowly, it began to move. I stood on the platform watching until the last carriage disappeared into the horizon. Only then did the silence arrive.

I returned to the office carrying a heaviness that no words could explain. My desk was precisely where I had left it, the files remained untouched, and the world continued its routine as though nothing had happened. Yet something had changed within me. I found myself staring blankly at documents, unable to focus. Strange emotions surrounded me, feelings I had not experienced in years. It was as if her departure had awakened a dormant part of my soul. In the weeks that followed, one thought refused to leave me: I had to see Ana again.

Christmas was approaching, and with it came a possibility. I continued working at my gift-packing job, carefully saving every franc I could. While others spent freely on festivities, I guarded my earnings with a purpose. Each coin I saved brought me closer to our reunion.

Finally, after gathering enough courage, I sat down one evening and wrote her an email. My fingers hesitated over the keyboard. I had written countless professional emails in my life, but this one felt different. I asked if she would be interested in meeting me in

Istanbul during the Christmas holidays. I knew how important Christmas was to her family and understood that missing the family celebration was not an option. So I suggested meeting after Christmas, for a short vacation in a city that had fascinated me for years, the ancient city of Constantine, where East met West.

The moment I pressed "Send", I felt a wave of nervousness. Despite the bond we shared, I feared rejection. What if she thought it was a foolish idea? What if the connection I felt was mine alone? The days that followed seemed unusually long. Every time my email inbox refreshed, I felt a rush of anticipation.

Then, one evening, her reply arrived.

With trembling hands, I opened the message.

To my astonishment, Ana had accepted.

She wrote that she would love to come and that she could hardly wait to see me at the airport. For a moment, I simply stared at the screen, reading the words again and again. A warm flutter swept through my veins, the kind that only hope can create. The grey winter outside my window suddenly seemed brighter.

And from that moment my thoughts belonged to Istanbul, the city of minarets, ancient walls, and timeless stories. Somewhere beyond its skyline awaited a reunion that my heart had been longing for since the day a train carried Ana away.

I knew that Ana had just completed an unpaid internship. Those months had given her valuable experience and memories, but certainly not a fortune in savings. I could imagine the quiet calculations she must have been making, balancing dreams against expenses, weighing every possibility before deciding whether a trip to Istanbul was even practical. Yet I did not want money to become a barrier between us, nor did I wish to embarrass her by asking about her financial situation. Some questions are best left unasked when

affection and dignity are involved.

So I made up my mind. One evening, after carefully comparing fares, I booked my own ticket on Turkish Airlines. Then, without hesitation, I booked another ticket for Ana from Germany to Istanbul. As I clicked the final confirmation button, a gentle thrill of joy blossomed within me, a feeling as if destiny itself had just brought us one step closer together. I drafted a simple email, telling her that I had come across an exceptionally remarkable deal on a return flight and feared it would disappear if I delayed any longer. Therefore, I went ahead and booked it.

The truth was that I had been saving for moments like these. Every hour I had worked, every sacrifice I had made as a student and intern suddenly felt worthwhile. At last, I felt that the sweat from years of struggle had found a beautiful purpose. There was immense satisfaction in knowing I could do something meaningful for someone who mattered to me.

The next challenge was my journey. As an Indian citizen, I required a visa to enter Turkey. After hours of research, I discovered that my Schengen visa made me eligible for a Turkish e-Visa. The process seemed straightforward until I reached the payment page, where I read that only credit cards were accepted. In Geneva, I did not possess one. Not willing to let such a minor obstacle ruin my plans, I approached a colleague and requested her help. She kindly made the payment on my behalf, and I reimbursed her in cash. A few anxious moments later, the email arrived.

“Your visa has been approved.”



Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Elektronik Vizesi

Electronic Visa, Republic of Turkey

B1



EV 739372164750

Referans No <i>Reference No</i>	: ZNM-KDQ6
Adı <i>Name</i>	: Anand
Soyadı <i>Surname</i>	: Deo
Doğum Yeri <i>Place of Birth</i>	: Nawada, India
Doğum Tarihi <i>Date of Birth</i>	: 11 Kas/Nov 1981
Uyruk Adı <i>Nationality</i>	: Hindistan India
Seyahat Belgesi <i>Travel Document</i>	: Umuma Mahsus Pasaport Ordinary Passport
Belge No <i>Travel Document No.</i>	: L5168978
Belge Veriliş T. <i>Travel Doc. Issue Date</i>	: 07 Eki/Oct 2013
Belge Geçerlilik T. <i>Travel Doc. Expiry Date</i>	: 06 Eki/Oct 2023
Ek Vize <i>Additional Visa</i>	: Oturma İzni / İsviçre Residence Permit / Switzerland
Ek Vize Geç. T. <i>Additional V. Expiry Date</i>	: 31 Mar/Mar 2014

Giriş Sayısı <i>Number of Entries</i>	: Tek Giriş Single Entry
Geçerlilik Tarihi <i>Valid From</i>	: 01 Sub/Feb 2014
Geçerlilik Bitişi <i>Valid Until</i>	: 01 Ara/Dec 2014
İkamet Süresi <i>Duration of Stay</i>	: 30 Gün / Days



PLEASE READ CAREFULLY!

- I hold a valid and legitimate passport and it is valid for a period of time, allowing me to return at the least
- I hold a valid Schengen visa or a valid visa (except for electronic visas) from any of the OECD member countries; or I have a valid residence permit of a Schengen or OECD country.
- I am travelling for the purpose of tourism or business.
- I hold travel documents in accordance with my travel purposes. (Return Ticket, Hotel reservation, adequate financial means (U.S. \$ 50 for each day))



739372164750

DISCLAIMER

In case that the records in your e-visa and passport differ, your e-visa will be deemed invalid. In the event that the information which you provide at your visa application and the information recorded in your passport differ, your e-visa will be invalid. If the persons recorded to the accompanying section of your passport are to travel with you, it is essential that they also get e-visa.

E-visa shall not be valid for purposes other than touristic and commercial trips. Visa applications such as work, study, etc. must be made via foreign missions of Turkey.

E-visa system does not monitor the days of your stay/residence in Turkey. Hence, it is your own responsibility to check whether your residence permit has expired or not.

Should your stay upon single entry without residence permit be longer than 30 days, you may well be sentenced to administrative fine and your entry into Turkey might be forbidden for a certain period of time.

In exceptional circumstances, it is possible that Turkish authorities may not permit an e-visa-holder to enter into Turkey. For more information, please visit <http://www.evisa.gov.tr/info>

The Turkish e-visa that made the Istanbul trip real.

I read the message twice, just to be certain. A broad smile spread across my face. Suddenly, Istanbul no longer felt like a distant dream. It was real. It was happening.

Since I was interning with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, I had to formally inform my unit about my itinerary. I signed the necessary declaration stating that the trip was entirely personal and had no connection with my work at OHCHR. With the paperwork completed, I was finally free to focus on the journey ahead.

I started my preparation; it was packed with so much mirth. I washed my clothes, prepared my luggage, and carefully selected a few gifts for Ana. Among them was a bottle of Baileys Irish Cream, which I hoped she would enjoy. Every item I packed seemed to carry a piece of my excitement.

My flight was scheduled for the 27th of December. Yet time, which usually rushed past unnoticed, now moved painfully slowly. Christmas arrived, and I spent it with Helene and her family. Their warmth and generosity made it one of the most memorable Christmas celebrations of my life. The laughter, the food, and the conversations – all of it was wonderful.

But even amidst the festivities, my thoughts drifted elsewhere.

I was counting days, then hours.

I imagined the silhouette of Istanbul rising above the Bosphorus, its minarets piercing the winter sky. I imagined wandering through its ancient streets, breathing in the scent of roasted chestnuts and Turkish coffee. Most of all, I imagined seeing Ana again. The city fascinated me, but it was the thought of meeting her that made my heart impatient. Every passing day felt like an eternity, and with each sunrise, I found myself one step closer to a journey that promised not only the splendour of Istanbul but also the joy of

shared moments and cherished memories.

26th December marked a date that had quietly etched itself into my heart long before it arrived. It was the day Ana and I had our very first video call. Until then, she had existed through words, emails, and fleeting messages that had somehow managed to bridge countries and cultures. Yet seeing her face on the screen felt entirely different. The distance that had separated us for so long suddenly seemed smaller, almost insignificant.

We spent hours discussing plans for the upcoming trip, our itinerary, and most importantly, how we would find each other at Istanbul Airport. Neither of us wanted to take any risks. Since I was not carrying an international mobile number, we had to depend entirely on the airport's Wi-Fi. Ever the planner, I had already researched the connectivity at the airport and reassured her that the Wi-Fi was reliable. We agreed that the moment our phones connected to the network, we would check our messages. My flight was scheduled to arrive before hers, which meant I would have the responsibility and privilege of choosing the place where we would finally meet.

The next morning, 27th December, arrived with an excitement that no alarm clock could have created. It was the most awaited day of my internship, the beginning of a journey I had dreamt about for months. As I packed my bags and left for Geneva Airport, my heart carried a mixture of anticipation, nervousness, and wonder.

Before I departed, Helene insisted on seeing me off. She knew exactly where I was headed and whom I was going to meet. There was a sparkle in her eyes that only genuine affection can create. Smiling warmly, she handed me an envelope containing five hundred euros.

"Bring me some Turkish chocolates and honey," she said. "And keep the rest for yourself."

Her gesture touched me deeply. Though I had initially lived in her house as a tenant, over the months we had become much more than landlord and tenant. We had become a family in a foreign land. We cared about each other's well-being, celebrated small victories together, and offered comfort during difficult days. Saying goodbye to her felt surprisingly emotional. I promised her that I would return soon, and she hugged me like a mother sending her son on an important journey.

As the aircraft lifted off from Geneva, I felt as though I was flying to a dream rather than a destination.



Istanbul.

The hospitality of Turkish Airlines added its charm to the journey. The crew welcomed us with warm smiles and served Turkish Delight as a complimentary treat. Even the food felt like a preview of the country I was about to discover. Exhausted from the previous night's excitement, I eventually drifted into sleep.

A soft announcement awakened me.

"We will be landing at Istanbul Airport in approximately thirty minutes."

My eyes opened instantly. My pulse quickened. In less than an hour,

I would be standing on the soil of a city that had witnessed empires rise and fall. More importantly, I would finally meet Ana.

As the plane descended through the clouds, a thousand thoughts raced through my mind. What would I do when I saw her? Should I greet her with a formal handshake? Should I hug her?

Would a simple smile be enough? Every possibility seemed inadequate for a moment I had imagined countless times. After landing, I cleared immigration, collected my luggage, and immediately connected to the airport Wi-Fi. My fingers trembled slightly as I typed a message.



Duty-free, Istanbul.

"I am waiting near the duty-free area, close to the wine outlet."

And then I waited. Those thirty minutes felt longer than entire months. Every arriving passenger made my heart skip a beat. I checked my phone repeatedly, looked for the immigration gates, and then checked my phone again. Time seemed to have slowed deliberately, teasing my impatience. Then, almost an hour later, I saw her.

She emerged from the crowd, pulling her luggage behind her. Even from a distance, I recognised her at once. There was a radiant smile on her face, a smile I had only seen through a computer screen before.

At that moment, the noise of the airport disappeared.

I walked in her direction and could see her coming.

When we finally met, words became unnecessary. We embraced each other tightly, as though we were making up for all the months of separation. Neither of us seemed willing to let go. For a few precious moments, the world around us ceased to exist.

Then, suddenly, I became aware of reality again. I realised that I was holding her in my arms for the very first time. Slightly embarrassed, I loosened my embrace, and we both laughed. The awkwardness lasted only a second before a feeling of familiarity and comfort replaced it. It was as though we had known each other far longer than we actually had.

Together, we began searching for our hotel and figuring out how to reach the city. After some research, we decided to take the airport bus. It was affordable, reliable, and far more sensible than taking a taxi. We had already heard countless stories about Istanbul's taxi drivers and their inventive pricing methods, so the bus seemed the wiser choice.

As we boarded, sitting side by side and watching the magnificent city slowly reveal itself through the window, I felt a quiet happiness settling within me. The journey I had dreamed about had finally begun. Not just a journey across countries, but a journey of memories, companionship, and moments that would remain etched in my heart forever.

Seven Days Under the Istanbul Sky

Some journeys end when the plane lands, while others live on in the heart long after the luggage is unpacked. Our seven days in Istanbul belonged to the latter. Even today, whenever I think of that city, memories return like a gentle breeze from the Bosphorus, filled with the scent of Turkish tea, the cries of seagulls, the distant call to prayer, and above all, the warmth of Ana's hand resting in mine as we wandered through one of the world's most enchanting cities.



The spice market, Istanbul.

Our adventure began with a challenge. After arriving in Istanbul, we found ourselves navigating a maze of narrow cobbled lanes in search of our Airbnb. The streets seemed to have a life of their own, twisting unexpectedly between ancient buildings, tiny grocery stores, tea houses, and hidden courtyards.

Neither of us spoke Turkish, and our map seemed determined to confuse us even further. We dragged our suitcases through countless alleyways, stopping every few minutes to ask for directions. Yet

despite the language barrier, everyone greeted us with smiles. Two phrases quickly became familiar companions throughout our stay: "No problem" and "Teşekkürler". We heard them so often that by the end of the week they felt as natural as our language. Finally, after what felt like an expedition across half the city, we found our Airbnb standing proudly at the end of a narrow lane. Exhausted and laughing, we looked at each other and knew that our Istanbul story had officially begun.



We stood together in front of the Blue Mosque.

The apartment soon became our little home. Every morning sunlight streamed through the windows while the sounds of the city slowly awakened outside. We loved the simple routine we created together. Sometimes we cooked Indian food, and sometimes we experimented with European dishes. Ana was particularly fond of my chicken curry, and I found myself cooking it again and again simply because I loved seeing her enjoy it. There was something deeply intimate about sharing a kitchen in a foreign city, preparing meals together while discussing our plans for the day. Those ordinary moments

often became the most memorable ones.

Istanbul itself felt like a living museum. Every street carried centuries of history, and every building seemed eager to tell a story. We spent hours wandering through Sultanahmet, where the grandeur of empires lingered in the air. Standing before the magnificent Hagia Sophia was a humbling experience. The sheer scale of the structure left us speechless. Built as a church, transformed into a mosque, then a museum, and once again a mosque, it stood as a testament to the many civilisations that had shaped the city. As sunlight filtered through its ancient windows, I felt as though we were standing in the presence of history itself.



Turkish lamps, glowing in the evening.

The city revealed new wonders each day. We explored museums filled with priceless artefacts from the Byzantine and Ottoman eras. We wandered through art galleries tucked away inside historic buildings, discovering contemporary artists whose work blended tradition and modernity. The streets themselves often felt like open-air galleries, with colourful facades, elegant balconies, and hidden

corners that we discovered.

One of our favourite places was the Grand Bazaar, a vibrant hub of activity. Entering it felt like stepping into another world. Endless corridors stretched before us, lined with shops overflowing with carpets, lamps, spices, jewellery, ceramics, and handcrafted treasures.

The scent of saffron and roasted coffee drifted through the air while merchants invited us inside for tea and conversation. We spent hours exploring its labyrinthine passages. It was there that we found an artisan-crafted ring. It wasn't extravagant, but it possessed a unique beauty that immediately caught our attention. Watching Ana try it on is still one of my favourite memories from the trip. The ring seemed to belong to her from the moment she wore it.



A chalkboard menu of Turkish coffee.

I also spent time searching for gifts. I bought souvenirs for my parents and carefully selected honey and dry fruits that Helene had

requested. There was something deeply satisfying about bringing home small pieces of Istanbul for the people we cared about.

Our evenings often led us to Taksim Square, where the city seemed to pulse with energy. Street musicians filled the air with melodies while crowds drifted through the illuminated streets. One evening we shared a pizza there and watched life unfold around us. A little further on, we boarded the ancient red tram that was lumbering its way down Istiklal Avenue. Riding it was like going through time. The tram moved leisurely through the crowd while the city revealed itself in all its vibrant complexity.



A Turkish breakfast, shared.

Perhaps our most cherished moments were spent along the Bosphorus. We walked countless kilometres beside its waters, watching ferries glide between Europe and Asia. The strait was more than a geographical boundary; it was the soul of Istanbul. One

afternoon we bought enormous waffles covered with fruits, chocolate, and every imaginable topping near the Bosphorus Bridge. Sitting together by the water, sharing bites and laughter while watching boats pass, felt wonderfully simple and perfect.

The boat ride on the Bosphorus was magical. From the deck we admired palaces, fortresses, mosques, and elegant waterfront homes. The city unfolded before us like a painting. The breeze carried the scent of the sea while seagulls followed our boat overhead. Ana stood beside the railing, her hair dancing in the wind, and I remember thinking that happiness rarely announces itself; it simply arrives and asks you to notice it.



The Galata Tower, lit red at night.

One evening we attended a Sufi performance. As the dervishes began their graceful spinning, the atmosphere became almost spiritual. Their movements were hypnotic, transforming devotion into art. The experience left us silent for a long time afterwards. Some

moments are too profound for immediate conversation.

Another unforgettable experience was climbing Galata Tower. The panoramic view from the top was breathtaking. Istanbul stretched endlessly in every direction, its skyline punctuated by domes, minarets, bridges, and shimmering waterways. Standing there together, looking over a city that had witnessed centuries of history, we found ourselves talking about dreams, possibilities, and futures we hoped to build together. One delightful aspect of Istanbul was its cats. They were everywhere, sleeping on café chairs, lounging on staircases, wandering through bookshops, and resting beside ancient monuments. The city embraced them as cherished residents rather than strays. Ana adored them and spent considerable time photographing them. At times it appeared that the cats knew they were celebrities and happily posed for the camera.



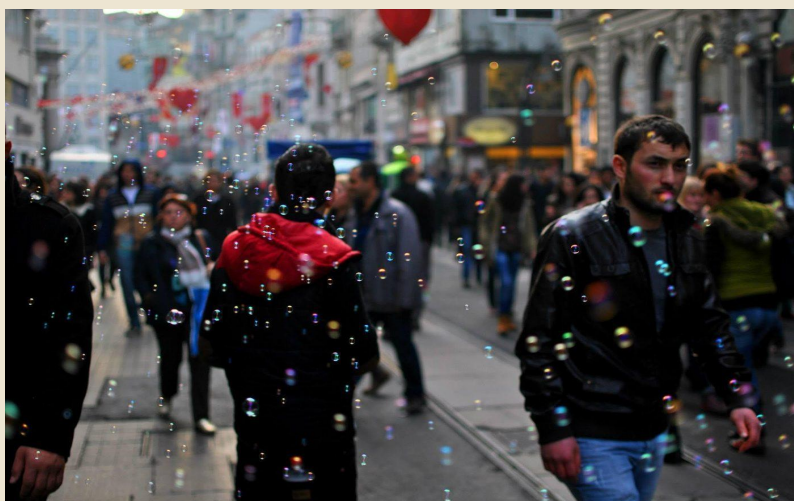
Baklava and tea.

Tea became another daily ritual. We would sit in cafés, sipping Turkish tea from delicate tulip-shaped glasses while sharing plates of baklava. There seemed to be endless varieties of baklava, each

more delicious than the last. Pistachio, walnut, and honey-soaked layers of pastry – every café claimed theirs was the finest, and we enthusiastically put that claim to the test. Those afternoons spent talking over tea and sweets remain among my happiest memories.

Throughout the trip, I found myself taking countless photographs. I photographed the city, its architecture, its markets, its cats, its sunsets, and its waterways. Yet my favourite photographs were always those of Ana. Somehow every street looked more beautiful when she walked through it. Every sunset seemed warmer when reflected in her smile.

Looking back now, I realise that what made Istanbul extraordinary was not just its monuments or museums, but the experience of discovering it together. It was the experience of discovering it together. It was the joy of holding hands while getting lost in unfamiliar streets. It was the comfort of sharing meals in a tiny apartment. It was the excitement of exploring a city where every corner revealed something unexpected. It was the feeling of dreaming together beneath a foreign sky.



Walking through the Istanbul bazaar

For seven unforgettable days, Istanbul became the backdrop to a story filled with laughter, wonder, affection, and discovery. The city gave us magnificent architecture, fascinating history, delicious food, endless cups of tea, and unforgettable sunsets. But more importantly, it gave us memories that would remain long after we left. Whenever I think of Istanbul now, I do not simply remember a city. I remember a feeling, a beautiful week when the world seemed larger, life seemed brighter, and every dream felt just a little closer to reality.

The day of our departure arrived far sooner than either of us had imagined. Throughout the week, we had spoken about it casually, almost as if avoiding its significance would somehow delay its arrival. Yet time has a way of moving forward without seeking anyone's permission. Last night was perhaps the longest night of our journey. Neither of us could sleep. There was a strange sadness in the room, a quiet discomfort that neither words nor smiles could ease. We both knew that, within a few hours, our paths would separate, and the realisation weighed heavily on our hearts. At some point during the night, exhaustion finally overcame her, and she drifted into a light sleep. I remained awake, listening to the silence and watching the city lights flicker outside the window. Unable to sleep, I took out a postcard I had bought during one of our walks through Istanbul. Under the dim light of the room, I wrote her a note – not grand declarations or dramatic promises, but simple words filled with gratitude, affection, and hope. When I finished, I quietly slipped the postcard into her luggage, imagining that she would discover it only after reaching home. The thought brought me a strange comfort, as though a small part of me would continue journeying with her even after we had parted.

We woke up early the next morning without needing any alarm. Those days when the heart wakes before the body. Together we prepared our breakfast, and even that ordinary activity felt

unusually meaningful. Every movement seemed slower, every glance more precious. We spoke little, yet the silence between us was full of emotions. Soon it was time to leave. Carrying our luggage, we made our way to the bus station that would take us to the airport. The city was slowly waking up around us. Vendors were arranging their stalls, commuters were rushing to work, and Istanbul appeared as beautiful as ever. Yet for us, the city looked different that morning because we knew we were leaving it behind.

We reached the bus station well before time and sat together waiting for the airport bus. As we waited, I noticed buses arriving from the airport carrying newly arrived tourists. Their faces were filled with excitement and anticipation. Their eyes sparkled with curiosity as they prepared to explore the city. Looking at them, I could not help but smile. Just a week earlier, we had arrived with the same excitement. They were beginning their story while ours was reaching its conclusion. It struck me that airports, railway stations, and bus terminals are perhaps the most philosophical places in the world. Every moment they witness reunions and separations, beginnings and endings, hopes and heartbreaks. Somewhere people are meeting anew, while elsewhere someone is saying goodbye forever.

Istanbul itself seemed to embody this truth. It was a city of wanderlust dreamers and refugees. Throughout our stay, we had seen people from Syria and many other countries who had found refuge there. For some, the city was a tourist destination; for others, it was a sanctuary. Everyone seemed to be searching for something, peace, security, opportunity, or love. As these thoughts wandered through my mind, I looked at her sitting beside me. We were physically together, yet emotionally we were already feeling the distance that would soon separate us. Neither of us could look directly into the other's eyes for long. We both carried millions of thoughts within us. Memories of the last seven days kept replaying

in our minds: the walks, the laughter, the conversations, the quiet moments, and the feeling of companionship that had developed so naturally between us. We knew we had to return to two different destinations and two different lives, yet neither of us seemed ready for that reality.

Soon the airport bus arrived. It felt almost cruel in its punctuality. We boarded quietly and took our seats. The journey to the airport lasted around forty-five minutes, but it felt much shorter. Outside the window, the city drifted past us like scenes from a film. The mosques, the bridges, the bustling streets, and the familiar neighbourhoods all seemed to be bidding us farewell. We spoke very little during the journey. At certain points our eyes met and a faint smile appeared, but neither of us could find the words to express what we were feeling.

Upon reaching the airport, we immediately began the check-in process. Once we had checked in our luggage, we moved together through security and immigration. At immigration, an officer stopped me and asked about my destination. He wanted to know why I was going to Geneva. His attitude changed the moment I showed him my United Nations identification card. He signalled his approval with a nod. As I stepped away, I saw how easily prejudice and mistrust can influence people when they travel. Many European countries see people from developing countries more as potential immigrants than tourists. It is an uncomfortable reality, but one that many people experience.

Soon we found ourselves walking through the terminal. Gradually, our paths began to diverge. Her departure gate was in one direction while mine was in another. The physical distance between them was small, but emotionally it felt enormous. We slowed our pace, as if by delaying our steps we could somehow put off what was coming. Finally, we stopped. Neither of us wanted to say goodbye. Our

hearts were sinking under the weight of the moment. Yet some farewells are unavoidable. We hugged each other once, then again, and then once more. Each embrace seemed to contain everything we could not say aloud. We wished each other a safe journey repeatedly, prolonging the moment for as long as possible. This time, there were no plans, no tickets for another journey, and no certainty about when we would meet again. That uncertainty made the goodbye even harder.

Finally, we turned and began walking to our respective gates. After a few steps, I looked back. She was doing the same. We smiled one last time before continuing in opposite directions. Gradually, she disappeared into the crowd, becoming just another tourist among thousands. Yet to me, she was far more than that. As I was about to reach my gate, a profound emptiness settled within me. The previous seven days already felt like a beautiful dream slipping into memory. I did not know when we would meet again, or even if we would. But I understood something deeply in that moment: some people enter our lives for only a short time, yet they leave footprints upon our hearts that remain forever. As my flight later rose above Istanbul and the city slowly disappeared beneath the clouds, I felt that although I was leaving, a part of me would always remain there, with her, among those unforgettable days that time would never erase.

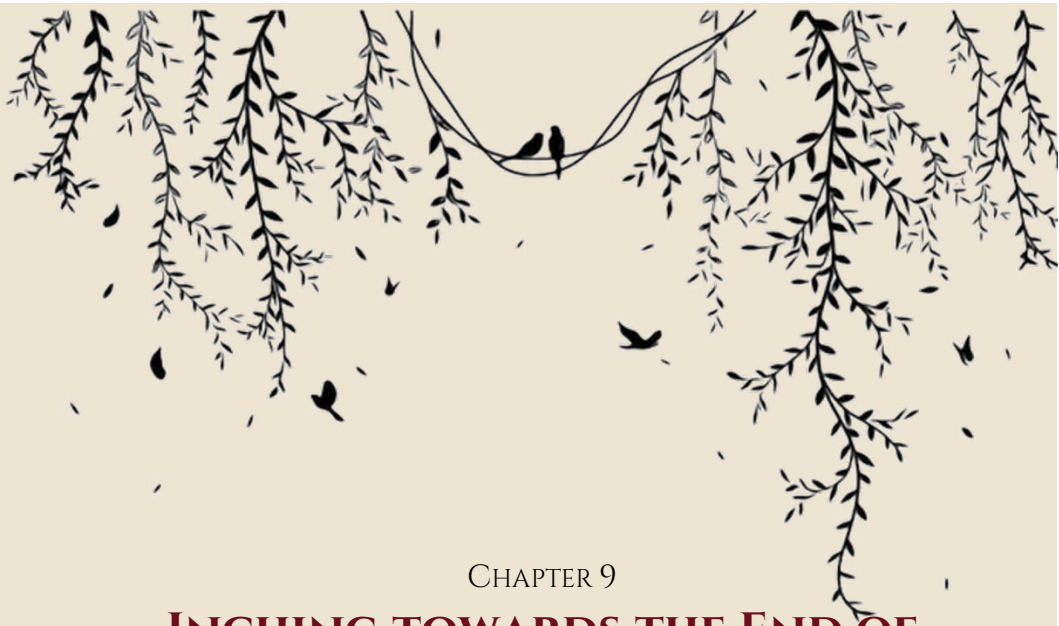
That is how life is; people are like morning dew. In that moment it's soothing, and we wish it to stay forever. But when I look back at the story, the protagonist of those chapters of my life establishes itself as a trailer that came with timelines. Affection has many forms, and at that age it comes cloaked in infatuation and an adrenaline rush. "Kab amber shoq manata hai¹⁴...¹⁵" has been my go-to since childhood,

¹⁴ <https://www.hindwi.org/geet/jo-beet-gai-harivanshrai-bachchan-geet>

¹⁵ Extract from a poem by Hariwansh Rai Bachchan.

either way. If you ask me if love has crossed my path or goodbyes have been my destiny, I would say, 'Yes, years later,' and it has taught me to come by and stay; if it's love, it's not meant to be let go of; nonetheless, we will come to that side of the story in some other edition.





CHAPTER 9

INCHING TOWARDS THE END OF MY INTERNSHIP

*"An ending rarely announces itself.
It simply gets closer, one ordinary day at a time."*

After returning from Turkey, I was left with only three months in Geneva at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Those final months carried an unsaid urgency because I knew my internship was coming to an end, and I was determined to find employment before having to return to India. I had already sacrificed a great deal to reach that stage. Years earlier, I had left a flourishing career with Airtel, where I was performing well and receiving recognition, to pursue my master's studies in Italy and subsequently undertake an internship with the United Nations in Geneva.

Looking back, I cannot write about these final months without confronting a harder truth about the very system that had shaped

my journey. My internship at the United Nations, like most such placements, was unpaid. For months I had survived on savings, odd jobs, and the generosity of people like Helene, simply to hold a position that carried real responsibility and real institutional value. An internship that pays nothing is not a neutral arrangement; in practice, it is a filter. It quietly excludes anyone who cannot afford to work for free in one of the world's most expensive cities. I met interns from wealthy countries who could rely on family support without a second thought, but I rarely met anyone from a least developed or developing nation who had not had to fight, as I had, simply to stay afloat. The doors of international diplomacy were technically open to everyone, yet in practice they opened only for those who could already afford to walk through them. That is not a democratic system; it is one quietly dominated by the rich and the already privileged among nations. And that troubles me, because it is precisely the students from developing countries and least developed countries who most need this exposure, the ones who will one day negotiate with these very institutions on behalf of their nations. If they never get the chance to understand how international diplomacy actually works from the inside, how can we expect them to shape it or to carry its lessons back into their countries' policymaking? I hope, someday, that governments like my own in India will consider sponsoring even a small number of students each year for exactly this kind of international exposure, not as charity, but as an investment in a generation of policymakers who must speak the language of these institutions fluently and deserve to be in the room.

Therefore, I was determined to make the most of the opportunity. During office hours, I devoted myself fully to my responsibilities at OHCHR, but every evening and weekend was spent searching for jobs, tailoring applications, preparing cover letters, and attending interviews. My efforts soon began to yield results, and I received

interview calls from organisations such as the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), the NGO Coordination Committee for Iraq (NCCI), the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), and several others. I successfully cleared many rounds of interviews and often reached the final stages of selection. Each time I became hopeful, imagining that perhaps by the following Friday I would receive the long-awaited offer letter. However, the outcome was repeatedly the same. The organisations appreciated my qualifications, international experience, and performance during interviews but ultimately informed me that they were unable to sponsor a work visa. It was a painful cycle of hope followed by disappointment. Gradually, the optimism that had fuelled me began to erode as the days slipped away and my visa was neared its expiry.

Determined not to give up, I even visited the student welfare office at the University of Geneva to explore whether there were possibilities for extending my stay or obtaining sponsorship. Unfortunately, the response was discouraging. The rules were strict, and there appeared to be very little flexibility for non-European graduates seeking employment. What frustrated me most was that there were numerous positions for which I was well qualified, yet many employers were reluctant to consider candidates who required visa sponsorship. As someone from outside the European Union, I increasingly felt that my nationality had become a barrier despite my education, professional experience, and proven abilities. Europe often spoke about diversity, inclusion, and global citizenship, yet the practical realities of the labour market seemed to contradict such ideals. While universities welcomed international students and encouraged them to contribute their perspectives, they found it far more difficult to remain and build a career after graduation. At times, it seemed that a person's passport mattered more than their competence. This realisation was deeply discouraging, as I knew I could have made a meaningful

contribution to many of the organisations that had interviewed me.

Beyond professional aspirations, there was also a personal reason I wanted to remain in Europe. It would have allowed me to stay closer to Ana, whose presence had become an important part of my life. The possibility of seeing her again offered another reason to continue fighting for opportunities. Yet with every passing week, that hope too seemed to drift further away. As my final days in Geneva approached, I found myself reflecting on history and the irony of modern mobility. Many European nations had once cruised freely across continents, shaping the destinies of distant societies through colonial expansion.

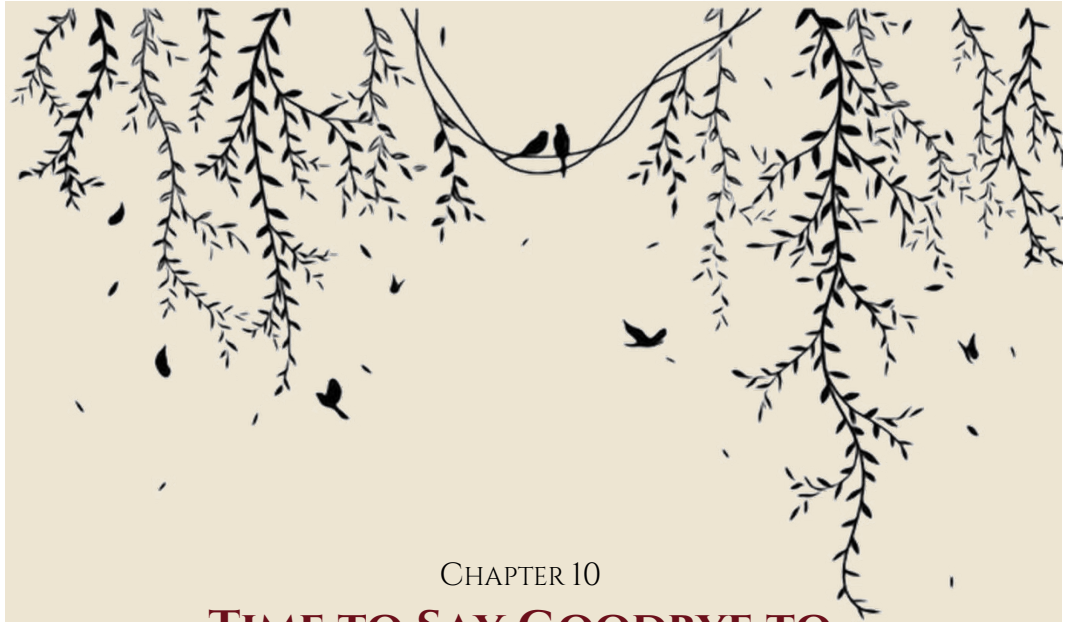
Yet in the contemporary world, individuals from those same formerly colonised regions often faced immense bureaucratic hurdles just to live and work in Europe. I understood that modern immigration policies were not equivalent to colonialism, and every country has the sovereign right to regulate its borders. Nevertheless, standing at the receiving end of those restrictions, the experience often felt profoundly unequal.

One incident during those difficult months remains etched in my memory. My Unit Head, Yuri, recognised my work and was genuinely supportive of my efforts to stay in Geneva. Seeing my dedication and understanding the uncertainty I was facing, he tried to explore the possibility of retaining me within the unit on an ad hoc basis. After many weeks, I finally felt hope. On a Friday afternoon, Yuri mentioned that he was making an effort and would discuss the matter internally. I left the office that day feeling lighter than I had in months. Throughout the weekend, I allowed myself to dream once again. Perhaps this would be the breakthrough I had been waiting for. Perhaps I would be able to remain in Geneva, continue contributing to the work I loved, and buy myself enough time to secure a longer-term opportunity.

That weekend felt unusually long. Every hour seemed to carry the promise of a new beginning. By Monday morning, I arrived at the office with cautious optimism. However, the conversation I had been eagerly anticipating quickly turned into another disappointment. Yuri informed me that, despite his willingness to retain me and the unit's need for additional support, Human Resources had not approved the arrangement. According to the HR department, employing me in that capacity would create a conflict of interest because I had recently completed my internship within the same unit. The decision was final.

I remember sitting there quietly, trying to process the news. It was difficult not to feel frustrated. Once again, my qualifications, performance, or commitment were not the issue. It was a procedural interpretation of a rule. I understood that institutions require policies and safeguards, yet at that moment the system felt impersonal and indifferent to individual circumstances. Another door had closed, not because there was no opportunity, but because regulations left little room for flexibility. As I walked back to my desk that day, I felt a profound disappointment. Yet I also felt grateful for Yuri's efforts. His willingness to advocate for me reminded me that while systems can appear rigid and unyielding, there are individuals within them who genuinely care and try their best to help.





CHAPTER 10

TIME TO SAY GOODBYE TO GENEVA

*"Leaving well is its kind of courage,
quieter than arriving but just as brave."*

As my days in Geneva came to an end, every moment took on a deeper significance. What had once been a foreign city had gradually transformed into a place filled with warmth, familiarity, and friendships that would remain etched in my heart forever. Among all the people I met during that remarkable chapter of my life, Helene occupied an exceptional place. Our friendship transcended age, nationality, and culture, built instead upon kindness, mutual respect, and an unspoken affection that grew stronger with time. As my internship in Geneva was nearing its end, I felt a deep desire to bring together all the people who had touched my life during those memorable six months. To express my gratitude and celebrate the friendships I had built, I decided to host a farewell

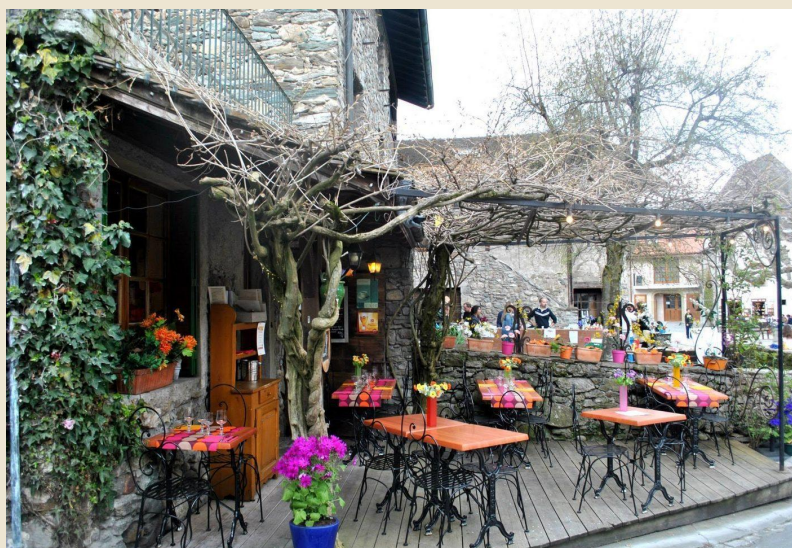
dinner at Helene's flat. It was not merely a dinner; it was a gathering of memories, emotions, and human connections that had enriched my journey far away from home. I invited everyone who had become a part of my life during that period, including the wonderful lady from Peru who had offered me my first professional opportunity, Helene's friends, my Hindi student, colleagues, and several other friends who had accompanied me through different moments of my stay in Switzerland.

Wanting to give them a taste of India, I spent the entire day in the kitchen preparing a feast with immense care and affection. The menu reflected the flavours of my homeland: aromatic rice, flavourful chicken curry, rich and creamy Shahi Paneer, a sweet tomato chutney prepared in traditional Indian style, cake, and wine to celebrate the evening. As the aroma of Indian spices filled the apartment, it felt as though a small piece of India had found its place in the heart of Geneva. One by one, the guests arrived, carrying smiles, stories, and warm wishes. The room soon echoed with laughter, conversations, and memories of shared experiences.

What touched me most was the efforts of my friends. Several of them brought chocolates as farewell gifts, knowing how much I loved Swiss chocolates. The gifts themselves were wonderful, but it was the thought behind them that moved me deeply. Throughout the evening, we reminisced about our adventures, discussed our plans for the future, and shared stories that had become part of our collective journey. For a few hours, it felt as though time had paused just for us.

Yet beneath the laughter was the quiet realisation that the evening would be one of the last times we would all be together. As the evening came to an end and friends began saying their goodbyes, I felt a rush of emotion. It was difficult to accept that the people who had become like family would soon be parted across different

countries and continents. Standing there in Helene's flat, surrounded by empty glasses, half-finished conversations, and memories that would last a lifetime, I had to acknowledge that the greatest gift Geneva had given me was not professional experience or international exposure; it was the friendships that had transformed strangers into lifelong companions. Saying goodbye that night was one of the most emotional moments of my journey, a reminder that the most meaningful relationships are often born far away from home yet remain with us forever.



An outdoor cafe, one last time.

A few days later, Helene suggested that we visit Evian, a charming little French town. The journey itself felt magical as we passed vineyards, rolling fields, and picturesque villages. Evian seemed untouched by time, with its cobbled streets, flower-adorned balconies, quaint cafés, and gentle pace of life. We spent the entire day wandering through the town. While Helene immersed herself in a Sudoku puzzle at a cosy café, I explored the streets with my camera, capturing old stone buildings, colourful window boxes,

church spires, and fleeting moments of everyday life.



Flowers in a window box.

Every now and then I would return to the café, and Helene would look up with a smile and ask if I had found something beautiful to photograph. What touched me most was her patience. She never hurried me or complained about my endless fascination with every little detail. Looking back, I realise that affection often reveals itself in such simple gestures of understanding and patience.

Among all the journeys that I undertook during my stay in Europe, none remains as vivid in my memory as our visit to Chamonix. Even today, when I close my eyes and allow my thoughts to wander back through the corridors of time, it is Chamonix that appears before me like a dream painted on the canvas of the French Alps.

Nestled beneath the imposing presence of Mont Blanc, the highest peak in Western Europe, Chamonix seemed less like a town and more like a masterpiece crafted by nature itself. Every direction offered a view so breathtaking that it felt almost unreal. Snow-capped mountains pierced the heavens with their majestic peaks,

ancient pine forests spread endlessly across the slopes, and crystal-clear waterfalls cascaded down rugged cliffs, their waters sparkling under the golden sunlight.



The bus stop to Chamonix lay beneath Mont Blanc.

The beauty of Chamonix possessed a rare quality; it did not merely impress the eyes; it touched the soul. Helene had invited us to spend the day there, and from the moment we arrived, I absorbed that this place occupied a special corner of her heart. Unlike tourists who merely visit a destination, Helene belonged to Chamonix in a deeply personal way. Every mountain trail, every street corner, and every old building seemed to hold a story for her. Her enthusiasm was contagious. She became determined to show me every hidden treasure of the valley. We spent the entire day wandering through the picturesque town, admiring the magnificent landscapes that seemed to emerge straight from a painting. As we walked together, Helene shared stories from her childhood, memories of family vacations, and countless anecdotes associated with the mountains surrounding us. The more she spoke, the more I knew that Chamonix was not merely a geographical location for her. It was a

repository of memories, emotions, and dreams accumulated over decades.



A dog resting in the snow.

As the day progressed, the changing light transformed the mountains into different shades of beauty. The peaks glowed silver in the afternoon sun, while the forests below seemed wrapped in emerald velvet. Every now and then, I would pause simply to absorb the scenery before me. There are places in the world that leave us speechless. Chamonix was one of them.

As evening slowly descended upon the valley, the sky turned shades of orange, pink, and violet. The sun disappeared behind the mountains, leaving behind a glow that lingered like the final notes of a beautiful symphony. Before beginning our journey back to Annemasse, Helene insisted on taking us to her winter house.

The house stood quietly amidst the alpine landscape, surrounded by nature and silence. The moment I saw it, I felt as though I had stepped into another era. It resembled the charming cottages one

often sees in old Hollywood films: timeless, elegant, and full of character. Its wooden exterior carried the marks of age with a personality, while the surrounding scenery made it appear almost magical. As we entered, I immediately understood why the house meant so much to Helene. It was far more than a holiday home. It was a sanctuary of memories.

Every room seemed to tell a story. Photographs adorned the walls, old furniture carried traces of generations gone by, and countless objects were carefully preserved, each holding a fragment of personal history. Unlike modern houses that often prioritise perfection, this house possessed something far more valuable, a characterful soul.

Helene moved through the rooms with quiet affection, occasionally stopping to share a memory associated with a particular object or corner of the house. As she spoke, I could see the little girl she once was, running through these very rooms, dreaming about the future. One of the things that fascinated me most was the collection of old belongings preserved throughout the house. There were books, photographs, musical instruments, handwritten notes, and countless small treasures accumulated over the years.

Then I noticed an old notebook resting on a shelf. There was something intriguing about it. Perhaps it was the worn-out cover or the way it seemed untouched by time. Curious, I asked Helene about it. Smiling, she handed it to me and explained that it was one of her notebooks from her college days when she had been learning music. With her permission, I carefully opened its pages.

The notebook was filled with handwritten musical notes, chords, compositions, and practice exercises. The ink had faded slightly with age, but the passion behind those writings remained visible. Each page revealed countless hours of dedication and learning. As I slowly turned the pages, I felt as though I had gained access to a

deeply personal chapter of Helene's life.

The notebook was not merely a collection of musical notes.

It was a record of dreams.

The aspirations of a young student.

The struggles behind mastering a craft.

The memories of a phase of life that existed long before our paths crossed.

For a few moments, the house grew silent.

Outside, the mountains stood motionless beneath the evening sky, while inside, I sat holding a fragile bridge to Helene's past. What struck me most was how human beings preserve themselves through such small things. Years pass. Faces change. Circumstances evolve. Yet an old notebook, a photograph, or a handwritten letter can instantly transport us back to another time.

As we finally left the house and began our drive back to Annemasse, darkness had already settled across the Alps. The headlights cut through the winding mountain roads while the stars slowly appeared above us.

I sat quietly throughout much of the journey. Part of me remained back in that little house in Chamonix. Looking back now, I realise that what made Chamonix unforgettable was not merely the extraordinary beauty of Mont Blanc or the breathtaking landscapes. It was the privilege of witnessing a deeply personal side of someone I cared about. Through the mountains, the stories, and that old music notebook, I gained a glimpse into Helene's world.

And perhaps that is what makes some journeys so unforgettable. They allow us not only to discover new places but also to discover the hidden landscapes that exist within the people we meet along the way.

Every morning she would arrive with a new plan, eager to take us to another valley, another viewpoint, another hidden trail that she loved. It was as if she wanted to compress years of experiences into the few days we had left together. The closer my departure came, the more emotional she became, and truthfully, so did I. Neither of us openly acknowledged it, but it was evident in the way she constantly sought new places to show me and in the way I tried to absorb every moment, every conversation, and every landscape. Standing together one evening as the setting sun painted the mountains in shades of gold and pink, I felt that Helene was not just showing me the beauty of the Alps; she was sharing with me pieces of her life, her memories, and her heart. Years have passed since then, but I have forgotten neither those breathtaking landscapes nor the countless conversations we shared.

More importantly, I have never forgotten Helene. Overall, it is not the places we visit that remain with us forever, but the people who accompany us on those journeys. Helene transformed ordinary trips into cherished memories, and through her kindness, generosity, and friendship, she made my final days in Europe some of the most meaningful of my life.

The final days of my internship in Geneva were passing quietly. Every day felt precious because I knew that soon I would have to leave a city that had become my second home. During those days, I spent most of my time with Helene. We talked endlessly about life, our future plans, and the memories we had created together. One evening, however, everything changed.

I received an email from the girlfriend of our Spanish roommate, Hooré. The moment I opened it, my heart sank. The message carried devastating news: Hooré had passed away. For a few moments, I simply stared at the screen in disbelief. Helene was sitting beside me, and when I shared the news with her, she too became speechless. It

felt impossible to accept.

Only a few days earlier, Hoore had driven back to Spain in his car. Before leaving, he had promised that once he returned, he would take me along on a road trip. He had spoken about the future with excitement and certainty. None of us could have imagined that he would never return. His belongings were still in our apartment. His books remained on the shelves, his clothes were still hanging in the wardrobe, and his coffee mug was sitting in the kitchen. Everything was exactly where he had left it. Yet he was gone.

The apartment suddenly felt different. The familiar warmth had disappeared and was replaced by an unsettling silence. I must admit that I was uncomfortable staying alone in the room after hearing the news. Every corner of the apartment reminded me of him. A few days later, Hoore's family arrived in Geneva to collect his belongings. Watching them pack his clothes and personal possessions was heartwrecking. Every item carried a memory, and every memory reminded us how suddenly life can change. Despite their grief, they treated me with grace and invited me to attend the memorial Mass being held for Hoore in Geneva.

It was the first time in my life that I attended a Christian Mass. The church was filled with sadness. Family members, relatives, and friends sat quietly, trying to come to terms with an unimaginable loss. Looking at Hoore's parents was particularly painful. There is perhaps no greater sorrow than that of parents losing their child. Their grief was visible in their eyes, and it deeply moved me. During the service, I was invited to say a few words about Hoore.

Standing before everyone, I found it difficult to speak. Emotions overwhelmed me. Yet I gathered myself and spoke from my heart. I spoke about the man I knew. I spoke about his kindness, his warmth, and his generosity. I spoke about the countless evenings we spent together, often sharing a cigarette and discussing life, politics,

relationships, and our dreams. Those conversations were never superficial. Hoore had a rare gift of making people feel heard and valued.

Although we came from different countries, cultures, and backgrounds, our friendship had grown naturally. Geneva had brought us together, but it was our shared humanity that turned us into close friends. As I spoke, memories flooded my mind.

I remembered his laughter.

I remembered his optimism.

I remembered the plans he had made for the future. And I remembered the road trip he had promised me. A promise that would never be fulfilled. By the time I finished speaking, tears had filled my eyes. The truth was simple: I was not only mourning a roommate. I was mourning a dear friend who had become like a brother. After the Mass ended, I remained seated in the church for a while. The silence around me felt sacred. I reflected on how fragile life truly is.

One day we were making plans. The next day, those plans disappeared forever. Even today, when I think about my time in Geneva, I still remember Hoore. His friendship remains one of the most cherished parts of that chapter of my life. Some people enter our lives for only a brief period, yet they leave footprints that never fade.

Hoore was a rare soul. Though he left this world far too early, the bond we shared continues to live within me, reminding me that friendship knows no borders and that the people we love never truly leave us. They remain forever in our memories, in our stories, and in our hearts.

Goodbye to Helene, and Departing from Geneva

Finally, the day arrived, the day I had been dreading for weeks, perhaps even months. The day I had to bid farewell to Geneva and begin my journey back to India. It was strange how a city that was once so unfamiliar had slowly become a part of my identity. The streets, the lake, the trams, the cafes, the office corridors, and the faces that had once been strangers had all woven themselves into the fabric of my life. Geneva was no longer merely a place on the map; it had become a chapter of my soul.

The morning of my departure was unusually quiet. The sky above Geneva wore a pale shade of grey, as if it too were reluctant to let me go. I packed my luggage one final time, carefully folding away not only my clothes but also countless memories that no suitcase could ever contain.

My dear friend Bashar came to accompany me to the airport. Throughout my stay in Geneva, Bashar had been more than a friend; he had been a brother. In a foreign land where loneliness often visited uninvited, his companionship had been a constant source of comfort. As we made our way to the airport, we spoke little. Sometimes silence says more than words ever can. We both knew that the journey was not merely a drive to the airport; it was the closing scene of a beautiful chapter of our lives.

Helene also came to see me off.

Among all the people I had met in Geneva, Helene occupied a special place in my heart. She had stood beside me during some of my most uncertain moments. She had offered support when I needed it most and had done so without ever expecting anything in return. There are people who enter our lives quietly and yet leave footprints so deep that time can never erase them. Helene was 'Helene', nothing more, nothing less; she was just perfect.

When we reached the airport, reality finally began to settle upon me. The departure boards flashed destinations from around the world. Passengers hurried past with their luggage, each carrying their own stories and destinations. Yet for me, time seemed to have slowed down.

We stood together for a few moments, trying to ignore the inevitable goodbye that was approaching. Then came the moment. Helene hugged me warmly and wished me well. There was a kindness in her eyes that words could never adequately describe. She turned around and slowly began to walk away. I watched her as she disappeared into the crowd.

In that instant, a wave of deep sadness swept over me. In my heart, I knew I might never see her again. Life has a peculiar way of separating people who have become important to us. Geography, time, responsibilities, and circumstances often draw invisible borders between human beings. We tell ourselves that we will meet again someday, yet we know that some goodbyes are more permanent than they seem.

As Helene disappeared from my sight, I felt as though a part of Geneva was walking away with her. Bashar could figure out my emotions without my having to say a word. True friendship often requires no explanation. We sat together for a while before my check-in. We spoke about life, our dreams, our future plans, and the uncertainty that lay ahead. Before leaving, we made a promise to each other that someday, somewhere in this vast world, we would meet again.

Neither of us knew whether that promise would be fulfilled or not. Yet the promise itself carries hope, and hope is all that a peripatetic wants.

As I passed through security and walked past the departure gate, I found myself looking back repeatedly. It was almost as though my

heart was refusing to board the flight. When the aircraft finally lifted above Geneva, I looked through the window. The city grew smaller and smaller beneath the clouds until it eventually disappeared from sight. Yet Geneva never truly disappeared from my life.

Looking back now, I realise that my final months in Geneva taught me lessons far greater than any professional achievement could. I arrived there carrying dreams, ambitions, and expectations about the future. Some of those dreams were fulfilled, while others slowly faded away. The most painful realisation was to understand that dreams do not always shatter dramatically. Often they are eroded by circumstances beyond our control. Rejections, uncertainties, immigration barriers, and the subtle feeling of not fully belonging gradually wear away at one's expectations. There were moments when I questioned my path, my decisions, and even my abilities. Yet life, in its mysterious wisdom, compensates us in ways we never anticipate.

Although Europe could not make me stay for the future, I had never imagined one for myself far from home; it gave me something perhaps even more valuable. It gave me friendships that transcended borders. It introduced me to people from different cultures, languages, and backgrounds who taught me the universality of kindness. It showed me that humanity remains the same regardless of nationality, religion, or geography.

Most importantly, it taught me resilience. I returned to India carrying far more than an internship experience. I carried lessons in humility, perseverance, friendship, and gratitude. I carried memories of countless conversations, shared meals, long walks, and moments of laughter that continue to illuminate my life even today.

The friendships I formed in Geneva became proof that human connections are among life's greatest treasures. Professional accomplishments may decorate a résumé, but it is relationships that nourish the soul.

Years later, when I think of Geneva, I do not first remember the office buildings, the conferences, or the prestigious institutions. Instead, I remember Helene turning back one final time before disappearing into the crowd. I remember Bashar's quiet companionship on the journey to the airport. I remember the warmth of people who made a foreign city feel like home. Perhaps that was the real purpose of the journey all along. Paulo Coelho wrote in *The Alchemist*:

"People are afraid to pursue their most important dreams because they feel that they don't deserve them or that they'll be unable to achieve them."

Geneva taught me another truth: even when dreams evolve into something different than we imagined, the journey remains worthwhile. Occasionally, but importantly, the greatest gift is not reaching the destination we envisioned but becoming the person we were meant to be along the way.

Even now, when I allow myself to sit quietly with the memory of those months, it is not any single event that returns to me first. It is the texture of the whole period: the particular grey of Geneva mornings before the sun had decided whether to appear; the sound of the tram bell at the corner near the office; and the smell of instant coffee in the pantry where I first learned everyone's names. Geneva was never one story. It was dozens of small ones, layered quietly on top of each other, until one day I looked up and experienced they had become the architects of who I was.

I think of the version of me who arrived in that city, not speaking the language, not knowing the cold, and unsure if coming was the right decision. That person carried his uncertainty like luggage he could not check in. Looking back, I understand now that Geneva did not resolve that uncertainty so much as it taught me to walk alongside it. There is a particular art of wisdom that only happens to grow far from home, in a place where no one already knows who you are supposed to be. You are permitted, almost forced, to become

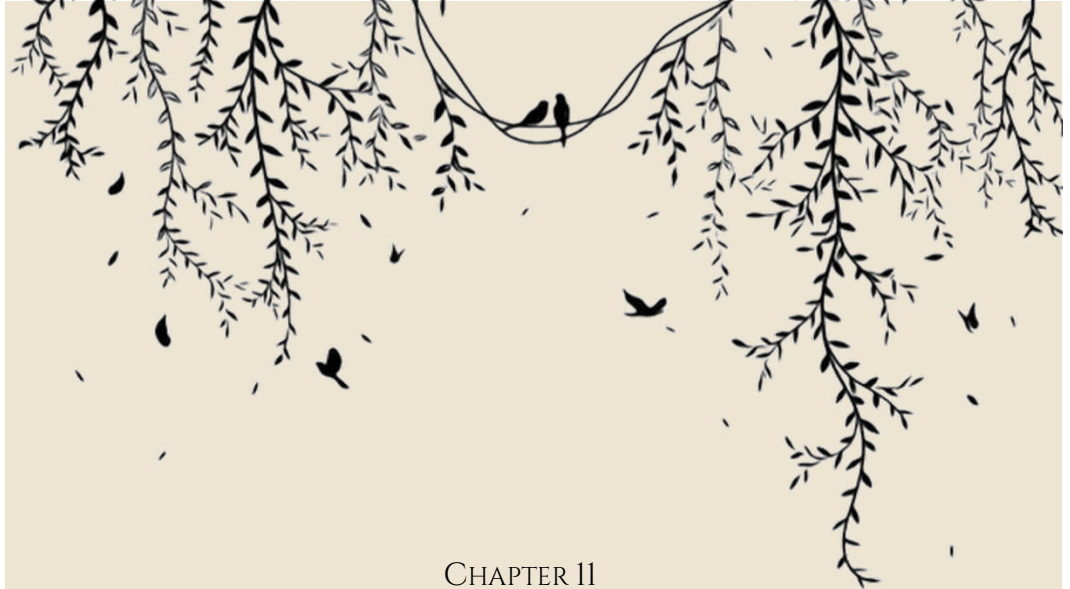
someone new. I am grateful, in ways I did not expect at the time, for every cold morning, every rejected application, and every evening spent alone before I found my footing. Those were not detours from the story. They were the story.

When I try to summarise an entire period of my life in a few honest lines, I am most struck by how much of it was built by people who owed me nothing. Helene did not have to open her home to a stranger. Bashar did not have to become the brother he became. The colleagues who taught me the rhythms of an office in a language not my own; the friends who filled a small apartment with the sound of a dozen different accents; the strangers who offered directions, patience, and small kindnesses on days when I felt entirely lost – none of them were obliged to make Geneva feel like home. And yet they did. If there is a single thread that runs through this entire chapter of my life, it is that generosity travels faster and farther than we often realise.

I left Geneva with less certainty about my future than I had hoped to have and far more certainty about the kind of person I wanted to become. That, I have come to believe, was always the true exchange. The internships, the interviews, and the professional milestones mattered, but they were never the point. The point was the slow work of becoming someone capable of building a life from nothing, in a city that owed me nothing, among people who chose, again and again, to give me everything they could. Geneva remains, to this day, less a place on a map than a season of my life I carry with me, one that taught me how to leave, how to arrive, and how to be grateful for both.

*Geneva, thank you for everything you gave me and
for everything you taught me to give.*





CHAPTER II

THE SEEDS OF A FOUNDATION

"Sometimes the path forward is not a promotion but a return to the people and the purpose you carry within you."

When I returned from Geneva, I knew that something within me had changed forever. The city had given me much more than an internship with the United Nations. It had transformed the way I looked at success, work, and life itself. The ambition that had once driven me to the corporate world had quietly faded. I no longer wished to return to my previous employer or spend my life chasing quarterly targets and annual profits.

For nearly a decade, I had worked in the corporate sector. It had undoubtedly taught me discipline, leadership, and the art of execution. I met brilliant colleagues, learnt from exceptional mentors, and ventured around extensively. Yet, beneath the polished offices and impressive balance sheets, I began to notice a pattern that deeply unsettled me. The primary objective of most

profit-driven organisations was, ultimately, to maximise returns. Employees often became numbers on spreadsheets, valued more for productivity than for their humanity. I slowly became disillusioned. I wanted my work to create impact, not merely generate revenue.

When my internship concluded and my Geneva sojourn came to an end, I made a decision that surprised many around me. Instead of rushing back into the corporate world, I chose to wait for an opportunity that aligned with my values. It was not an easy year. There were moments of uncertainty and financial anxiety, but I held on to the belief that meaningful work was worth waiting for.

Eventually, the opportunity arrived.

I joined Medic Mobile as the Asia manager, a role that completely transformed my understanding of development work. Our mission was simple yet profound: to reduce preventable maternal deaths during pregnancy by strengthening healthcare systems through technology. My work took me across Nepal, Indonesia, Timor-Leste, Kenya, and several other countries, where I collaborated with governments, doctors, nurses, and community health workers. Every successful birth, every mother who survived because healthcare reached her on time reminded me that development work was not merely a profession—it was a responsibility.

My journey continued with organisations such as the Grameen Foundation, where I worked on women's financial inclusion and livelihood programmes. Each project brought me closer to the people I had always wanted to serve. The farther I marched across the world, the more I found myself thinking about the village where I was born.

Growing up in rural Bihar had exposed me to realities that many policymakers only encountered through reports and statistics. Poverty was not an abstract concept; it was a daily companion. Access to education, healthcare, sanitation, and dignified livelihoods

remained a privilege rather than a right. As a student of human rights, I had learnt about discrimination in classrooms. As a son of the soil, I had witnessed it firsthand.

The challenges confronting rural women and girls troubled me deeply. Child marriage continued to rob girls of their childhoods. Domestic violence remained hidden behind closed doors. Countless girls dropped out of school because they lacked access to safe menstrual hygiene products. In many tribal communities, stigma, silence, and neglect still surrounded menstruation. These were not isolated incidents; they represented a systemic denial of dignity.

Gradually, an idea that had lived quietly within me for years became impossible to ignore.

I wanted to build something of my own.

Not a company driven by profit, but an institution driven by purpose.

That dream eventually became my brain-baby and stood as the 'Ananda Foundation'.

It began modestly, sustained entirely through the encouragement of family members, friends, and a handful of well-wishers who believed that meaningful change begins with small steps. We chose to focus on women's empowerment through health, education, livelihood generation, and menstrual hygiene. We organised awareness camps, distributed sanitary pads to rural and tribal girls, connected communities with healthcare services, and worked to restore dignity where society had too often looked away.

Watching a young girl return to school because she finally had access to sanitary pads brought me far greater satisfaction than any corporate incentive I had ever received. Seeing rural women begin to believe in their potential became my greatest reward.

Years later, I was humbled to receive an invitation from the United Nations to speak at the Global Social Forum in Geneva, where I shared our experiences of working with women and tribal communities in India.



Standing once again in Geneva, this time not as an intern but as an invited speaker, felt like life completing a beautiful circle. Participants from around the world appreciated the work of the Ananda Foundation and generously encouraged our efforts. At that moment, I felt that genuine impact never depends on the size of an organisation but on the sincerity of its purpose.

Looking back, I have no regrets about leaving the corporate world. Every chapter of my life—from multinational boardrooms to remote villages, from snowy streets in Finland to crowded settlements in Bihar—has shaped the person I have become. Each experience taught me something invaluable.

This memoir tells only one part of that journey.

Perhaps another book will someday recount the untold stories of corporate life, leadership, difficult decisions, failures, and the countless struggles that unfolded behind closed office doors.

For now, however, my story belongs elsewhere.

It belongs to the villages, to the mothers who dream of healthier children, to the girls who deserve an education free from fear and stigma, and to the communities that continue to motivate me every single day.

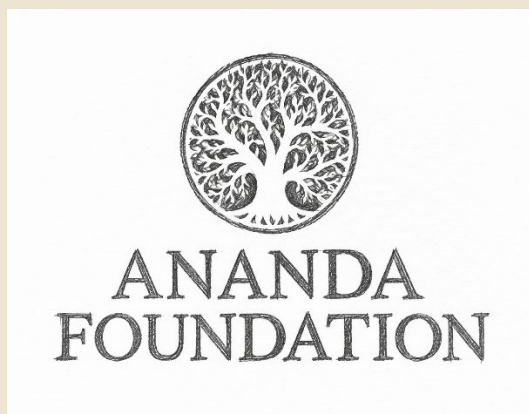
Every rupee of my royalty from this book will go to the Ananda Foundation. It will help educate a child, provide a sanitary pad to a young girl, support a woman seeking dignity, or strengthen a rural community striving for a better future.

Stories have value only when they create hope.

And perhaps that is what this journey has always been about—not building a successful career, but living a meaningful life. Nothing comes perfect in life; we decide and make it perfect, the picture-perfect one to 'cheers to'.



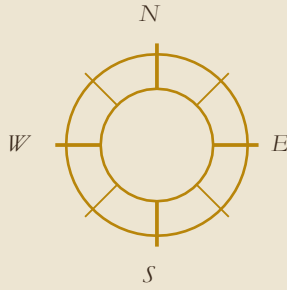
ANANDA FOUNDATION



QR Code for the Video of Ananda Foundation



QR Code for the Website



A TRAVEL SCRAPBOOK

A MOSAIC OF FOOTPRINTS

Mementos of a Journey Across Europe

Currencies · Tickets · Cards · Ferries · Borders Crossed

Anand Deo

PROLOGUE
Currencies of the Road
Turkey • The Eurozone • Switzerland



Turkish Lira, Euro, and Swiss Franc, representing different stages of my journey across Europe.

Three notes, three borders, one restless heart. Long before the tickets and the cards, there was always a new currency to learn — proof that the road had carried me somewhere unfamiliar again.

CHAPTER I
Geneva

Geneva — Annemasse, Switzerland



Used for travelling between Geneva and Annemasse during my stay in Switzerland.

A small yellow card, punched and stamped, that quietly carried me back and forth across a border every single day — until crossing it stopped feeling like anything remarkable at all.

CHAPTER II

Italian Rails and Roads

Treviso · Padova · Milano — Italy



A ticket from one of my journeys during my time in Italy.



The journey I took when I left Italy and travelled to Geneva for my internship.

*Two thin paper stubs, half a summer apart. One sent me down a quiet regional road;
 the other carried me north, out of Italy entirely, toward the internship that would
 change everything.*

CHAPTER III

Finland, and Points Beyond

Finland — Vienna — Prague



Used during my stay and university programme in Finland.



Part of my journey exploring Central Europe.

A worn Visa Electron that paid for a hundred small Finnish mornings, and a crossed-out coach ticket from a night bus that carried me from Vienna to Prague and back into motion again.

CHAPTER IV

Farewell to Erasmus

Turku — The Baltic Sea



Details of my accommodation in Pula.



The ferry I took while returning from Turku after completing my Erasmus Programme.

A hostel card signed in my own careless hand, and a ferry stub from the boat that carried me away from Turku — the last mile of an Erasmus year I wasn't ready to let go of.

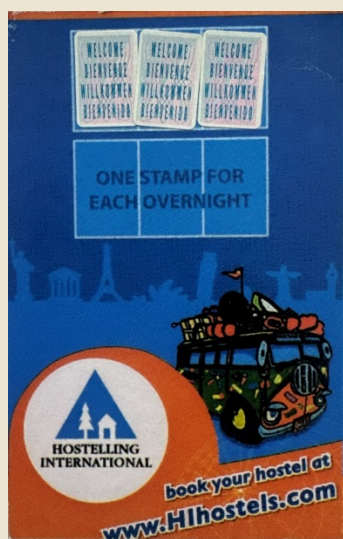
CHAPTER V

Fifteen Days, One Coast

Croatia — Pula and the Adriatic

VOZNA KARTA		3	
JEDNOSMJEERNA POVRATNA		PUTNIK	
31.7.99		31.7.99	
OD	DO	OD	DO
OD	DO	OD	DO
KATEGORIJA PUTNIKA		POPLUST	VALUTA
SVEUKUPNO		SVEUKUPNO	

The beginning of my 15-day journey through Europe.



The hostel where I stayed during my journey.

A hand-filled bus ticket and a hostel passport waiting for its stamps — the very first page of a fifteen-day journey across Europe with nothing booked past the first night.

CHAPTER VI
Venice, Between Semesters
Venice · Lido — Italy

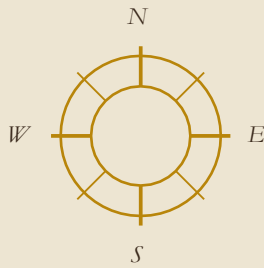


Used for travelling between Venice, Lido, and the surrounding islands.



Used during my university years in Italy.

A vaporetto pass worn soft at the corners, and the bank card that quietly funded a university life on the water — the everyday relics of a city that never once felt ordinary.



Every ticket kept was a heart followed.

*Turkey to Switzerland, Italy
to Finland, Croatia to Venice
— the road was never really
about the places.*

The End — for now.