LUCK HAS NO MANNERS

TWO FRIENDS.
TWO PHILOSOPHIES.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: No Agenda 1
Chapter 2: The Interview 24
Chapter 3: Waiting 37
Chapter 4: What Success Looks Like From Home 60
Chapter 5: First day 64
Chapter 6: Different Directions 83
Chapter 7: The Better Chair 93
Chapter 8: The Plot, the Bike and the Missed Train 99
Chapter 9: What People Say at Weddings 111
Chapter 10: The Small Door 115
Chapter 11: Salary 127
Chapter 12: Parents Never Retire From Worry 140
Chapter 13: The Comfortable Man 149
Chapter 14: The Rise 160
Chapter 15: The Risk They Never Discussed 166
Chapter 16: The First Crack 175
Chapter 17: Advice and Appearances 182
Chapter 18: Recognition 185
Chapter 19: The Business Card and the Room 187
Chapter 20: The 360-Degree View 191
Chapter 21: What They Kept Postponing 195
Chapter 22: The Wrong Direction 203
Chapter 23: Two Boxes 206

Chapter 24: Down 208
Chapter 25: Congratulations, Dev 210
Chapter 26: The Lucky Man..... 213
Chapter 27: The Lowest Floor..... 215
Chapter 28: When Luck Left 218
Chapter 29: Enough 223
Chapter 30: Luck Has No Manners 229

Nobody is superior, nobody is inferior, but nobody is equal either. People are simply unique, incomparable.
You are you, I am I. ***-Osho***

*****

CHAPTER 1

No Agenda

They had met in college at nineteen and were now thirty-two, old enough to have accumulated consequences but still young enough to believe most of them could be corrected.

Raghav reached the café twelve minutes early.

Not ten. Not fifteen.

Twelve.

He had calculated that ten minutes might look casual, fifteen minutes might look eager, and anything beyond that would make him question the purpose of punctuality

He had chosen the table before Dev arrived: not too close to the entrance, far enough from the coffee grinder, with a clear view of the street. The place was old enough to have character and new enough to charge for it. Wooden tables, framed photographs of a city that no longer existed, a long counter lined with glass jars, and a waiter who seemed to remember people better than orders.

Outside, the evening traffic had begun thickening. Auto-rickshaws squeezed between cars. A fruit seller was arranging guavas into a pyramid he would eventually have to dismantle. An elderly man stood near a pharmacy, reading a prescription twice before going in.

Raghav wiped the already clean surface with a tissue, placed his phone face down, opened his small black notebook, and wrote the date on top of a fresh page.

Then he wrote:

Dev: 5.30 p.m.

After a moment he added:

No agenda.

He stared at it.

The phrase irritated him.

He stared at the words for a while.

"No agenda," he murmured. "That itself is dangerous."

The waiter came.

"Sir, order?"

"Not yet," Raghav said. "I am waiting for someone."

The waiter nodded with the sympathy of a man who had seen many people waiting for someone.

Dev arrived twenty-three minutes late.

He entered as if the café had been waiting for him, not the other way around. His shirt was slightly crushed, his hair had surrendered to the wind, and his face carried that unreasonable happiness of people who do not check traffic before leaving home.

He saw Raghav and waved.

Raghav looked at his watch.

"Traffic?"

“No,” Dev said, smiling. “Life.”

“That is not an answer.”

“It is the only answer.”

“You’re twenty-three minutes late.”

“Then I am improving.”

“Improving from what?”

“Last time I was thirty-eight minutes late.”

“That is not improvement. That is damage control.”

Dev sat opposite him and picked up the menu.

“Before you begin your lecture, let me order. Philosophy is better with coffee.”

“You did not even apologise.”

“I came.”

“That is not an apology.”

“It is evidence of commitment.”

Raghav removed his glasses, cleaned them, and wore them again.

“Dev, one day your casualness will ruin something important.”

“It already has,” Dev said cheerfully. “Several things.”

“That is not something to be proud of.”

“I am not proud. I am experienced.”

The waiter returned.

“One filter coffee,” Raghav said.

“One strong coffee, one onion samosa, and whatever cake looks most confident,” Dev said.

The waiter blinked.

“Sir?”

“Cake. Confident-looking.”

Raghav sighed. “Give him chocolate cake.”

Dev leaned back.

“You see? This is why I keep you in my life. You convert my poetry into practical instruction.”

“And you convert my peaceful life into an emergency ward.”

Dev laughed.

For a few seconds, they didn’t speak

Outside the glass wall, the city moved with its usual confusion. Bikes slipped through gaps that did not exist. A fruit seller argued with a customer. A schoolboy dragged his bag as if education had personally betrayed him. Two young women took photographs of coffee before drinking it. A man in a formal shirt shouted into his phone, using the word “actually” six times in thirty seconds.

Dev watched all this with delight.

“Look at that man,” he said. “He is saying ‘actually’ so much that even truth must be tired.”

Raghav glanced outside.

“He is probably on a work call.”

“Work call means what? Saying simple things in complicated ways?”

“Sometimes.”

Their coffee arrived.

Raghav stirred his coffee once and placed the spoon exactly on the saucer.

Dev stirred his coffee like he was rescuing someone from a cyclone.

Raghav watched him.

“Even your coffee has no plan.”

“It will become coffee only. Why should it have a plan?”

“Because everything benefits from preparation.”

“Does it?”

“Yes.”

“Love?”

“Yes.”

“Sleep?”

“Yes.”

“Rain?”

“We can carry an umbrella.”

“Death?”

Raghav paused.

Dev smiled.

“See? Life keeps a few subjects outside your notebook.”

Raghav took a sip.

“Preparation does not mean control. It means respect.”

“For whom?”

“For time. For people. For possibilities. For risk.”

Dev nodded slowly.

“That sounds beautiful. You should print it on your visiting card.”

“I am serious.”

“I know. That is your main problem.”

Raghav leaned forward.

“Listen. Suppose there is an interview tomorrow. I will study the company, understand the role, prepare answers, reach early, carry documents. You will wake up late, wear whatever is available, and say something like ‘I will handle it when I go there.’ Who has a better chance?”

“You.”

“Exactly.”

“But suppose the interviewer likes honesty, hates rehearsed answers, and offers me tea because I look harmless?”

“That is not a strategy. That is gambling.”

“Life is also gambling.”

“No. Life is probability.”

Dev broke a piece of samosa and pointed it at him.

“You prepare because you are afraid of being surprised.”

“I prepare because surprises are expensive.”

“Nice line.”

“Thank you.”

“Write it down.”

“I already did.”

Dev bent forward and looked at the notebook.

“You wrote ‘Meeting with Dev : No agenda.’ Very hurtful.”

“It’s a fact.”

“You should have written, ‘Meeting with Dev : possible emotional damage.’”

“I considered it.”

They laughed.

The chocolate cake arrived. Dev looked at it carefully.

“Yes,” he said. “This cake has confidence.”

Raghav shook his head.

“You are impossible.”

“No. I am unprepared. There is a difference.”

Raghav looked at him for a long moment.

“Tell me honestly. Does it never bother you?”

“What?”

“That you lose out.”

Dev’s smile softened.

“Of course it bothers me.”

“Then why don’t you change?”

“I have tried.”

“And?”

“I forget.”

"That is your answer?"

"Mostly."

Raghav waited.

Dev looked out through the glass.

"I don't know, Raghav. Some people wake up and see the day like a project. I wake up and see it like weather. It may rain. It may not. Someone may call. Someone may leave. Some work may happen. Some work may collapse. I don't naturally arrange life before living it."

"That sounds peaceful."

"It is not always peaceful. It is just natural to me."

"You have missed deadlines."

"Yes."

"Lost money."

"Yes."

"Missed flights."

"Two."

"Three."

"One was the airline's fault."

"You reached after the gate closed."

"Still, they closed it."

Raghav smiled.

Dev continued.

"Yes, I have lost things. But I have also met people because I missed buses. I have eaten in places I never planned. I have

heard stories from strangers. I have taken roads that were not on maps. I don't know whether I am careless or open."

"Both," Raghav said.

"Correct. But open sounds better."

Raghav turned the cup in his hand.

"My father used to say, 'If you fail to prepare, you prepare to fail.'

Dev nodded.

"My grandfather used to say, 'Even if you prepare the bed, sleep must still agree.'"

"Your grandfather said that?"

"No. But he would have, if someone had asked."

Raghav laughed loudly this time.

The man outside was still on the phone. The schoolboy had now bought a packet of chips. The fruit seller had won the argument but lost the customer.

Dev watched them.

"You know what society likes?" he asked.

"What?"

"Result first. Story later. If you succeed, they call your mistakes courage. If you fail, they call your courage stupidity."

Raghav nodded.

"That is true."

"If I become successful tomorrow, people will say, 'Dev always lived freely. He trusted life.' If I fail, they will say, 'Dev never had discipline.' Same Dev. Different result."

Raghav didn't say anything.

"That is why preparation matters. It gives you some defence against people's judgement."

"No," Dev said. "Success gives defence. Preparation only gives personal satisfaction."

"That is not a small thing."

"I agree."

Raghav looked at him.

"You agree?"

"Of course. I am not against preparation. I am against living as if life is an exam and God is the invigilator."

Raghav smiled.

"That is a good line."

"Write it down."

"I will not."

"You will."

"I might."

Dev leaned back, satisfied.

For some time, they drank coffee without speaking.

Their silences had become old enough to be comfortable. They did not need to fill every pause. Friendship, after many years, becomes less about talking and more about not feeling abandoned when words stop.

Raghav's phone buzzed.

He looked at it and frowned.

"What happened?" Dev asked.

"Reminder."

"For what?"

"To relax."

Dev stared at him.

"You have a reminder to relax?"

"Yes."

"At what time?"

"Every evening at six."

"And do you relax?"

"I usually postpone it."

Dev placed both hands on the table.

"This is why I love you. You are the only man I know who reschedules peace."

Raghav tried not to laugh but failed.

"Mock all you want. At least I know I need peace."

"I also know."

"How?"

"When I am tired, I sleep. When I am hungry, I eat. When I am sad, I call you and irritate you."

"That is not peace. That is outsourcing."

"Friendship is emotional outsourcing."

Raghav wrote that down.

Dev saw it.

"Aha. Stolen."

"Documented."

The café had begun to fill. Two college boys argued about start-ups. An elderly couple shared one plate of toast. A woman in a blue saree sat alone, reading a book and smiling occasionally, as if the author had become her private friend.

Dev pointed gently.

"See her?"

"Yes."

"She is successful."

"How do you know?"

"She is alone and not lonely."

Raghav looked at the woman again.

"That is a dangerous assumption."

"All understanding begins as assumption."

"All mistakes also."

"Correct. That is why we need conversation."

Raghav smiled.

"You know, sometimes you speak nonsense beautifully."

"And you speak truth like a tax notice."

This was one of the reasons their friendship worked. They could say uncomfortable things and leave them on the table without immediately forcing a resolution.

Their second coffee came without either of them ordering it.

Dev looked at the waiter.

"We didn't order."

The waiter smiled. "Sir, regular customer," he said, pointing to Raghav. "He always orders second coffee after forty minutes."

Dev slowly turned toward Raghav.

"Prepared even by the waiter."

Raghav looked embarrassed.

"It is just a pattern."

"No. It is a legacy."

Dev lifted the cup.

"To patterns."

Raghav lifted his cup.

"To accidents."

They drank.

Dev wiped his fingers and said, "So what is your plan for life now?"

Raghav did not answer immediately.

"That itself is a problem," Dev said.

"What?"

"You are searching for the correct answer."

"Because it is an important question."

"No. It is a simple question. Important questions are usually simple. We make them complicated so that delay looks intelligent."

Raghav looked at him carefully.

"Say that again."

"No. Once is natural. Twice is performance."

Raghav closed the notebook.

"My plan is to grow in my career, save enough, take care of my parents, support my sister, stay healthy, read more, travel twice a year, and eventually do work that has meaning."

Dev stared.

"You have bullet points for existence."

"At least I have direction."

"I have direction also."

"What?"

Dev pointed outside.

"Forward."

"That is not direction. That is geometry."

"Still useful."

Raghav leaned back.

"And what about money?"

"It comes. It goes."

"That is why it goes."

Dev shrugged.

“I am not careless with money.”

“You once invested in a restaurant because the owner made good chutney.”

“It was excellent chutney.”

“The restaurant closed in three months.”

“But the chutney memory remains.”

“Memories don’t compound.”

“Some do.”

Raghav paused.

Dev’s voice was lighter now, but his eyes were not.

“My mother still remembers the first mixer grinder my father bought. It was second-hand. He polished it like a new car. That memory has compounded for thirty years.”

Raghav softened.

“How is aunty?”

“Same. Complains about knee pain but climbs stairs faster than me when the neighbour brings mango pickle.”

“And uncle?”

“Still reading newspapers fully, including tender notices.”

“Why tender notices?”

“He says opportunity hides where people don’t read.”

Raghav smiled.

“Wise man.”

“Yes. But he never applied for anything.”

"That is your family problem."

"Maybe. We see opportunities and discuss them until they expire."

Raghav did not laugh this time.

Dev noticed.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"No. Say."

"I sometimes worry about you."

"I know."

"You are talented."

"Dangerous word."

"Why?"

"Because people use it when they want to say you have not achieved enough."

Raghav nodded slowly.

"That is true."

"They say, 'You are so talented, why are you wasting yourself?' Then they go home feeling they have helped society."

"I don't mean it that way."

"I know. That is why I still come late to meet you."

Raghav smiled.

"You should prepare more, Dev."

“You should trust more, Raghav.”

“I trust.”

“You verify and then trust.”

“That is better.”

“Sometimes. But not always. Some doors close while you are checking the hinges.”

Raghav looked at the café door.

Outside, clouds had gathered suddenly. The afternoon light had changed colour.

“It may rain,” he said.

Dev smiled.

“See? Weather entered the meeting.”

“I have an umbrella.”

“Of course you do.”

“You don’t?”

“I have optimism.”

“Optimism is not waterproof.”

“No, but it dries fast.”

Rain began slowly, then heavily. People outside ran for cover. Bikes stopped under trees. The fruit seller covered his cart with blue plastic. The schoolboy, now free from adult supervision, jumped into a puddle with the seriousness of an artist.

Dev watched him and laughed.

“That boy understands life.”

“He will spoil his shoes.”

“He will remember the puddle.”

“His mother will remember the shoes.”

“Both are valid.”

Raghav looked at Dev.

“That may be the whole problem.”

“What?”

“Everything is valid from one angle.”

Dev nodded.

“That is why we should not compare.”

“You say that because comparison is difficult for you.”

“No. I say that because comparison is lazy thinking.”

Raghav raised his eyebrows.

“Explain.”

Dev leaned forward.

“If I compare your success with my failure, I will miss your fear and my freedom. If you compare your discipline with my chaos, you will miss your anxiety and my luck. Comparison takes two incomplete pictures and declares one complete.”

Raghav stayed silent.

Dev continued.

“You and I are not running the same race. Actually, I am not sure I am running. Maybe I am walking. Maybe I stopped for tea. Maybe you already finished and came back to scold me. But why compare?”

Raghav smiled.

“Because society compares.”

“Society also honks in traffic when nobody can move. We don’t have to respect every habit.”

The rain strengthened.

Raghav’s phone buzzed again.

“Another reminder?” Dev asked.

“Yes.”

“What now?”

“Call insurance agent.”

Dev shook his head.

“In this rain, even your phone is practical.”

Raghav ignored him and looked at the message.

Then his face changed.

Dev noticed immediately.

“What happened?”

Raghav read silently.

“Say.”

“My interview got advanced.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

“Good.”

“I thought I had three more days.”

“You have tonight.”

“That is precisely the problem.”

Dev grinned.

“For you, yes.”

Raghav opened his notebook.

Dev watched him.

“There he is,” Dev said softly. “Soldier going to war.”

“It is an important role.”

“I know.”

“I need to look at the company numbers, leadership team, market position, recent news…,,”

“And sleep.”

“I will sleep.”

“You will prepare for sleep.”

Raghav did not respond.

Dev broke the last piece of cake and pushed it toward him.

“Eat.”

“I don’t want cake.”

“Eat. Tomorrow when they ask your greatest weakness, you can say chocolate pressure.”

Raghav smiled despite the tension.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” he asked.

“Nothing planned.”

“Obviously.”

“Maybe I’ll come with you.”

“Why?”

“To drink tea after you finish.”

“What if it goes badly?”

“Then stronger tea.”

“What if it goes well?”

“Then samosa also.”

Raghav closed the notebook again.

“You really have no ambition?”

Dev looked at him.

“I have ambition.”

“What?”

“To not become bitter.”

The rain softened.

For the first time that afternoon, Raghav had no immediate reply.

Dev looked outside, then back at his friend.

“You become successful, I will clap. I become successful, you will correct my spelling in the announcement. You fail, I will sit with you. I fail, you will make a recovery plan. This is enough.”

Raghav looked down at the table.

“You make life sound simple.”

“No. Life is not simple. But friendship can be.”

The waiter came with the bill.

Raghav reached for it.

Dev also reached.

Raghav looked surprised.

“You are paying?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I was late.”

“That sounds like accountability.”

“Don’t insult me. It is mood.”

Raghav let him pay.

Dev searched his pockets, found one card, two receipts, a movie ticket from six months ago, and finally some cash.

Raghav watched.

“Prepared?”

“Emotionally.”

The waiter took the money.

They stood near the entrance. The rain had almost stopped. The road was shining. The city looked briefly washed, as if it had received a second chance it had not asked for.

Raghav opened his umbrella.

Dev stepped beside him.

“Come,” Raghav said. “I’ll drop you.”

“No need. I’ll walk.”

“It is still drizzling.”

“I know.”

“You will get wet.”

“Only externally.”

Raghav sighed.

“Fine. At least take the umbrella.”

“Then what will you do?”

“I’ll manage.”

Dev smiled.

“See? You also know how to be unprepared.”

Raghav held out the umbrella anyway.

Dev did not take it.

They stood there, two men at the edge of rain, one holding protection, the other trusting distance.

Finally, Dev said, “Tomorrow, you win.”

Raghav said, “First, I prepare.”

Dev looked at the wet road and laughed.

“Same family. Different clothes.”

They walked out together.

Neither knew it then, but the difference between possibility and probability would occupy much of their lives.

And life, for the moment, was still favouring the man who prepared.

CHAPTER 2

The Interview

Raghav woke up before the alarm.

He looked at the ceiling for a few seconds.

Today was interview day.

Not just another interview.

One of those interviews that changes your life.

The house was quiet. His father had already collected the newspaper and left it folded on the dining table. His mother had kept hot water in a flask and a small plate of cut fruit beside it. Neither would admit to being nervous for him.

He sat up, folded his blanket neatly, drank a glass of water and opened the notebook that had become thicker over the years.

Today's page read:

Interview : 10:00 a.m.

Below it,

Documents ✓

Company annual report ✓

Leadership profiles ✓

Financial results ✓

Questions to ask ✓

Route checked ✓

Traffic buffer : 40 minutes ✓

Backup shirt ✓

Shoes polished ✓

Umbrella ✓

Pens : Two ✓

Car keys ✓

He smiled.

Preparation did not guarantee success.

But it allowed him to breathe.

At exactly 6:47 a.m., his phone rang.

Dev.

“You are awake?” Raghav answered.

“I haven’t slept.”

“You were nervous for me?”

“No.”

“Then?”

“I watched an old movie.”

“You watched a movie before my interview?”

“It ended at three.”

“And then?”

“I couldn’t sleep because I kept wondering whether the hero should have married the other girl.”

Raghav closed his eyes.

"You are unbelievable."

"I know."

"You remembered my interview?"

"I called, didn't I?"

"What do you want?"

"I'll come."

"There is no need."

"There is."

"Why?"

"We'll have tea."

"The interview is at ten."

"So?"

"I need to revise."

"I'll sit quietly."

"You?"

"Mostly."

Raghav laughed.

"Come if you want."

"I already left."

"You called after leaving?"

"I didn't know if you would say yes."

"So if I had said no?"

“I would have had breakfast alone.”

After an hour, Raghav checked the file twice and left.

At the gate, Dev was waiting.

Raghav stopped.

“You came?”

“I said I might.”

“At seven-thirty?”

“I have hidden depths.”

“You haven’t slept, have you?”

“I watched a movie.”

“Of course.”

They got into the car.

The city was still between two versions of itself. Tea stalls were crowded while large office buildings remained dark. Sweepers pushed yesterday’s dust into small piles. A few runners occupied the pavements before traffic reclaimed them.

Dev looked at the folder on Raghav’s lap.

“How many pages?”

“Enough.”

“That is not a number.”

“Thirty-two.”

Dev stared.

“You have thirty-two pages for a forty-minute conversation?”

“I won’t use all of them.”

“That is like carrying a parachute to cross the road.”

Raghav smiled.

Halfway to the office, traffic stopped.

A truck had broken down near an intersection.

Raghav checked the time.

8:42.

“We should have taken the flyover.”

“We should have been born in Switzerland,” Dev replied.

“Please.”

“Sorry.”

Raghav looked at the navigation.

Red.

Everywhere.

Dev looked outside.

A balloon seller stood between the vehicles.

A little girl insisted on buying one.

Her father refused.

She crossed her arms.

The balloon seller smiled, untied one balloon and simply handed it to her.

The father tried to pay.

The balloon seller shook his head.

“No.”

The traffic began moving again.

Dev kept looking back.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You are thinking."

"Yes."

"What?"

"That man probably earns less in a day than we spend on coffee."

"So?"

"He still gave away one balloon."

Raghav smiled.

"Generosity has poor accounting."

"And excellent returns."

They reached the office building at 9:14.

Forty-six minutes early.

Exactly as Raghav had planned.

"There."

He exhaled.

"I can relax now."

"You couldn't have relaxed earlier?"

"I relax after reducing uncertainty."

Dev laughed.

"I reduce uncertainty by accepting it."

The office had a glass façade. polished stone. security barriers. artificial plants in enormous pots. The kind of corporate lobby where everyone instinctively lowered their voice.

Dev looked around.

These places always smell like no one cooks here.

"What?"

"Nothing."

At reception, Raghav gave his name.

The receptionist checked her screen.

"Sir, the panel is delayed. Your interview will begin at eleven."

Raghav looked at the clock.

It was 9.22.

His heartbeat skipped.

"To when?"

"Eleven."

He looked at Dev.

Dev grinned.

"Congratulations."

"For what?"

"You have one extra hour to worry and your forty-minute buffer has multiplied."

Raghav frowned.

The delay bothered him more than the traffic.

Preparation had created readiness.

Waiting created helplessness.

They walked to a small tea stall opposite the office building.

The contrast was absurd. Inside the corporate lobby, everything reflected light. Here,

Plastic chairs.

Steel glasses.

Fresh ginger tea.

Office boys, drivers, junior executives and construction workers stood shoulder to shoulder.

Dev took the first sip.

"This tastes better than five-star coffee."

"It costs one-tenth."

"Exactly."

The old tea seller looked at them.

"You boys from interview?"

Raghav nodded.

The old man smiled.

"Don't worry."

"I am not worried."

"You are."

"How do you know?"

"You stirred the tea twelve times."

Dev almost spilled his tea laughing.

“Twelve?”

The tea seller nodded.

“The happy ones drink.”

“The worried ones stir.”

Dev looked at Raghav.

“You are becoming predictable.”

Raghav smiled reluctantly.

The old man continued.

“My son also prepares a lot.”

“Is that good?” Raghav asked.

“Very.”

“And?”

“He forgets that people also decide.”

For a moment, no one spoke.

Finally the old man said,

“Preparation opens the door.

People invite you inside.”

Dev looked at Raghav.

Raghav looked away.

Back at the office, candidates waited silently.

Some revised notes.

Some stared at their phones.

One walked up and down the corridor.

One kept repeating answers under his breath.

Dev watched everyone.

He whispered,

"Nobody looks happy."

"This isn't a picnic."

"I know."

"But imagine if companies interviewed laughter."

"You would become CEO."

"I'd reject the offer."

Finally…after sometime

"Mr. Raghav?" someone from HR called

Raghav stood.

Adjusted his tie.

Straightened his file.

Looked once at Dev.

Dev gave him a thumbs-up.

"No matter what happens…"

"What?"

"We'll eat samosas."

Raghav smiled.

"I'll be back."

"You always are."

At eleven-ten, the interview began.

Four people.

One HR leader.

Two business heads.

The CEO.

Raghav had expected questions about the role.

The CEO asked, "Tell me about the biggest professional mistake you have made."

Raghav had prepared the obvious answer.

He did not use it.

He spoke about a project he had pushed too hard. A team that had delivered but paid for it in fatigue. The manager resigned shortly afterward.

"What did you learn?" the CEO asked.

Raghav replied, "That delivering the result does not automatically mean I managed well."

The room became attentive.

The interview continued for nearly an hour.

Some questions he answered well.

One he could not.

"I don't know," he said.

The CEO smiled.

"Good."

Raghav smiled too.

When he stepped outside, Dev was sitting on a low wall speaking to a security guard.

Raghav walked over.

Dev stood up and asked,

“How was it?”

“I don’t know.”

“What does that mean?”

“I answered everything.”

“Good.”

“They asked something I hadn’t prepared.”

“And?”

“I admitted I didn’t know.”

Dev nodded.

“What happened?”

“They smiled.”

“See?”

“What?”

“You prepared enough to say ‘I don’t know.’”

Raghav stopped walking.

“I never thought of it that way.”

“The purpose of preparation isn’t to know everything.”

“It is?”

“To become comfortable with not knowing everything.”

Raghav looked at him.

“That may be the wisest thing you’ve said.”

"I hope not."

"Why?"

"I still have many years left."

The security guard they had spoken to earlier was now helping an elderly visitor locate another building. The man had been sent to three different entrances already.

Dev said, "You know what I noticed while you were inside?"

"What?"

"That guard knows more about how this building works than half the people who work in it."

Raghav smiled.

"You spent my interview studying the security guard?"

"I had no interview."

That evening, Raghav's mother asked only one question.

"Did you eat?"

His father asked another.

"Were you honest?"

Neither asked whether he would get the job.

Raghav noticed that.

For years afterward, he would remember it.

CHAPTER 3

Waiting

Waiting has its own weather

Three days passed.

Neither the company called.

Nor emailed.

Nor rejected.

Nor accepted.

Life had entered one of its favourite phases.

Waiting……

Dev called on the third morning.

"Still nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Excellent."

"Excellent?"

"If they had rejected you immediately, that would be bad."

"If they had selected me immediately, that would be good."

Dev laughed.

"You always imagine only two possibilities."

"There are only two."

"No."

“There are?”

“Sometimes life simply forgets.”

They met again.

Not at the café.

At the railway station.

Dev wanted to visit an old college friend in another city.

Raghav had work there the following day.

“So,” Dev said, looking at the electronic display board, “today we trust Indian Railways.”

Raghav looked at his ticket.

“Not exactly.”

“What do you mean?”

“I booked two months ago.”

“You booked before deciding to travel.”

“I decided before travelling.”

“I travelled before deciding.”

Raghav smiled.

“I know.”

They reached Platform Three.

The station smelled of steel, frying food and sweat. Families sat on luggage. Porters moved through crowds with impossible balance. A child slept across three chairs while his parents stood. A group of young people argued about seat numbers before the train had even arrived.

Raghav checked the display.

“Thirty-five minutes late.”

Dev sat.

“Good.”

“You find delay spiritually satisfying?”

“No. I find your reaction entertaining.”

A young boy approached selling notebooks and pens.

Dev bought a small pocket diary.

Raghav looked at him.

“You?”

“Yes.”

“You’ll never use it.”

“Then it can keep hoping.”

Meanwhile, the announcement echoed through the station.

Train delayed by another twenty minutes.

Dev stretched.

“I love stations.”

“Why?”

“Nobody belongs here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look around.”

A family eating breakfast on newspapers.

An old man sleeping on his suitcase.

Someone typing furiously.

A monk drinking tea.

A soldier talking softly to his daughter.

"A station," Dev continued, "reminds everyone that life is movement."

Raghav looked around.

"You notice strange things."

"I notice available things."

"Can I ask you something?" Dev said.

"You usually do."

"Why do you want this job so much?"

Raghav took his time.

"Security."

"For whom?"

"My parents."

"And after that?"

"Freedom."

"What kind?"

"The kind where I don't calculate every purchase."

Dev nodded.

"My father calculates mangoes."

"What?"

"If mangoes are expensive, he buys guavas."

"So?"

"I asked him once why."

“What did he say?”

“‘Taste changes. Debt remains.’”

Raghav smiled.

“Wise.”

“He never went to business school.”

“Some people don’t need to.”

A porter walked past carrying luggage taller than himself.

Dev watched him.

“See him?”

“Yes.”

“How many dreams do you think he’s carrying?”

Raghav looked puzzled.

“I mean the bags.”

“Each belongs to someone.”

“Inside each bag…”

“Different life.”

“Exactly.”

The porter disappeared into the crowd.

Dev continued.

“We think our problems are unique.”

“Maybe.”

“But railway stations disagree.”

Silence.

Comfortable silence.

The kind earned after years.

Finally Raghav spoke.

"I envy you sometimes."

Dev almost dropped his tea.

"What?"

"I said…"

"I heard."

"You?"

"Yes."

"What exactly?"

"You don't carry pressure the way I do."

"Dev's usual quick reply didn't come."

"You know why?"

"Why?"

"Because I carry uncertainty instead."

Raghav looked at him.

"I don't understand."

"You know what your next five years roughly look like."

"Hopefully."

"I don't."

"Doesn't that scare you?"

"Every day."

“You never show it.”

“You never show yours.”

They both laughed.

The train arrived fifty minutes late.

People who had waited calmly for nearly an hour immediately began pushing.

Dev looked at the crowd.

“Wonderful.”

“What?”

“We become impatient exactly when waiting is about to end.”

Inside, they found their seats.

An elderly man sat opposite them reading a book.

For the first hour, they barely spoke.

Dev asked

“What are you reading, sir?”

The gentleman showed the cover.

It was a collection of essays.

“Finished?” Dev asked.

“No.”

“Then why close it?”

The old man smiled.

“Books also need silence.”

Neither Raghav nor Dev spoke.

The train had just started moving.

Outside…

The city thinned into industrial outskirts, then open land. Concrete walls gave way to fields. Mobile towers stood where trees once had. Small stations appeared for less than a minute and disappeared.

Slowly, noise became rhythm.

Raghav checked his phone repeatedly.

Still nothing.

After several minutes…

The old man asked,

"Friends?"

"For more than thirteen years," Dev answered.

"You still travel together?"

"Whenever possible."

The old man nodded with quiet satisfaction.

"Rare."

Raghav asked,

"You travel alone?"

"My wife died seven years ago."

"I'm sorry."

The old man smiled gently.

"So was I."

Silence settled again.

Then he continued.

"We travelled together for forty-three years."

"What was the secret?" Dev asked.

"There wasn't one."

"There must have been."

"There wasn't."

"Then how?"

"We argued."

Both laughed.

"So does everyone."

"We apologised."

"Everyone says sorry."

"We forgave."

The compartment became still.

The old man looked out of the window.

"Marriage survives because memory is short."

Dev laughed loudly.

"I'm writing that."

He opened the tiny diary bought at the station.

Its first sentence became:

Marriage survives because memory is short.

A little later, the elderly man closed his book.

Dev asked, "Finished?"

"No."

"Then why stop?"

The man looked at him.

"Sometimes reading too much reduces what you remember."

Dev smiled.

Raghav did not.

He was still thinking about the interview.

After sometime …

The conversation returned.

This time…

To luck.

Dev looked outside.

"Tell me honestly."

"What?"

"Do you believe luck exists?"

Raghav thought.

"Yes."

"And?"

"I don't trust it."

"Why?"

"It doesn't sign contracts."

Dev nodded.

"I like that."

"What about you?"

"I think luck is like rain."

"Meaning?"

"It falls."

"On everyone?"

"Eventually."

"But not equally."

"No."

"Then?"

"You can't order it."

Raghav looked through the window.

Green fields blurred into one another.

"So what do we do?"

Dev smiled.

"Carry an umbrella."

Raghav laughed.

"I knew you'd finally admit preparation matters."

Dev shook his head.

"No."

"What then?"

"And if you forget the umbrella…"

He stretched out his hand beyond the open window.

"…learn to enjoy getting wet."

For a moment…

Neither spoke.

The train continued forward.

So did the conversation.

So did life.

Neither knew that before this journey ended…

A phone call would arrive.

One that would begin changing both their lives.

At the next station, a family boarded carrying too much luggage.

Raghav got up immediately and helped shift bags into the rack.

Dev helped a child find his seat.

Within ten minutes, the compartment had reorganised itself.

The elderly man watched them.

"One of you plans."

Raghav smiled.

"And the other?"

The man looked at Dev.

"One of you notices."

Dev laughed.

"Which is better?"

The man reopened his book.

"For what?"

No one answered.

The sound of metal against metal continued.

Fields passing like unfinished paintings.

Occasional stations appearing and disappearing before anyone could remember their names.

Dev had fallen into one of his favourite activities.

Watching strangers.

Raghav had fallen into one of his.

Reading the same email for the sixth time.

"You know," Dev said without looking at him, "if you read it again, they might change the words."

"They might have sent another one."

"They haven't."

"You don't know."

"I know."

"How?"

"Your face still looks worried."

Before Raghav could reply…

His phone vibrated.

Both men looked down simultaneously.

An unknown number.

For a moment, there was silence. The phone rang again.

Dev pushed it gently towards him.

"Answer."

Raghav inhaled deeply.

“Hello…”

A polite voice introduced herself.

She was calling from the company.

Raghav listened.

He spoke only four words.

“Yes.”

“I understand.”

“Certainly.”

“Thank you.”

The call ended.

Dev didn’t ask immediately.

He waited.

Friendship had taught him something important.

Good news can wait.

Bad news deserves silence first.

“Well?” Raghav looked out of the window.

“I got it.”

Dev smiled.

Just the smile of a man who felt as if something good had happened to his own family.

“I knew.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“I did.”

“No.”

“I hoped.”

“That’s different.”

“It usually is.”

They shook hands.

Then, almost at the same time, both laughed.

“Imagine,” Dev said, “twenty years of education…”

“…and the most important conversation happens over one phone call.”

Raghav nodded.

“It feels strange.”

“What does?”

“I prepared for months.”

“And?”

“The result came in thirty-eight seconds.”

Dev leaned back.

“Life compresses effort into moments.”

The elderly gentleman across from them looked up from his book.

“Good news?”

Raghav nodded.

“I got selected.”

The old man folded his hands gently.

“Congratulations.”

"Thank you."

Then he smiled.

"Now begins the difficult part."

Both friends looked at him.

"The difficult part?"

"Keeping the job."

Dev laughed.

"You sound like my school principal."

"I was."

"Were you?"

"For thirty-two years."

Dev clapped softly.

"I should have guessed."

"Why?"

"You congratulate people by increasing their homework."

The old man laughed.

"Experience does that."

Raghav's phone rang again.

This time…

His mother.

He answered.

"Amma."

Dev pretended to look outside.

He never listened deliberately when families spoke.

But some words escaped.

"…Yes."

"…It went well."

"…Yes."

"…No, don't tell everyone yet."

A pause.

Then Raghav smiled in a way Dev had never seen before.

The smile of a son.

Not an employee.

Not an achiever.

Just a son.

When the call ended…

Dev asked,

"Happy?"

Raghav nodded.

"She cried."

"Of course."

"I only got a job."

"No."

"What?"

"You gave her relief."

After a while Dev said,

"You know what's funny?"

"What?"

"When parents say they're proud…"

"They're actually saying…"

"'We can sleep a little better tonight.'"

Raghav looked down.

"I've never thought of it that way."

"Parents rarely celebrate success."

"They celebrate reduced worry."

A little later…

Dev's phone rang.

He answered casually.

"Amma."

His conversation lasted less than a minute.

"No."

"I'm on the train."

"Yes."

"I'll eat."

"Okay."

He disconnected.

Raghav smiled.

"That's all?"

"What more?"

“You didn’t tell her where you are.”

“She knows.”

“You didn’t tell her when you’ll reach.”

“She’ll ask later.”

“You didn’t tell her anything.”

“I told her enough.”

Raghav shook his head.

Lunch arrived.

The pantry staff placed identical trays before everyone.

Rice.

Dal.

Vegetables.

Curd.

Dev looked around.

“I love train food.”

“You are the only person who says that.”

“Because expectations are low.”

“And?”

“Happiness likes low expectations.”

Raghav wrote the sentence into his notebook.

Dev noticed.

“You’re stealing again.”

“I’m preserving.”

The train slowed near a river.

Children jumped into the water from a small bridge.

They shouted.

Splashed.

Laughed.

Not one of them cared whether the jump looked graceful.

Dev watched them disappear into the river.

"You know…"

"What?"

"We stop playing long before we stop growing old."

Raghav answered without taking his eyes off the children.

"No."

"What?"

"We stop allowing ourselves to look foolish."

Dev turned towards him.

"That's one of your best."

"I've been thinking about it."

The elderly principal joined again.

"When I was teaching…"

"Yes?" Dev asked.

"The brightest students were not always the happiest."

"The happiest?"

"They were usually somewhere in the middle."

"Why?"

"They knew enough to work."

"And?"

"They didn't know enough to become arrogant."

Dev smiled.

"Middle is underrated."

The old man nodded.

"So is ordinary."

The train entered a tunnel.

For a few seconds…

Everything became dark.

Only reflections remained on the glass.

Both friends could see themselves.

Not the world outside.

Dev smiled.

"Interesting."

"What?"

"When life becomes dark…"

"We see ourselves."

Raghav looked at the reflection.

"And when it becomes bright?"

"We become busy looking outside again."

A short pause followed.

The train emerged into sunlight.

The reflections disappeared immediately.

Evening approached.

The old man gathered his belongings.

His station had arrived.

Before getting down, he looked at both friends.

"May I give you one piece of advice?"

Dev laughed.

"You've already given us at least fourteen."

The old man smiled.

"One more won't hurt."

He looked first at Raghav.

"Never believe your success belongs only to you."

Then he turned to Dev.

"Never believe your failures belong only to you."

Both listened.

The old man continued.

"Families… teachers… strangers… timing… health… accidents… opportunities… every life is a group project pretending to be an individual achievement."

The train stopped.

He stepped down slowly.

Neither friend moved.

They watched him disappear into the crowd.

Finally Dev spoke.

"I wish railway tickets included conversations like him."

Raghav nodded.

"They're more valuable than the journey."

Night settled outside.

Lights from distant villages appeared like scattered thoughts.

Raghav closed his notebook.

"So…"

"So?"

"I got the job."

"Yes."

"What should we do?"

Dev smiled.

"The same thing we decided three days ago."

"Samosa?"

"Samosa."

"And tea?"

"Always."

The train continued into the night.

One friend carried an appointment letter.

The other carried an empty diary with only three sentences written in it.

Neither knew which notebook would change more lives.

CHAPTER 4

What Success Looks Like From Home

Next day, Raghav's mother made sweets for people he had never met.

By six in the evening, three neighbours knew about his new job. By eight, seven relatives had called. By nine-thirty, an uncle who had not spoken to Raghav in eight months had explained why the position was "only the beginning."

Dev arrived just before dinner.

The colony had changed little in twenty years. Two new apartment blocks had appeared at the far end, but the old houses remained stubbornly individual. Children still played cricket in the lane. Bikes were parked at impossible angles. Someone was frying onions nearby. A pressure cooker whistled from an upstairs kitchen.

Raghav's father sat on the verandah.

"Congratulations," Dev said.

His father smiled.

"To me?"

"You managed him."

"That remains unfinished work."

Dev laughed and went inside.

Raghav was on the phone.

“Yes, uncle.”

“No, uncle.”

“Yes.”

“No, I haven’t joined yet.”

Dev sat at the dining table.

Raghav’s mother placed a plate before him.

“Eat.”

“I came to congratulate him.”

“First eat.”

“See, this is why I visit.”

Raghav finally ended the call.

“People are behaving as if I became prime minister.”

Dev looked around.

“You underestimate family ambition.”

Raghav sat beside him.

“What did your parents say when you told them?”

“About what?”

“Your last job.”

“My mother asked if the office was far.”

“And your father?”

“He asked whether they pay on time.”

Raghav laughed.

His father joined them.

"Those are important questions."

Dev nodded.

"Exactly."

The evening moved between food and conversation.

Raghav's mother spoke about relatives.

His father spoke about work.

Dev spoke about a mechanic in his lane who could diagnose a bike problem by sound alone.

Raghav asked, "How do you even know him?"

"My bike stopped."

"Of course."

Later, when the parents had gone inside, Raghav and Dev remained in the verandah.

The colony had become quiet. The cricket game had ended. A dog slept under a parked car. Somewhere, a television serial was loud enough for the entire street.

Dev said, "You're happy."

"Yes."

"You look relieved."

"Maybe."

"That's different."

Raghav thought about it.

"You know what my mother said?"

“What?”

“She said, ‘Now I can stop worrying a little.’”

Dev nodded.

“That is success at home.”

Raghav looked at him.

“What?”

“Outside, promotion means title.”

“And at home?”

“Reduced worry.”

The next morning, Raghav woke early and found his father in the kitchen making tea.

“You’re up?”

“I always am.”

Raghav sat.

His father handed him a cup.

“Your mother is proud.”

“And you?”

“I’m relieved.”

Raghav smiled.

“Dev said the same thing.”

His father looked toward the window.

“Success is useful when it reduces somebody’s worry.”

He kept thinking about it.

CHAPTER 5

First day

You ironed your socks?"

Dev held them up between two fingers as if they were museum exhibits.

Raghav looked up.

"I ironed the trousers."

"The socks are ironed too."

"They happened to be underneath."

"They look happier than me."

"You came here at six-thirty in the morning just to inspect my socks?"

"I came to wish you."

"You could have called."

"I don't trust congratulations over the phone."

Raghav smiled.

"You trust nothing."

"I trust breakfast."

Raghav's apartment looked unusually neat.

His mother had arranged everything

Every shirt hung perfectly.

Every button had been checked.

His lunchbox waited on the dining table.

His father sat reading the newspaper, trying to hide his emotions.

Dev greeted them.

"Aunty."

"Come, have breakfast."

"I already ate."

His stomach growled loudly.

Raghav looked at him.

"That was your conscience."

"It was my second breakfast asking for company."

His mother laughed.

"You'll never change."

"I hope not."

She placed hot dosas before him anyway.

Raghav's father folded the newspaper.

"First day."

Raghav nodded.

"No need to prove yourself today."

"I know."

"Listen more."

"I know."

"Write things down."

“I know.”

Dev interrupted.

“Uncle…”

“Yes?”

“He already knows.”

His father smiled.

“I know.”

Everyone laughed.

While eating, Dev asked,

“Uncle, what advice did your father give you on your first job?”

The old man thought for a moment.

“He said…”

He looked at Raghav.

“‘The company is paying for your work, not your opinions.’”

Dev almost choked on his dosa.

“That’s brilliant.”

Raghav nodded.

“He still says that.”

His father smiled.

“I’ve become slightly kinder.”

They drove to the office without much conversation.

Some silences are crowded with thoughts.

Dev finally broke it.

“Nervous?”

“A little.”

“Good.”

“Good?”

“If you stop being nervous before important things…”

“…?”

“…either you’ve stopped caring or you’ve stopped growing.”

Raghav looked at him.

“I should start writing your lines.”

“You already do.”

The office building looked the same, but Raghav saw it differently today.

The same glass doors.

The same security guard.

The same reception.

Only now…

He belonged.

The security guard recognised him.

“Congratulations, sir.”

Raghav smiled.

The man remembered.

A week ago he had entered as a candidate.

Today he entered as an employee.

Small recognitions mattered.

Dev stopped near the entrance.

"I'll leave."

"Come inside."

"No."

"Why?"

"This is your beginning."

"And?"

"I don't want to accidentally become your habit."

Raghav frowned.

"What does that mean?"

"You should make your own friends here."

"We'll still meet."

"Of course."

"But not every evening."

"Why not?"

"Because life expands."

Raghav didn't answer.

He knew Dev was right.

Just before leaving, Dev said,

"One request."

"What?"

"When you become very important…"

"I won't."

"When you think you're very important…"

"I still won't."

"…remember this morning."

"The socks?"

"The socks."

Inside…

The induction session began.

Twenty-three new employees.

Twenty-three new ambitions.

Twenty-three different definitions of success.

The HR manager welcomed everyone.

Then she asked,

"Please introduce yourselves."

One by one they stood.

Degrees.

Universities.

Experience.

Achievements.

Awards.

Languages.

When Raghav's turn came…

He stood.

“My name is Raghav.”

A pause.

“I like solving problems.”

He sat down.

Nothing more.

The HR manager smiled.

“Short.”

Raghav nodded.

“I hope my work becomes the longer introduction.”

Several heads turned. The sincerity of his words caught their attention.

During lunch…

Groups formed automatically.

People from the same cities.

Same colleges.

Same languages.

Human beings organise themselves remarkably fast.

Raghav sat without speaking.

A young engineer asked,

“Which college?”

He answered.

Another asked,

“CTC?”

Raghav smiled politely.

“I haven’t earned it yet.”

The table laughed.

Someone else asked,

“Five-year plan?”

Raghav almost answered.

Then he remembered Dev.

Forward.

He smiled.

“To become useful.”

No one at the table spoke.

One woman nodded gently.

“That’s a good answer.”

He wasn’t sure.

But it felt true.

At exactly two ‘o’clock…

Dev called.

“Alive?”

“Yes.”

“Bored?”

“Not yet.”

“Made friends?”

“Working on it.”

“Told them about your sock discipline?”

"No."

"Missed opportunity."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm in a park."

"Why?"

"I met an old man playing chess."

"And?"

"I'm losing."

"You don't even know him."

"I know."

"Why are you playing?"

"He asked."

"You said yes?"

"I had no reason to say no."

Raghav laughed.

"How many moves?"

"Enough to realise experience has excellent memory."

"What's his profession?"

"I don't know."

"You didn't ask?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I wanted to know his thinking before his résumé."

Raghav stopped speaking.

He kept thinking about those words.

The afternoon passed quickly.

New systems.

New passwords.

New faces.

New responsibilities.

Everything demanded attention.

Before leaving…

His manager stopped him.

"Good first day."

"Thank you."

"You asked good questions."

"I prepared."

The manager smiled.

"I noticed."

Then he added,

"But remember something."

"Yes?"

"The people who grow fastest here…"

"…?"

"…are not the ones who know the most."

"They are?"

"The ones who learn the fastest."

Raghav nodded.

Preparation had opened the door.

Learning would have to keep it open.

That evening….

The café.

Their café.

Dev was already there.

He had a small bruise on his forehead.

Raghav stared.

"What happened?"

"Chess."

"The old man hit you?"

"No."

"I walked into a pole while replaying the game in my head."

Raghav burst into laughter.

"You laugh too much."

"No."

"You deserve it."

They ordered coffee.

Automatically.

Neither looked at the menu.

After years…

Some decisions become friendships.

"So?"

Dev asked.

"So…"

"How was your first day?"

Raghav looked at the steam rising from the coffee.

"It wasn't what I expected."

"Worse?"

"No."

"Better?"

"No."

"Then?"

"It was… ordinary."

Dev smiled.

"The biggest days usually are."

"I thought I'd feel different."

"You do."

"I do?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"You noticed."

"Noticed what?"

"You didn't tell me what happened."

"What do you mean?"

"You told me who smiled."

"Who helped."

"Who asked questions."

"Who made you think."

"You didn't mention the building."

"The salary."

"The title."

"You came home with people."

Not achievements.

People.

Raghav hasn't realised it.

Dev took the last sip of coffee.

"You know…"

"What?"

"I think careers are built by skills."

"And?"

"Lives are built by conversations."

Raghav opened his notebook.

Dev laughed.

"I knew it."

"You want me to write it?"

"No."

"Why?"

"One day…"

"When?"

"You'll remember it without the notebook."

Raghav closed it.

For the first time…

He didn't write.

Outside, the evening traffic had begun.

Inside, two friends sat without speaking.

The silence was different now.

One had entered a structured world.

The other still wandered freely through an unstructured one.

Neither envied the other.

Not yet.

Both believed they had chosen their own roads.

Neither realised that life had already begun preparing a third road…One that neither had planned.

…

Later that week, Dev missed an opportunity he had been discussing for months.

He had delayed the application until the position closed.

He told Raghav casually.

Raghav stared at him.

"You forgot?"

"No."

"Then?"

"I kept thinking."

"You wanted it."

"I think I did."

"Dev."

"I know."

There was no defence.

No joke.

Dev looked down.

"This one hurts."

Raghav softened.

"Good."

Dev looked up.

"Good?"

"Maybe pain will make you remember."

Dev smiled faintly.

"Very compassionate."

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

A few weeks later, they met again at the same coffee shop.

Dev looked at Raghav for a moment.

“You’ve changed,” he said.

“So have you.”

“You first.”

“You look more relaxed.”

“That worries me.”

“Why?”

“I’m not used to it.”

Raghav smiled. “And you look more serious.”

Dev touched his face. “That worries me even more.”

“Why?”

“Seriousness doesn’t suit me.”

Raghav laughed.

Dev leaned back. “See? At least I’m still useful.”

Coffee arrived.

Both instinctively waited until the waiter left.

Some conversations deserved privacy.

“So,” Dev asked, “Mr. Senior Manager.”

Raghav shook his head.

“Please don’t.”

“You became one.”

“That’s my designation.”

"Exactly."

"It isn't me."

Dev nodded.

"Good."

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

"What are you doing this month?"

"This month?"

"That itself is my answer."

Dev laughed.

Sometimes laughter is the best response to life's absurdity.

"Do you regret it?". Leaving the previous jobs." Raghav asked

Dev stirred his coffee slowly.

"I regret only one thing."

"What?"

"I sometimes mistake excitement for purpose."

Raghav didn't interrupt.

"When something is new…"

Dev continued,

"…I become convinced it's my calling."

"And later?"

"I discover it was only my curiosity."

Silence.

Then Raghav spoke softly.

"Curiosity starts journeys."

"Yes."

"But discipline finishes them."

Dev looked at him.

"That sounded like a quote."

"It sounded like you."

Outside…

Rain began.

Not heavy.

Just enough to remind the city that clouds still had work to do.

Dev smiled.

"There it is."

"What?"

"Our weather."

Raghav laughed.

"Rain always comes when we disagree."

"No."

"When we understand."

A young couple occupied the next table.

They spent fifteen minutes taking photographs.

Neither touched the coffee.

Dev watched them.

“What are you thinking?”

Raghav asked.

“I wonder…”

“What?”

“…whether they are creating memories…”

“…or evidence.”

Raghav burst into laughter.

“You’ve become dangerous.”

“I’ve become older.”

For the first time, their philosophies had produced visible consequences within the same week.

One man’s preparation had lifted him.

The other man’s delay had cost him.

People around them noticed.

Raghav’s father, hearing about Dev’s missed opportunity, said to his wife that night:

“That boy has everything except timing.”

It was not criticism.

It was concern.

And somewhere beyond that colony, timing was already preparing to change sides.

CHAPTER 6

Different Directions

When they were thirty-two, marriage proposals still arrived with optimism.

Parents spoke carefully.

Relatives spoke freely.

One evening, Raghav's mother said:

"There is a girl."

Dev happened to be eating at their house.

He immediately looked around.

"Where?"

Raghav glared at him.

His mother laughed.

"Proposal."

"Oh."

Dev returned to his food.

Raghav said, "Not now."

"Why?" his mother asked.

"This role is important."

His father looked over the newspaper.

"Will marriage stop the role?"

"No."

"Then?"

"I want to settle first."

Dev whispered:

"Dangerous word."

Raghav kicked him under the table.

Six months into his new job, Raghav had become the person people called when something went wrong.

He liked that.

Problems had edges.

You could define them, break them down, assign people, set dates and measure progress.

People were harder.

The office occupied seven floors of a glass building overlooking a flyover. From Raghav's cabin, traffic looked organised. Tiny cars moved in lines. From the road below, it was chaos.

Perspective did that.

One Monday morning his manager walked in.

"There's an internal position opening."

Raghav looked up.

"Which one?"

"Strategy."

Raghav knew about it.

Of course he did.

He had already read the job description.

“What do you think?”

“I’m interested.”

“Apply.”

That evening he called Dev.

“I’m applying for another role.”

“You just got this one.”

“Six months ago.”

“That is ‘just’ in friendship years.”

“It’s a bigger responsibility.”

“More money?”

“Yes.”

“More work?”

“Yes.”

“More tension?”

“Probably.”

Dev thought.

“Excellent package.”

Raghav laughed.

“What are you doing tomorrow?”

“Apply for a job”

Raghav stopped.

“You?”

"Yes."

"Which company?"

"Some education company."

"Some education company?"

"I forgot the name."

"Dev!"

"I have the email."

"Have you read about them?"

"A little."

"How little?"

"I know they are in education."

"That is in the name."

"See? Preparation has begun."

The next evening they met in a public park.

Raghav carried a folder.

Dev carried peanuts.

"Give me your résumé."

"Why?"

"I'll look at it."

Dev handed him a folded sheet from his pocket.

Raghav opened it.

"You folded your résumé?"

"It fits better."

“There is a spelling mistake.”

“Where?”

“Your own designation.”

“That explains why nobody calls.”

Raghav stared at him.

Then Dev started laughing.

Raghav tried to remain annoyed.

He failed.

For an hour, they worked.

Raghav corrected.

Dev protested.

Raghav structured answers.

Dev destroyed them.

“Tell me about yourself,” Raghav said.

“Myself already knows.”

“Dev.”

“Fine.”

“Why should we hire you?”

“You shouldn’t unless you need me.”

Raghav lowered the paper.

“That is actually good.”

“Of course.”

“But don’t say it exactly like that.”

“Then it will become yours.”

The interview came.

Dev walked in without the folder.

He had left it in the auto.

He returned forty minutes later.

“How did it go?” Raghav asked over phone

“Beautifully.”

“You got it?”

“No.”

“What was beautiful?”

“The conversation.”

Raghav closed his eyes.

A week later, Raghav got his promotion to the new role

Dev got a rejection email.

Dev called him first.

“Congratulations.”

“How did you know?”

“You told me they were deciding today.”

“And yours?”

“Rejected.”

There was a pause.

Raghav said, “I’m sorry.”

“Why? You didn’t interview me.”

“You wanted it.”

“Yes.”

“Are you okay?”

“Ask me after dinner.”

That evening Dev ate with his parents.

His father listened to the story.

“You went without even knowing enough about the organisation?”

“I knew some things.”

His mother interrupted.

“He forgot the file.”

His father looked at him.

“Dev, being natural is good.”

Dev waited.

“Being careless is not a philosophy.”

Dev did not answer.

That sentence followed him into his room.

For once, he had no clever line for it.

Meera

Raghav's younger sister, Meera, was one of the few people who could insult him without preparation.

She called one Sunday morning.

"Where are you?"

"Home."

"Doing?"

"Planning the week."

"Of course."

"What do you want?"

"Nothing. I wanted to check whether you schedule breathing."

"I do not."

"Progress."

She was married and lived in another city, but called often enough to remain an active commentator on Raghav's life.

Whenever Raghav became too serious, she called Dev.

"Please repair my brother."

Dev once replied:

"Warranty expired."

She said:

"You are the manufacturing defect."

They became allies immediately.

At a family lunch, Meera told Dev:

"He was like this even in school."

Raghav protested.

"I was organised."

"You labelled your pencil box."

"Everybody did."

"You labelled the eraser."

Dev looked at Raghav with admiration.

"The origin story."

Meera continued:

"He used to keep old question papers by subject."

"That is useful."

"He was nine."

Dev placed a hand over his heart.

"Respect."

Raghav looked at both of them.

"I regret introducing you."

Meera smiled.

"You didn't."

"Then?"

"Dev found me."

Dev nodded.

“Natural networking.”

Meera also understood Raghav in ways others did not.

When his career later began collapsing, she did not say, “Everything happens for a reason.”

She said:

“You’ve spent years being useful to everyone.”

Raghav waited.

“Now learn how to remain valuable when nobody is asking.”

He remembered that.

CHAPTER 7

The Better Chair

Work did not always go to the person whose job it was. It went to the person who would finish it.

At first, this pleased him.

If a presentation was stuck, someone called Raghav.

If a client note was late, someone called Raghav.

If a review needed rescuing, someone called Raghav.

He became reliable.

Then reliable became available.

Then available became overloaded.

One afternoon, he walked past the recreation room and saw three colleagues playing table tennis.

One of them waved.

“Raghav! Come.”

“I have a review.”

“Again?”

“Yes.”

The man laughed.

“You work too much.”

Raghav smiled.

"I know."

Later that evening, Dev called.

"What are you doing?"

"Finishing someone else's report."

"Why?"

"Because it has to go tomorrow."

"Whose report?"

Raghav told him.

"And where is he?"

"Probably gone."

Dev was silent for two seconds.

Then said:

"Interesting business model."

"What?"

"He develops work-life balance. You develop his work."

Raghav laughed.

But Dev continued.

"You know what happens to competent people?"

"What?"

"People reward them with more competence-testing opportunities."

"That is called trust."

"Sometimes."

"And sometimes?"

“Poor resource planning wearing perfume.”

Raghav smiled.

He had seen another kind too.

People who worked hard.

People who appeared to work hard.

And people who spent considerable energy ensuring senior management noticed that they worked hard.

One colleague sent emails at 11:47 p.m.

Raghav once discovered that colleague had drafted them at six and scheduled them.

Dev admired him enormously.

“That man is not working late.”

“What is he doing?”

“Brand management.”

“Of himself?”

“Best-performing product in the company.”

That was one of Raghav’s first lessons in organisational unfairness.

Contribution and visibility were related.

But they were not twins.

———

Raghav’s new cabin had a better chair.

Dev noticed immediately.

“So this is promotion?”

"What?"

"Lumbar support."

"Sit."

Dev sat.

"Very good. I now understand ambition."

The office after hours had a different personality. Most lights were off. Cleaning staff moved between cubicles. Through the windows, the flyover had become a stream of red tail-lights.

Raghav was still working.

Dev had come to pick him up for dinner.

"Ten minutes."

"You said that twenty minutes ago."

"I need to finish this."

"Why?"

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow will come even if you don't."

"That attitude explains your career."

Dev smiled.

"Your insults are becoming executive."

Raghav finished the document.

They went downstairs.

Near the lift, a junior employee was sitting alone.

Raghav stopped.

“Everything okay?”

“Yes, sir.”

He clearly wasn’t.

Raghav waited.

Finally the young man said, “My presentation went badly.”

“So?”

“My manager shouted.”

“In front of everyone?”

He nodded.

Raghav sat beside him.

Dev remained standing at a distance.

Ten minutes later, the young man looked better.

Outside, Dev said, “That was good.”

“What?”

“You didn’t solve it.”

“There was nothing to solve tonight.”

“You’re becoming dangerous.”

“How?”

“You’re learning people.”

Raghav smiled.

“And you?”

“Still studying myself. Very complicated organisation.”

They walked toward the car.

Across the road, a large billboard advertised luxury apartments:

YOU HAVE ARRIVED.

Dev pointed.

"How do they know?"

"What?"

"That I have arrived."

"You haven't. Those apartments start at four crores."

"So arrival is location-dependent."

Raghav laughed.

Dev looked again at the billboard.

"Imagine spending your entire life trying to arrive somewhere and then discovering there is another billboard."

Raghav didn't say anything.

He kept thinking about Dev's words.

Dev had that irritating gift.

He could arrive unprepared and leave behind something worth remembering.

CHAPTER 8

The Plot, the Bike and the Missed Train

The idea began in Raghav's office.

Someone had heard about a new layout on the outskirts of the city.

"Good location."

"Upcoming area."

"Ring road is coming."

"Prices will double."

Nobody knew exactly when the ring road was coming, but everyone spoke about it as if they had personally approved the tender.

Within a week, six people had decided to visit.

Raghav called Dev.

"We're going to see some plots on Saturday."

"Why?"

"To buy."

"I understood that part. Why?"

"Investment."

"Ah."

"What does 'ah' mean?"

"It means conversation is becoming serious."

"You should come."

"I don't want land."

"You haven't seen it."

"I have seen land before."

"Dev."

"Fine. I'll come."

Saturday morning, two cars left the city.

The layout was nearly forty kilometres outside the city.

There were white stones marking plots.

A temporary sales office.

A large banner showing trees that had not yet been planted, roads that had not yet been built and children cycling through a neighbourhood that currently contained two cows and three goats

The salesman spoke enthusiastically.

"Sir, this entire belt will develop."

Raghav asked questions.

Approvals?

Clear title?

Road width?

Water?

Registration?

Development timeline?

The salesman answered.

Raghav took notes.

Two colleagues walked around calculating appreciation.

Another was already calling his wife.

Dev stood beneath a tree.

The salesman approached him.

“Sir, which plot size are you looking for?”

“None.”

The man gave him a polite smile.

“Just see, sir. No obligation.”

“I am seeing.”

“Very good investment.”

“Maybe.”

“Land never decreases, sir.”

Dev looked at the ground.

“It has been here for several million years. Very stable performance.”

The salesman laughed uncertainly.

Raghav walked over.

“Come. Plot 47 is good.”

“Why?”

“Corner plot.”

“So?”

"More frontage."

"I don't need frontage."

"You don't need anything because you haven't thought about your future."

Dev looked around.

Rows of stones divided the earth into rectangles.

"Who owns that?"

He pointed beyond the layout.

"Some farmer," Raghav said.

"And this?"

"The developer bought it."

"And before the farmer?"

"What?"

"Who owned it?"

Raghav looked at him.

"Where are you going with this?"

Dev smiled.

"I find land ownership philosophically ambitious."

"Oh God."

"We arrive seventy years into our lives, put four stones around a piece of a planet that is 4.5 billion years old and say, 'Mine.'"

One colleague laughed.

"Tell that philosophy to the registration office."

Dev nodded.

"Exactly. Philosophy has poor documentation."

Raghav smiled.

"Land doesn't need to belong to you emotionally. It can belong to you legally."

"That is even less romantic."

"It is an investment."

"I know."

"And a good one."

"Probably."

"Then let's buy."

Dev shook his head.

"No."

"Why?"

"I don't want my money sitting here waiting for the city."

"Then what will you do with it?"

Dev smiled.

"I have an idea."

Raghav immediately became suspicious.

"That sentence has damaged you before."

By that evening, four of them had booked plots.

Raghav booked one too.

Dev congratulated everyone sincerely.

There was no argument.

No lecture.

No attempt to prove that he was different.

On the way back, Raghav asked him.

"Sure you don't want to reconsider?"

"Very."

"You have enough for the down payment."

"I know."

"This could become three times the value in ten years."

"Wonderful."

"You'll regret it."

"Possible."

"What are you buying instead?"

There was a pause.

"A bike."

Raghav nearly missed a gear.

"You are taking money that could become an appreciating asset and buying a depreciating asset?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because the appreciating asset will stand there."

"And?"

"The depreciating asset will take me somewhere."

Raghav was silent.

Dev added:

“Your money will grow.”

“Yes.”

“Mine will travel.”

“That is the stupidest financial argument I have heard.”

“Financially, yes.”

Two weeks later, Dev arrived outside Raghav’s office on the new motorcycle.

He took off his helmet like a movie hero.

Raghav came downstairs.

He walked around the bike.

“How much?”

Dev told him.

Raghav closed his eyes.

“You actually did it.”

“Yes.”

“You could have paid the plot instalment.”

“Yes.”

“You realise this loses value the moment it leaves the showroom?”

Dev looked at the motorcycle.

“So do flowers.”

“What?”

“We still buy them.”

“Flowers don’t cost this much.”

"Then imagine how happy I am."

Raghav couldn't help laughing.

"Come."

"Where?"

"No agenda."

"I have a meeting in forty minutes."

"Thirty-minute ride."

"That leaves ten minutes."

"You've already calculated?"

"Obviously."

Dev started the bike.

Raghav climbed on.

"Slow."

"Yes, father."

Dev had a habit of calling people without warning.

One evening, Dev was sitting beside Raghav in his car when Dev dialled a number.

"Who?"

"Someone."

"Who?"

"An old friend."

A woman answered.

“Hello?”

Dev immediately began singing.

Not well.

Not softly.

A romantic old film song, something like,

O..Tum se door rahke…..

Humne jaana pyar Kya hein….

Dil ne maana yaar Kya hein…….

Raghav stared at him in horror.

The woman remained silent for several seconds.

Then said:

“Dev?”

He continued singing.

“Have you lost your mind?”

He finished the line.

She burst out laughing.

“What is wrong with you?”

“Nothing. I heard the song.”

“So?”

“I thought of you.”

“That is not a compliment.”

“I have not yet decided.”

She laughed again.

"Why are you calling?"

"No reason."

"You cannot call a woman after six months and sing."

"Apparently I can."

"You are absurd."

"Thank you."

She hung up laughing.

Raghav stared at Dev.

"What?"

"You cannot do that."

"I just did."

"What if she misunderstood?"

"She didn't."

"How do you know?"

"She laughed."

"That proves nothing."

Dev looked at him.

"You need everything notarised emotionally."

Raghav shook his head.

"What was the point?"

Dev leaned back.

"There was no point."

"That is the problem."

“No.”

Dev smiled.

“That was the pleasure.”

Later, when the woman texted:

Idiot. But you made my day.

Dev showed Raghav.

Raghav read it.

Then said:

“Still irresponsible.”

Dev nodded.

“Emotionally effective, though.”

Few days later, both had to travel to a neighbouring city to attend a wedding

Dev missed the train.

Raghav did not.

This created a logistical problem because they were supposed to be travelling together.

Raghav called from his seat.

“Where are you?”

“Outside.”

“Outside what?”

“The station.”

“The train is moving.”

“I know.”

“How?”

“I can see it.”

Raghav looked through the window.

Dev stood beyond the barrier waving.

Raghav stared at him.

Dev waved harder.

Raghav disconnected.

Dev called again.

“Don’t be angry.”

“I am travelling alone for eight hours because you stopped for breakfast.”

“The idli took longer.”

“You missed a train for idli?”

“It sounds bad when you remove context.”

“What context improves that sentence?”

“The chutney.”

Raghav laughed despite being annoyed.

CHAPTER 9

What People Say at Weddings

Weddings revealed society efficiently.

In three hours you could learn who had become rich, who had gained weight, whose child had gone abroad, who had separated, who had bought property and who was pretending not to notice any of it.

Raghav and Dev attended an old classmate's wedding.

The hall glittered with flowers, chandeliers and relatives directing other relatives.

An old friend spotted them.

"Raghav! Heard about the promotion."

Raghav smiled.

"Thank you."

Then he turned to Dev.

"And you?"

Dev smiled.

"Also alive."

The friend laughed.

"No, seriously. What are you doing?"

"Currently holding this plate."

"Career, man."

"Still figuring it out."

The friend's face changed.

Concern mixed with superiority.

"You should settle."

Dev nodded solemnly.

"I sit whenever possible."

After he left, Raghav said, "You could answer normally."

"I did."

"No."

"He wasn't asking what I do."

"What was he asking?"

"Whether I have done enough to deserve respect."

Raghav looked across the hall.

The same friend was now speaking enthusiastically to someone more successful.

"You may be right."

"I usually am in retrospect."

Later, an aunt cornered Dev.

"Your parents must be worried."

"They are."

"Marriage?"

"Among other things."

"Career?"

"Among other things."

"House?"

"Among other things."

"What are you doing about all this?"

"Eating dessert before it melts."

She gave up.

Raghav laughed for several minutes.

Yet on the way back, Dev became quiet.

"Did it hurt?" Raghav asked.

"What?"

"All that."

"A little."

"Then why joke?"

Dev looked through the window.

"Sometimes it's easier to laugh than explain."

Raghav remembered that.

Years later, when people would ask him equally intrusive questions, he would borrow Dev's method.

During the return journey, "I forgot to ask," Raghav said.

"How did you finally make it to the wedding?"

"I caught a bus."

"And?"

"The bus broke down."

"Of course."

"So I shared a taxi with three strangers. One of them was a school principal."

Raghav looked at him. "And?"

"We started talking. By the time I reached the wedding, he had invited me to speak to the teachers at his school."

Raghav stared at him.

"You missed the train and got a speaking invitation?"

"Yes."

"This is exactly why you never learn."

Dev smiled.

"The universe keeps encouraging bad behaviour."

A month later Dev spoke at the school.

He prepared this time.

Not much.

Enough.

He spoke about curiosity, children, mistakes and why adults sometimes teach children to fear looking foolish.

A teacher recorded part of it.

The video travelled.

Not far.

Far enough.

Someone sent it to someone.

Dev forgot about it.

Raghav did not even know it existed.

The first small wheel of luck had begun turning.

Nobody heard it.

CHAPTER 10

The Small Door

The address was not impressive.

Dev checked it twice.

Then a third time.

A narrow lane.

An old two-storey building.

No glass façade.

No reception.

No company logo stretching across the entrance.

Just a small metal board.

Third Floor

Aster Learning Studio

Raghav had imagined something else.

“So this is it?”

“This is it.”

“You could still leave.”

“I haven’t even gone in.”

“You usually decide after going in.”

“Progress.”

They climbed the stairs.

The walls carried framed photographs.

Children drawing.

Teachers laughing.

People sitting on the floor discussing something.

No awards.

No motivational quotes.

No photographs of founders shaking hands with celebrities.

Dev stopped before one photograph.

"What?"

Raghav asked.

"Nobody is looking at the camera."

"So?"

"They're looking at each other."

The office door was open.

A woman in her fifties looked up from a table full of books.

"You must be Dev."

"I am."

"And you brought a friend."

"This is Raghav."

She smiled.

"Tea?"

Neither had expected that.

Not "Please sit."

Not “Tell me about yourself.”

Just…

“Tea?”

They sat around a round wooden table.

The room felt more like a library than an office.

Books everywhere.

Maps.

Sketches.

Half-finished ideas pinned to walls.

A globe with handwritten notes on it.

Dev looked around like a child entering a toy shop.

Raghav looked around like an auditor.

After tea arrived…

A man entered.

About sixty.

Simple cotton shirt.

Walking shoes.

No laptop.

No watch.

Only a notebook folded under his arm.

He smiled.

“We met yesterday.”

“The sugarcane stall,” Dev said.

"Exactly."

He turned to Raghav.

"I hope he told you why I invited him."

"He said you liked his eyes."

The man burst out laughing.

"I said nothing of the sort."

Dev smiled.

"No. I said it on your behalf."

The man sat down.

"My name is Anand."

"What do you do?" Dev asked.

"I learn."

Raghav smiled.

"And professionally?"

"I help organisations learn."

"Training?"

"Sometimes."

"Consulting?"

"Sometimes."

"Coaching?"

"Sometimes."

Dev leaned forward.

“So what exactly do you do?”

Anand shrugged.

“I solve problems that don’t fit into job descriptions.”

Silence.

Not awkward.

Interested.

Anand looked at Dev.

“Yesterday I asked what you do.”

“Yes.”

“You said…”

“‘Currently I’m available.’”

“I liked that answer.”

“Why?”

“Most people tell me what they wish to sound like.”

“And?”

“You told me the truth.”

Raghav asked,

“What exactly are you looking for?”

Anand smiled.

“I don’t know.”

Dev laughed immediately.

“I like him.”

Raghav looked confused.

"You don't know?"

"No."

"Then how will you hire?"

"I don't hire positions."

"I hire people."

Anand continued.

"I've learned something after forty years."

"What?"

"The résumé tells me what someone has done."

"And?"

"Conversation tells me who they'll become."

Dev looked around again.

"So…"

"What?"

"Why me?"

Anand smiled.

"Yesterday…"

"You watched the balloon seller."

"You watched the porter."

"You thanked the sugarcane vendor."

"You laughed with a child."

"You asked my name before asking my company."

He paused.

"Curiosity."

He tapped the table gently.

"I cannot teach curiosity."

Raghav looked at Dev.

For a brief moment…

He understood something.

The very qualities that had frustrated employers…

had attracted someone else.

Anand opened his notebook.

"I have a small project."

"How small?"

"Very."

"What is it?"

"I want to build learning experiences for schools."

"Books?"

"No."

"Videos?"

"No."

"What then?"

"Conversations."

Dev smiled.

"Conversations?"

"Children ask fewer questions every year."

"And?"

"I want to reverse that."

Raghav leaned forward.

"How many people work here?"

Anand smiled.

"Today?"

"Yes."

"Three."

"And tomorrow?"

"I don't know."

Dev laughed.

"You sound like me."

Anand looked at him.

"No."

"I prepare."

He pointed at the shelves.

"I've spent twenty years preparing."

"But I remain open to changing the destination."

Raghav became still.

That sentence landed somewhere deep.

Preparation…

without rigidity.

Openness…

without drifting.

Perhaps life wasn't asking people to choose between the two after all.

The meeting lasted almost three hours.

Nobody discussed salary.

Nobody discussed designation.

Nobody discussed office timings.

Instead they discussed…

Questions.

Children.

Curiosity.

Why schools reward answers more than questions.

Why adults slowly stop wondering.

Why companies hire for experience but promote for judgement.

Why people remember teachers long after forgetting textbooks.

As they walked down the stairs…

Raghav finally spoke.

"What do you think?"

Dev didn't answer immediately.

"I don't know."

"What don't you know?"

"I don't know whether this is a job."

“It isn’t.”

“What is it?”

“It feels…”

He searched for the word.

“…alive.”

Outside…

They stood beside the same tea stall that served the lane.

Different tea.

Same conversation.

“You know…” Raghav paused.

“I’m jealous.”

Dev looked surprised.

“Of what?”

“You spent three hours without looking at the time.”

“So?”

“I’ve had meetings for years.”

“And?”

“I’ve never forgotten the clock.”

Dev looked at him carefully.

“You like your work.”

“I do.”

“But?”

“I don’t disappear into it.”

Dev stirred his tea.

"My grandfather used to say…"

"What?"

"'If time disappears, pay attention.'"

"I thought he never said half the things you quote."

"He didn't."

"But he would have liked this one."

Both laughed.

On the drive home…

Raghav looked outside.

"So…"

"You'll join?"

"If they want me."

"They do."

"You don't know."

"I do."

"How?"

"They weren't interviewing you."

"They weren't?"

"No."

"They were discovering whether you fit into a conversation they had already been having."

Dev nodded slowly.

"I think you're right."

Then he smiled.

"And you know what?"

"What?"

"This is the first interview…"

"…?"

"…where I forgot I was being interviewed."

Raghav smiled.

"Maybe that's why you succeeded."

The evening sun slipped behind the buildings.

One man returned home carrying certainty.

The other returned home carrying possibility.

Neither knew which one was heavier.

Far away, life was already changing things for both of them.

It was not about who was right or wrong.

Some doors open because we knock.

Others open because we happen to be there.

CHAPTER 11

Salary

Three months later…

The café was unusually quiet. Outside, the evening traffic moved slowly past the windows.

Raghav was already on his second coffee.

Dev arrived carrying a brown envelope.

He placed it carefully on the table.

Without a word.

Raghav looked at it.

"What is this?"

"My salary slip."

Raghav smiled.

"You brought your salary?"

"I brought the envelope."

"Why?"

"I wanted to look at it before it becomes numbers in a bank account."

Raghav laughed.

"You really are different."

"I know."

Dev slowly opened the envelope.

A cheque.

A payslip.

One handwritten note.

He read the note first.

Raghav leaned forward.

"What does it say?"

Dev smiled.

"'Thank you for asking questions we had forgotten to ask ourselves.'"

He looked up.

"Anand wrote it."

Raghav remained silent.

Then he said,

"That's worth more than the cheque."

"I thought the same."

"So…"

"How much?"

Dev told him.

Raghav blinked.

"That's… much lower than your previous salary."

"It is."

"And you're smiling?"

"I've smiled for less."

"You've also worried for less."

"I have."

Raghav stirred his coffee.

"Tell me honestly."

"What?"

"Can you manage?"

Dev took his time.

"My expenses?"

"Yes."

"Yes."

"My ego?"

He smiled.

"Still negotiating."

The waiter placed two plates of hot pakoras on the table.

Neither had ordered them.

The waiter smiled.

"New item, sir."

"You remembered us?"

Dev asked.

The waiter nodded.

"You always sit here for a long time."

"And?"

"You make people laugh."

He walked away.

Dev looked at Raghav.

"See?"

"What?"

"We finally have a reputation."

Raghav picked up the payslip.

"You know…"

"What?"

"You were earning almost twice this five years ago."

"I know."

"Doesn't it bother you?"

"It did."

"What changed?"

"I stopped comparing salaries."

"And started comparing?"

"Mornings."

Raghav looked puzzled.

"I used to wake up for work."

"And now?"

"I wake up because I want to see what we're building."

Silence.

The kind that refuses interruption.

Raghav finally said,

"I admire that."

"But?"

"But I couldn't do it."

"Why?"

“I have responsibilities.”

Dev nodded immediately.

“So do I.”

“You don’t have my financial commitments.”

“No.”

“You have yours.”

“Exactly.”

Neither defended himself or blamed the other.

They had stopped trying to win arguments long ago.

A little later…

Dev asked,

“Can I ask you something uncomfortable?”

“You usually do.”

“When was the last time you looked at your salary slip?”

Raghav thought.

“I don’t remember.”

“When was the last time you looked forward to Monday?”

“I usually do.”

“No.”

“What?”

“You look forward to finishing Monday.”

Raghav laughed.

“That’s unfair.”

“Is it?”

He thought again.

Longer this time.

"I'm good at what I do."

"I know."

"I enjoy solving problems."

"I know."

"I like my team."

"I know."

"But?"

Raghav looked out through the rain-covered glass.

"I don't know if I'm still curious."

Dev didn't answer.

Some questions need time

That evening…

Anand called Dev.

"Coffee tomorrow?"

"Always."

The next morning…

Their office looked exactly as before.

Books.

Maps.

Conversations.

Half-finished sketches.

Anand was arranging chairs.

"You came early."

Dev smiled.

"I thought I'd help."

Anand nodded.

Without looking up, he asked,

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to."

"No."

"What?"

"You wanted to be useful."

Dev stopped.

Anand continued arranging the chairs.

"There's a difference."

"What is it?"

"People who want to help…"

"…?"

"…sometimes become disappointed."

"And useful people?"

"They don't keep score."

For a moment, no one said anything.

Finally Dev asked,

"How do you know these things?"

Anand laughed.

"I've made all the mistakes."

Later that day…

They visited a government school.

Small classrooms.

Broken benches.

Bright eyes.

Curious children.

One boy raised his hand.

"Sir…"

"Yes?"

"Why is the sky blue?"

Another interrupted.

"No."

"I want to know why people dream."

A girl asked,

"Why do adults stop drawing?"

Another wanted to know why birds never collided in the sky.

Questions poured out.

None were in the lesson plan.

Dev forgot the time.

Again.

On the drive back…

He asked Anand,

"Do you know all the answers?"

Anand smiled.

"No."

"Then what do you tell them?"

"The truth."

"What truth?"

"'I don't know.'"

Dev looked surprised.

"They don't lose confidence in you?"

"They gain confidence."

"Why?"

"Because children trust honesty faster than expertise."

That evening…

Raghav worked late.

A client presentation.

Deadlines.

Corrections.

Numbers.

His manager stopped by.

"Still here?"

"Just finishing."

The manager looked at the clock.

"It's nine-thirty."

"I know."

"You've been here since eight."

"Yes."

The manager smiled.

"You remind me of myself."

"Thank you."

The manager shook his head gently.

"It wasn't a compliment."

Driving home…

The thought remained with Raghav.

It wasn't a compliment.

He wasn't offended.

He was disturbed.

Saturday arrived.

The friends met again.

Same café.

Same table.

Different thoughts.

Dev looked unusually cheerful.

Raghav looked unusually tired.

"You look exhausted."

"I had a long week."

"You?"

"What?"

"You look…"

He searched for the word.

"…lighter."

Dev smiled.

"I think I laughed twenty-seven times yesterday."

"You counted?"

"No."

"I just know."

Raghav looked at him for a long moment.

"Tell me something."

"What?"

"If someone offered you…"

He named a salary nearly four times higher.

"…would you leave?"

Dev didn't answer immediately.

"I don't know."

"You don't?"

"No."

"Five years ago you'd have left immediately."

"I know."

"What changed?"

Dev smiled softly.

"I've finally found work…"

"…?"

"…that asks me who I am…"

"…not just what I can do."

They didn't speak.

Outside…

The rain finally began.

People rushed for shelter.

Cars slowed.

The café windows filled with tiny streams of water.

Raghav watched them.

"You know…"

"What?"

"I've spent years preparing for promotions."

"And?"

"I've never prepared for contentment."

Dev looked at his friend.

"One day…"

"…?"

"…when your salary becomes very large…"

"…?"

"…you'll remember the smallest one that made someone genuinely happy."

utside, the rain grew heavier.

Inside, two friends sat with two very different incomes.

Yet for the first time…

Their conversation was not about money.

Both were about value.

And somewhere beyond the rain…

Luck was still walking toward them.

Patiently.

Silently.

Unconcerned with salaries.

CHAPTER 12

Parents Never Retire From Worry

The call came at 6:10 on a Tuesday morning.

Dev was still negotiating with sleep.

It was Raghav's father.

"Can you come home this evening?"

His voice sounded normal.

Perhaps too normal.

"Everything okay?"

"Yes."

A pause.

"Just come."

There are sentences that contain no information…

yet carry enormous weight.

"Just come."

Raghav cancelled two meetings.

Parents rarely ask.

By evening…

Dev was already waiting outside Raghav's parents' house.

"You came?"

"You sounded different on the phone."

"I did?"

"You didn't speak much."

"I was thinking."

"I know."

The house looked exactly as it always had.

The same swing in the verandah.

The same jasmine plant.

The same brass bell near the entrance.

Only…

The swing moved more slowly now.

His father sat with a newspaper in his hands.

Sometimes fathers do that when they don't know how to start a difficult conversation.

His mother came out of the kitchen.

"You came."

"As if I had a choice."

She smiled.

"There is always a choice."

"And?"

"You chose correctly."

After tea…

His father folded the newspaper.

“I’ve been thinking.”

Raghav and Dev waited.

“I don’t want to drive anymore.”

Silence.

“What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Then why?”

“I don’t trust my eyes after sunset.”

Another silence followed.

The kind that sits between generations.

Raghav looked at him carefully.

The same man who had once driven twelve hours without complaint.

Who had taught him to reverse a car.

Who had insisted that every journey begin with a full tank.

Now…

He was asking permission from age.

Dev spoke first.

“That’s wisdom.”

His father smiled.

“Most people call it getting old.”

“They’re wrong.”

Later…

Raghav drove his parents to a nearby temple.

His father sat in the passenger seat.

Without giving directions.

Without reminding him to slow down.

Without pointing out potholes.

For the first time…

The son drove.

The father trusted.

On the way back…

His mother spoke.

"You know…"

"What?"

"When you were learning to drive…"

"You hit the compound wall."

Dev laughed loudly from the back seat.

"I did?"

"You blamed the wall."

"I don't remember."

"We do."

Everyone laughed.

His father looked out through the window.

"There comes a day…"

"…?"

"…when children stop asking parents for permission."

"And?"

"They begin taking responsibility."

Nobody replied.

The traffic signal turned green.

Anand did not offer him a job.

He invited him to observe.

Schools.

Teachers.

Students.

Meetings.

Dev went.

For six months he travelled with Anand.

He earned very little.

He learnt constantly.

Raghav watched with curiosity.

"You're finally preparing."

"For what?"

"I don't know."

"Then how can it be preparation?"

Raghav smiled.

"Maybe preparation doesn't always know its examination."

Dev stared.

"Very good."

“I have my moments.”

“Rare. Protect them.”

They didn’t notice that their philosophies were beginning to influence each other.

Anand fell ill on the morning of a workshop.

Fifty school principals were already seated.

He called Dev.

“You speak.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“I’m not ready.”

“Good.”

“That is usually my line.”

“Today it’s mine.”

Dev arrived at the venue carrying twelve pages of Anand’s notes.

He read the first page.

Then the second.

Then closed them.

When he walked onto the stage, he began:

“I was given twelve pages to explain how children learn.”

The principals waited.

“I couldn’t understand them.”

Laughter.

"So I thought I should begin honestly."

He spoke for forty minutes.

Questions stretched it to ninety.

He disagreed with a principal twice.

Admitted ignorance three times.

Changed his mind once.

At one point, a principal asked:

"How do we encourage children to ask better questions?"

Dev said, "First stop rewarding them only for giving fast answers."

Another asked:

"What if the teacher doesn't know?"

"Excellent."

"Why excellent?"

"Because now both can learn."

The room laughed.

An elderly principal raised his hand.

"You are saying teachers should admit ignorance?"

"I am saying teachers should stop pretending children cannot see it."

More laughter.

Then silence.

The useful kind.

At the end, people surrounded him.

One person waited until others left.

“I like how you think.”

Dev smiled.

“That may reduce with familiarity.”

The man laughed.

“What do you do professionally?”

Dev thought.

“Today? Survived.”

The man handed him a card.

“Call me.”

Dev looked at it.

Another card.

Another possibility.

This time he put it carefully in his notebook.

Progress.

He called Raghav.

“Something strange is happening.”

“What?”

“People want to hear me talk.”

“I have warned society for years.”

“They paid me.”

Raghav didn’t respond.

“For talking?”

"Yes."

"Civilisation is collapsing."

Dev laughed.

Raghav added, "I'm proud of you."

Dev stopped.

"Don't say that dramatically."

"I mean it."

"I know."

That made it harder.

CHAPTER 13

The Comfortable Man

By their mid thirties, conversations about careers had begun sharing space with conversations about parents, marriage, money and the speed at which time seemed to be moving.

Raghav's career continued upward.

Salary.

Bonus.

Recognition.

A larger team.

Better hotels.

Airport lounges.

People returning calls faster.

Success rarely arrives as one dramatic event.

It accumulates.

A faster response.

A better seat.

An invitation that did not exist earlier.

People laughing slightly more at ordinary jokes.

Raghav noticed some of it.

Not all.

By the time Raghav reached middle management, success had developed a uniform.

A certain kind of car.

A certain neighbourhood.

A certain school for children.

International holidays.

Executive health checks.

Club memberships.

Investments discussed over lunch.

Nobody issued a list.

That was what made it powerful.

One simply noticed what everybody else was doing.

At lunch one afternoon, three colleagues were discussing cars.

"I booked the new one."

"Which?"

He named a luxury brand.

Another colleague nodded.

"About time. At your level, you can't keep driving that old car."

Raghav looked up.

"At your level?"

The colleague laughed.

“You know what I mean.”

Raghav did.

That was the problem.

A week later, someone commented on his watch.

Another asked why he still lived so far from the office.

A senior colleague advised him to join a particular club.

“Good networking.”

“I don’t play golf.”

“You don’t join for golf.”

Raghav smiled.

“What do you join for?”

The man looked at him as if the answer was obvious.

“Access.”

That evening, Raghav told Dev.

They were walking through a shopping street. Jewellery stores and car showrooms competed for brightness. Large photographs showed people who seemed unusually happy about owning things.

“I am thinking of changing my car.”

“Problem?”

“No.”

“Then why?”

“It’s six years old.”

“Cars don’t retire at six.”

"I know."

"Then?"

Raghav hesitated.

"Everyone at my level drives something better."

Dev stopped walking.

"Ah."

"What?"

"You don't want a car."

"I do."

"You were happy with your car until you started looking at theirs."

"That is an oversimplification."

"Most useful truths are accused of that."

They continued walking.

Raghav said, "Perception matters in corporate life."

"I agree."

"Clients notice."

"Maybe."

"Senior people notice."

"Apparently."

"You cannot behave as if appearances don't matter."

"I don't."

Raghav looked at him.

Dev pointed to his shirt.

"I ironed this."

"You did not."

"I intended to. Appearance begins with intention."

Raghav laughed.

Then became serious again.

"It is not only the car. Everyone is moving."

"Where?"

"That is exactly what I don't know."

Dev smiled.

"Excellent. We have found the problem."

Raghav looked irritated.

"People are buying bigger houses. Taking international holidays. Their children are going abroad. They are investing. Moving companies. Becoming vice-presidents. Starting businesses."

"And?"

"I sometimes feel I am behind."

Dev stopped again.

"Behind whom?"

"Don't start your no-comparison philosophy."

"I am asking geographically."

Raghav laughed.

Dev continued.

"You know what is interesting? Nobody says, 'Raghav, you are behind.'"

"They don't have to."

"So you have outsourced the criticism and kept the job in-house."

Raghav looked at him.

That landed.

Dev said, "Peer pressure becomes very efficient after forty."

"Why?"

"Because nobody has to pressure you anymore. You have collected enough peers to do it yourself."

They reached a traffic signal.

A large SUV stopped beside them.

Dev looked at it.

"Nice car."

Raghav smiled.

"You like it?"

"Very much."

"Then why are you lecturing me?"

"I am not against buying it."

"Then?"

"Buy it because you want the car. Don't buy it because you want the driver's respect at the office gate."

Raghav thought about that for a moment.

The signal changed.

They crossed.

After a while Raghav said, “Sometimes I don’t know which is which.”

Dev nodded.

“Neither do I.”

That surprised Raghav.

“You feel peer pressure?”

“Of course.”

“About what?”

Dev counted on his fingers.

“Career. Money. Marriage. House. Clothes. Being serious. Knowing what I am doing.”

Raghav smiled.

“And?”

“I fail peer pressure also.”

“No. You pretend you don’t care.”

Dev looked at him.

There was no humour in his face now.

“Sometimes.”

That stopped Raghav.

Dev continued.

“Freedom is easier to perform than to feel.”

Then Raghav asked, “So what do we do?”

Dev shrugged.

"Maybe before buying anything, changing anything or chasing anything, ask one question."

"What?"

"Would I still want this if nobody knew I had it?"

Raghav looked at him.

"That is a very difficult question."

"Good questions usually damage shopping."

Years later, Raghav did buy the better car.

He loved it.

Dev was the first person he called.

"Come downstairs."

Dev saw the car.

His face lit up.

"You bought it!"

"Yes."

"Beautiful."

"You're not going to ask whether I bought it for myself?"

Dev opened the passenger door.

"No need."

"How do you know?"

"You called me before posting the photograph."

Raghav laughed.

They drove away.

Sometimes peer pressure pushed.

Sometimes aspiration pulled.

Maturity was learning that from inside the mind, the two could feel almost identical.

At home, his parents worried less about money and more about how little they saw him.

It was a festival day. His mother had prepared his favourite dishes and expected him home early. His father had also made sure he had no plans for the evening.

That afternoon, his mother called.

"Dinner?"

"Yes."

"What time?"

"Eight."

At eight-thirty she reheated the dal.

At nine-fifteen she reheated it again.

At ten-thirty his father said, "Eat."

She said, "He said he is coming."

Raghav arrived at eleven-fifteen.

The food was covered on the table.

His parents were asleep.

He stood alone in the dining room.

The clock sounded unusually loud.

He opened the containers.

Cold again.

He ate standing.

The next morning his mother said nothing.

That was worse.

He called Dev.

“I think I am becoming successful.”

“Congratulations.”

“It wasn’t a compliment.”

Dev understood.

They met for a walk that evening.

The park was crowded with people escaping offices, houses, doctors and themselves.

Raghav told him.

Dev listened.

Then said, “Your mother waited.”

“I know.”

“You knew yesterday too.”

Raghav looked at him.

No joke followed.

Raghav said, “It was one dinner.”

Dev nodded.

“Exactly.”

Raghav waited.

Dev added, “Which is why it was easy to miss.”

They walked another lap.

Raghav said, “You know what scares me?”

“What?”

“I like the work.”

“That is unfortunate.”

“No. I mean I genuinely like it.”

“Good.”

“So when do I know it is too much?”

Dev looked at a man walking while speaking on two phones, one in each hand.

“When people who love you start scheduling appointments.”

Raghav smiled faintly.

That evening he went home early.

His mother looked surprised.

“No meeting?”

“Yes.”

“Then?”

“I cancelled.”

She placed another roti on his plate.

No speech.

No gratitude.

Just food.

It was enough.

CHAPTER 14

The Rise

Raghav's rise did not happen with one promotion.

It happened through a series of difficult assignments.

By then, he had built a reputation inside the company.

If a project was delayed, Raghav was sent in.

If costs were rising, he was asked to review them.

If two departments could not agree, someone eventually said, "Ask Raghav."

He prepared for everything.

Before meetings, he knew the numbers.

Before reviews, he knew the questions.

Before making a commitment, he knew who would do what and by when.

His first big opportunity came when an important project was running several months late.

The company had already missed two internal deadlines. Costs were rising. The customer had started asking uncomfortable questions.

The CEO called Raghav.

"Can you fix it?"

Raghav looked through the papers.

"How much freedom do I have?"

"What do you need?"

"Direct access to every function involved. Weekly reviews. And no changing priorities midway."

The CEO smiled.

"You haven't even said yes."

"I'm deciding what yes requires."

He took the assignment.

For the next four months, Raghav almost lived inside the project.

He broke the work into smaller parts.

Every delay had an owner.

Every decision had a date.

Every meeting ended with actions.

He called people before problems became crises.

He questioned assumptions that had gone unchallenged for months.

Some people found him demanding.

But the project began moving.

A milestone that had been delayed for weeks was completed in ten days.

A vendor problem was resolved.

Two departments that had spent months blaming each other were made to sit in the same room until they agreed on a plan.

The project was finally delivered.

Not perfectly.

But well enough to restore the customer's confidence.

The CEO noticed.

So did the Board.

A year later, Raghav was given a larger role.

Then another.

His team grew.

His budgets grew.

His meetings moved to bigger rooms.

He began presenting directly to senior leadership.

At one Board meeting, a director asked him a question about a number buried deep inside the presentation.

Raghav answered without looking at the slide.

The director looked impressed.

"You remember all these numbers?"

"The important ones."

That answer travelled through the company.

Soon, Raghav was no longer known only as someone who could manage his own work.

He became the person trusted with difficult work.

When the company entered a new market, Raghav was part of the core team.

When a major customer threatened to move business elsewhere, Raghav led the recovery plan.

When costs had to be reduced without affecting delivery, his team found a way.

His career accelerated.

Senior Manager.

General Manager.

Vice President.

Then responsibility for an entire division.

Each role seemed to arrive sooner than expected.

His salary increased.

The better car came.

Business-class travel appeared occasionally.

People who had once called him directly now checked his calendar first.

His parents spoke about him with pride.

At family gatherings, relatives began asking younger people to "learn something from Raghav."

Dev found this particularly entertaining.

One evening, he called.

"I heard you got promoted again."

"Yes."

"This is becoming a habit."

Raghav laughed.

"It's more work."

"You always say that after getting more money."

"I didn't ask for the promotion."

"That makes it worse. Promotions are now looking for you."

Raghav smiled.

But his success had a price.

The higher he went, the more he expected from himself.

And slowly, he began expecting the same from everyone around him.

He came prepared, so he expected others to come prepared.

He remembered commitments, so he expected others to remember theirs.

He worked late when necessary and assumed others would do the same.

When someone brought him a problem, his first question was often:

"What have you done about it?"

He thought he was building ownership.

Some people felt he was being impatient.

In meetings, he moved quickly.

"Come to the point."

"What is the issue?"

"Who owns this?"

"By when?"

His teams delivered.

Targets were met.

Projects moved.

Senior management liked the results.

And because the results were good, very few people questioned the method.

Raghav himself had little reason to question it.

Everything around him seemed to confirm that his way worked.

His preparation had become discipline.

His discipline had become reliability.

Reliability had brought responsibility.

And responsibility had brought power.

What Raghav did not yet see was that success was also changing how people behaved around him.

Some stopped disagreeing openly.

Some prepared more before meeting him.

Some simply spoke less.

Raghav saw an efficient team.

The team sometimes saw a demanding boss.

Both were right.

For now, the numbers were good.

And when the numbers are good, many other numbers remain unseen.

Including the ones that would later appear in a 360-degree feedback report.

CHAPTER 15

The Risk They Never Discussed

They had discussed preparation for years.

Planning.

Spontaneity.

Luck.

Failure.

Money.

Career.

Marriage.

They had somehow avoided one word.

Risk.

It came up because Dev had been offered an opportunity to work independently.

The money was uncertain.

The work interested him.

Anand thought he should try.

Raghav thought he should calculate.

Dev did neither.

For three weeks.

Finally Raghav asked:

"Why haven't you decided?"

"I am thinking."

Raghav stared at him.

"You?"

"Yes."

"For three weeks?"

"Yes."

"This is worrying."

Dev smiled.

"Growth."

"No. Fear."

The smile disappeared.

Dev looked at him.

"Maybe."

Raghav sat opposite him.

"What are you afraid of?"

"Losing income."

"You barely have income."

"Exactly. Imagine losing even that."

Raghav laughed.

Then stopped.

"Seriously."

Dev thought.

"Maybe I am comfortable being spontaneous only when the consequences are small."

Raghav leaned back.

That was new.

Dev continued.

"I miss a train. Fine. I find another way. I travel without a booking. Fine. I find a room. I talk to strangers. Fine."

"But?"

"Quitting work without knowing what comes next is different."

"So you're not a risk-taker."

Dev smiled faintly.

"Apparently I am a recreational risk-taker."

Raghav laughed.

"Weekend courage."

"Exactly."

Then Dev looked at him.

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

"You prepare for everything. Why?"

"We have covered this for fifteen years."

"No. We discussed preparation. We never discussed what preparation protects you from."

Raghav did not answer.

Dev waited.

“Failure.”

“Only failure?”

“Financial insecurity.”

“More.”

“Disappointing people.”

“More.”

Raghav looked irritated.

“Stop interviewing me.”

“More.”

Raghav looked away.

“Looking foolish.”

Dev smiled gently.

“There.”

“What?”

“You don’t hate risk.”

“I don’t.”

“You hate being seen taking a risk that fails.”

Raghav looked at him.

“That is different.”

“Very.”

The conversation became uncomfortable.

Which was why neither left it.

Raghav said, "I have taken risks."

"Of course."

"Career moves. Investments. Large projects."

"Yes."

"I've made difficult decisions."

"Yes."

"Then don't call me risk-averse."

"I didn't."

"You implied it."

Dev thought.

"You take calculated risks."

"Which is sensible."

"Yes."

"And you?"

"I take uncalculated risks."

"Which is stupid."

"Sometimes."

They laughed.

Then Dev said:

"But there is a third kind."

"What?"

"The risk we don't take at all."

Raghav waited.

"The job you don't leave. The person you don't ask. The idea you don't try. The trip you postpone. The apology you don't make."

Raghav thought about that for a moment.

Marriage entered both their minds.

Neither said it.

Dev continued.

"Those risks are strange."

"Why?"

"Because when you don't take them, nothing happens."

"Exactly."

"So there is no visible failure."

Raghav nodded slowly.

"And because nothing happens, you can pretend there was no cost."

Raghav looked back at his career.

He had taken enormous responsibility.

Managed businesses.

Put his reputation behind difficult decisions.

Accepted targets others avoided.

But he had usually taken risks inside systems he understood.

He knew the boundaries.

He knew the numbers.

He knew who approved what.

Dev had taken different risks.

He had travelled without plans.

Accepted work without titles.

Spoken without scripts.

Trusted strangers.

Bought a bike instead of land.

But when consequences became deeply personal, he too had hesitated.

Marriage.

Commitment.

Financial uncertainty.

Building something entirely his own.

They had mistaken style for courage.

Raghav said, “Maybe neither of us is as brave as we think.”

Dev smiled.

“I never thought you were brave.”

“Thank you.”

“I thought you were insured.”

Raghav laughed.

“And you?”

“Uninsurable.”

They laughed together.

Then Raghav asked, “How do you decide whether a risk is worth taking?”

Dev thought for unusually long.

“Maybe three questions.”

Raghav smiled.

“You have a framework?”

“Don’t spoil this.”

“Go on.”

“What do I lose if it fails?”

Raghav nodded.

“What do I gain if it works?”

“Yes.”

Dev paused.

“And what do I lose if I never try?”

Raghav looked at him.

“The third one is dangerous.”

“Exactly.”

Raghav took out his notebook.

Dev immediately protested.

“No.”

“What?”

“Don’t turn my existential crisis into a three-point framework.”

“It is a good framework.”

“I knew talking to you was a mistake.”

Raghav wrote it down anyway.

A few weeks later, Dev accepted the uncertain assignment.

It did not immediately change his life.

There was no dramatic music.

No miraculous client.

No instant success.

For months, he wondered whether he had made a mistake.

That mattered.

Because risk should not be romanticised merely because it eventually works.

And years later, when Raghav’s own career collapsed, he would remember this conversation.

For most of his life, Raghav had asked:

What happens if this goes wrong?

Only much later did he learn to ask:

What happens if I do nothing?

Preparation reduced risk.

Spontaneity sometimes ignored it.

Luck occasionally rewarded both.

But risk was something else entirely.

It was the price of choosing before the outcome introduced itself.

CHAPTER 16

The First Crack

Raghav's division had grown quickly.

For three years, revenues had increased. Costs were under control. Important projects had been delivered. The Board had approved most of Raghav's proposals without much resistance.

Success had given him confidence.

Perhaps a little too much.

The first problem appeared when Raghav proposed an aggressive expansion into a new business segment.

The numbers looked good.

The market was growing. The margins were attractive. Two major customers had shown interest. Raghav believed that entering early would give the company an advantage.

His team prepared the strategy.

Investment.

People.

Capacity.

Customer projections.

Timelines.

The Board approved it.

For the first few months, everything went according to plan.

Then things began to change.

One major customer delayed its programme.

Another reduced its forecast.

A competitor cut prices.

The market continued to grow, but not in the way Raghav's team had expected.

Inside the company, there had been warnings too.

The sales head had suggested a slower expansion.

Finance had questioned some of the assumptions.

One of Raghav's senior managers had asked whether they should wait for firm customer commitments before adding more capacity.

Raghav had listened.

But he had not changed the plan.

"We cannot build strategy around fear," he had said.

At the time, it sounded decisive.

Six months later, it sounded different.

Capacity remained unused.

Costs increased.

The expected business did not arrive.

Raghav responded the way he always did.

More reviews.

More tracking.

More pressure.

He believed execution could still correct the problem.

But this time, execution was not the only problem.

The assumptions themselves had changed.

By the end of the year, the division was still profitable, but well below what had been promised to the Board.

For the first time, Raghav's preparation had not produced the expected result.

The Board raised serious concerns about his strategy for the division.

It was not a crisis.

But it was serious enough for the new CEO to call for a detailed review.

Raghav prepared thoroughly.

The original strategy.

What had changed.

What they had missed.

Customer delays.

Competitive pressure.

Recovery actions.

Timelines.

Ownership.

He entered the meeting with the same preparation that had carried him through hundreds of reviews.

But this review was different.

The new CEO had joined only a few months earlier.

He knew Raghav's reputation.

He had heard about the projects he had rescued and the growth he had delivered.

But he had not been there for any of it.

Raghav's past successes meant less to him than the numbers in front of him.

The presentation lasted almost an hour.

The CEO listened carefully.

He asked about the customer assumptions.

Raghav answered.

He asked about the investment.

Raghav answered.

Then he asked about the warnings from Sales and Finance.

Raghav paused.

"They had concerns."

"Did you agree with them?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I believed the opportunity justified the risk."

"And now?"

"I would make some of those decisions differently."

The CEO closed the presentation in front of him.

"Why should you continue leading this?"

The room became still.

It was a question Raghav had never been asked before.

Not like this.

Raghav answered carefully.

"I understand what failed, what we missed, and what has to change."

The CEO leaned back.

"That also means you led what failed."

Raghav didn't say anything.

For years, responsibility had helped him rise.

He had never hidden behind his team when things went wrong.

He had always said the same thing.

I own it.

Now, for the first time, ownership felt different.

The meeting ended without a decision.

Raghav walked back to his office.

People greeted him along the way.

He greeted them back.

Nothing outside had changed.

His designation was the same.

His office was the same.

His name was still on the door.

But something had changed.

For years, the company had looked at Raghav and seen answers.

Now, for the first time, it had a question.

Raghav returned to his cabin.

For the first time in years, his notebook did not help.

Every page contained actions.

None contained certainty.

That evening Dev called.

“How was the review?”

“Bad.”

“How bad?”

“Professionally bad. Nobody died.”

“Good benchmark.”

Raghav smiled.

Then told him.

Dev listened.

“What are you thinking?”

“That I need a stronger recovery plan.”

“Of course.”

“What?”

“You get punched and prepare a spreadsheet.”

“What should I do?”

“Tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Nothing.”

Raghav stared at the phone.

“Nothing?”

“You had a bad day. Have it.”

“That sounds useless.”

“Some things are.”

Raghav smiled.

Dev had a strange way of making bad days feel less serious. And that evening, Raghav needed exactly that.

CHAPTER 17

Advice and Appearances

Advice Is Free

Dev's visibility brought advice.

Wake up early.

Build a brand.

Write a book.

Hire a manager.

Charge more.

Charge less.

Post daily.

Never post.

Scale.

Stay small.

He wrote some of it down for amusement.

He showed Raghav.

"Twenty-three pieces of advice in six days."

Raghav read the list.

"You forgot mine."

"Yours has a separate volume."

They were sitting outside a bookstore.

People came and went carrying bags full of answers.

Dev said, “Everybody knows what I should do.”

“Do you?”

“No.”

“Good.”

“You’re becoming very Dev-like.”

“Temporary infection.”

A young woman recognised Dev from the school video.

She approached hesitantly and introduced herself.

“Can I ask something?”

“Of course.”

“Everyone is telling me what career to choose.”

Dev looked at Raghav.

Raghav said, “Listen to them.”

Dev added, “Obey slowly.”

She smiled.

Dev continued.

“Advice is borrowed experience.”

Raghav added, “Your consequences are not borrowed.”

The young woman looked at both of them.

“You two always answer together?”

Dev said, “No. He corrects me professionally.”

Raghav said, “And “He complicates my life for fun.”

She laughed.

That evening she repeated “obey slowly” at home.

Her father disagreed.

Her mother liked it.

Her brother wrote it on a sticky note.

Dev never knew.

Words sometimes travelled farther than speakers.

CHAPTER 18

Recognition

Dev was invited to a national conference.

Raghav was asked to lead a major transformation programme.

They told each other on the same evening.

Raghav celebrated Dev's invitation more loudly than his own.

Dev noticed.

"You're happier about mine."

"Yours is unexpected."

"Meaning yours was?"

"Planned."

"Of course."

Dev prepared.

Properly.

He read.

Rewrote.

Practised.

Called teachers.

Called Anand.

Called Raghav.

Called him again.

Finally Raghav said, “You’re over-preparing.”

Silence.

Then Dev said, “I want this recorded.”

The conference went well.

Afterward, a stranger thanked Dev for something he had said months earlier.

“My granddaughter changed how she talks about failure after that workshop.”

Dev did not know what to say.

Recognition suddenly felt different.

Applause was pleasant.

Being remembered was heavier.

At dinner he told Raghav.

Raghav said, “That’s recognition.”

“What?”

“When your words start living in houses you have never entered.”

Dev looked at him.

“Very good.”

“I have my moments.”

“Rare. Protect them.”

CHAPTER 19

The Business Card and the Room

At an industry event in a metro city, Dev met Arvind.

Founder.

Industrialist.

Builder of companies.

Arvind watched Dev during a panel.

Afterward he approached.

"What do you do?"

"I ask questions."

"Professionally?"

"Occasionally."

Arvind smiled.

"I need someone like that."

He handed Dev a card.

Dev put it in his notebook.

Three days later, Raghav found out.

"You waited three days?"

"Yes."

"To call one of the most respected industrialists in the country?"

"It was the weekend."

"So?"

"He has a family."

Raghav stared.

"You may be the only underemployed man protecting a billionaire's personal time."

Dev smiled.

"I am not underemployed."

"What are you?"

"Available."

Raghav laughed.

"Call him."

"I will."

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

"Why not now?"

"Dinner."

Raghav surrendered.

Arvind invited Dev to discuss a leadership initiative.

Dev expected conversation.

Seven senior executives were waiting.

"Take us through your thinking," Arvind said.

Dev's laptop refused to connect.

Old Dev would have enjoyed the excuse.

This Dev had prepared.

He felt the disappointment.

Then he closed the laptop.

"I had slides."

The executives waited.

"They have chosen not to participate."

A few laughed.

"So let me ask you something. Why do you think you have a leadership problem?"

The room came alive.

Forty-five minutes became two hours.

By the end, Dev had no solution.

He said so.

One executive looked irritated.

"Then what have we achieved?"

Dev pointed at the whiteboard.

"Two hours ago you wanted a training programme. Now we're not sure training is the problem."

Arvind smiled.

"Give him two weeks."

Dev called Raghav.

"The slides failed."

"And?"

"The meeting worked."

"Luck?"

"No."

"Preparation?"

"No."

"What then?"

Dev thought.

"Prepared improvisation."

Raghav groaned.

"You invented a category just to avoid agreeing with me."

"Correct."

CHAPTER 20

The 360-Degree View

As Raghav moved deeper into senior leadership, the company introduced a 360-degree feedback process.

It was announced as a development initiative.

Raghav liked the concept.

Feedback from managers.

Peers.

Direct reports.

Internal stakeholders.

A complete view.

"Good process," he told Dev.

Dev looked suspicious.

"Anonymous?"

"Yes."

"Then you are about to discover how many people have been politely waiting."

Raghav laughed.

"I want honest feedback."

"Everyone says that before receiving it."

Three weeks later, the report arrived.

Raghav opened it confidently.

The first page was encouraging.

Strong execution.

High accountability.

Strategic thinking.

Reliable.

Disciplined.

Then came the comments.

Can be intimidating.

Expects others to work at his pace.

Sometimes decides too quickly.

Does not always create enough space for dissent.

Can appear impatient when people are not prepared.

One sentence hurt more than the rest:

People hesitate to bring incomplete thoughts to him.

Raghav read it several times.

That evening, Dev found him unusually quiet.

"What happened?"

Raghav handed him the report.

Dev read slowly.

Then looked up.

"So."

"So?"

“You have successfully frightened competent adults.”

“Very funny.”

“I am not laughing.”

Raghav leaned back.

“I thought people trusted me.”

“They probably do.”

“Then why would they hesitate?”

“Trust and comfort are different.”

Raghav looked at him.

Dev continued.

“You like finished thoughts.”

“Of course.”

“Maybe people need somewhere to bring unfinished ones.”

He kept thinking about it.

But the process did not stop there.

During leadership discussions, the feedback began appearing in other forms.

“Raghav needs to work on stakeholder sensitivity.”

“Raghav can be more inclusive.”

“Raghav’s intensity can become a barrier.”

Each sentence was reasonable.

Together, they began constructing a different version of him.

The same traits that had once made him "decisive" now sounded "rigid."

The same insistence on standards became "intimidating."

The same urgency that had built his reputation became "impatience."

When the restructuring came later, the 360 degree report remained in the background.

No one said it caused anything.

No one needed to.

Dev heard about it and said:

"Interesting."

"What?"

"When you were winning, they called it leadership."

"And now?"

"They have discovered adjectives."

That hurt.

Because it was funny.

And true.

CHAPTER 21

What They Kept Postponing

Months later, Dev's mother raised the subject with him.

"There is a good girl."

"How good?"

"Dev."

"I am asking."

"Educated. Nice family."

"Does she know?"

"What?"

"Does she know you're planning to give me to her?"

His mother couldn't help laughing.

"You don't take anything seriously."

"I take marriage seriously. That is why I am not saying yes casually."

That answer surprised her.

For Raghav, the postponement was preparation.

He wanted a better role.

A stronger financial position.

A clearer future.

For Dev, it was uncertainty.

He wasn't sure what he was becoming.

"I can't invite someone into a house whose address I haven't found," he once told Raghav.

Raghav said:

"That sounds profound."

"It means I am confused."

Years passed.

Proposals reduced.

Then changed tone.

By their late thirties, relatives asked:

"What are you waiting for?"

Next day, Dev visited Arvind's factory.

The factory was hot, noisy and alive.

Machines drowned conversation.

Forklifts moved between marked lanes.

Shift workers ate quickly.

Managers ate separately.

An operator told them about a sensor malfunctioning for three years.

"Everyone knows?" Dev asked.

"Yes."

"Then why hasn't it moved?"

"Approval."

Maintenance blamed engineering.

Engineering blamed the vendor.

The vendor blamed warranty.

Dev said,

That sensor is better connected than most people here.

At the security gate, he met a guard working a twelve-hour shift.

“What is the hardest part?” Dev asked.

“Standing.”

“Physically?”

The guard smiled.

“No, sir. Standing for some people and sitting for others.”

That evening Dev told Arvind:

“You don’t have a silence problem. People speak constantly.”

“Then?”

“The right people aren’t hearing them.”

And added:

“And listening won’t matter unless systems allow something to happen afterward.”

Dev found voices.

And built mechanisms.

The experiment began.

“Now you should adjust expectations.” Dev told Raghav

“Fascinating.”

"What?"

"When we were thirty-two, they were assessing girls for us."

"And now?"

"They are assessing our market clearance."

Raghav laughed.

But there was sadness beneath it.

One evening, Meera asked Raghav:

"Did career really stop you from marrying?"

Raghav thought.

"No."

"Then?"

"I kept thinking the next year would be more stable."

"And was it?"

"No."

She smiled gently.

"Life never sent you the final draft."

Raghav had no answer.

Dev faced something similar.

He had liked someone once.

Perhaps enough.

But his career was unstable.

He delayed.

She moved on.

Years later, he told Raghav:

"I thought I needed certainty before asking someone to share uncertainty."

Raghav looked at him.

"And now?"

"Now I think that may have been the whole point."

Dev started meeting people across the company.

At first, they were cautious.

Some came with complaints. Some came with ideas. A few came simply because they had heard that someone was finally willing to listen.

Dev listened.

Then he asked questions.

"Why hasn't this been fixed?"

"We told our manager."

"And?"

"He told his manager."

"And?"

"His manager told another manager."

Dev smiled.

"So the problem has travelled more than you have."

The employee laughed.

But Dev wrote the problem down.

He spent hours talking to operators, supervisors, young managers and people who had been with the company for twenty years. He began noticing patterns. Small problems were being discussed everywhere but solved nowhere. Good ideas were getting lost between levels.

Dev took them to Arvind.

"We need to remove some layers."

Arvind disagreed.

"Those layers exist for a reason."

"Maybe. But right now, information is getting tired before it reaches you."

Arvind looked at him.

"That is not how organisations work."

"That is exactly how this organisation is working."

They argued.

Dev pushed. Arvind questioned him. Dev went back to the employees, collected examples and returned with better answers.

This happened several times.

Arvind did not agree easily, but he listened. More importantly, when Dev made sense, he was willing to change his mind.

Dev also changed some of his own ideas after listening to Arvind.

Slowly, they built a system.

Employees could raise problems directly. Small teams were given more freedom to solve them. Managers had to respond

within a fixed time. Useful ideas were recognised and acted upon.

Dev became the bridge between people who had something to say and people who had the authority to act.

And he was good at it.

He could take a complicated problem and explain it simply. He could make senior managers listen without making them defensive. He could make employees speak without making them afraid.

The experiment began to show results.

Small problems disappeared.

Ideas surfaced.

People who had been thinking of leaving decided to stay.

Arvind began seeing the numbers change.

One evening, he called Dev.

"I still disagree with half your methods."

"Only half?"

"Don't celebrate."

Dev smiled.

"But?"

Arvind looked at the report in front of him.

"They're working."

That was enough.

Other companies heard about what was happening.

They wanted to know who had designed it.

Dev's phone began ringing.

Then ringing more.

His name appeared in an article.

Someone called him a "thought leader."

He called Raghav.

"What is a thought leader?"

"Apparently you."

"Should I be worried?"

"Yes."

People who had once asked, "What exactly do you do?" now introduced Dev before he could answer.

At an event, the classmate from the wedding approached.

"Dev! I always knew you'd do something different."

Dev smiled.

"You should have told me. I was worried."

The man laughed, missing the point.

Across the room someone said to Raghav:

"Your friend is lucky."

Raghav looked toward Dev.

"Yes."

The man expected more.

Raghav added:

"And good."

CHAPTER 22

The Wrong Direction

The Meeting Without Raghav

The restructuring email arrived Monday.

Raghav's name was absent from the new leadership structure.

He read the message twice.

Then once more.

His division had been merged.

His role would "evolve."

Corporate language was elegant when delivering bad news.

He went to his manager.

"What does evolve mean?"

The man looked uncomfortable.

"We're finding the right fit."

"For me?"

"Yes."

"Do you have one?"

Silence.

Raghav understood.

He returned to his cabin.

The chair Dev had once admired suddenly felt borrowed.

That evening, his father noticed before he spoke.

"What happened?"

"Restructuring."

"Job?"

"Still there."

"Work?"

"I don't know."

His father folded the newspaper.

"Then the job is not still there."

Raghav looked at him.

The old man had understood in ten seconds what HR had taken three pages to explain.

Dev's career accelerated.

Raghav's stalled.

Within three months, Dev had more work than he could accept.

Within the same three months, Raghav had less authority than five years earlier.

His title remained respectable.

His responsibilities disappeared quietly.

Meetings happened without him.

Decisions arrived after they had been made.

People who once waited outside his cabin now sent emails beginning:

For your information.

One afternoon, Raghav walked into a meeting room and found his former team discussing a project he had created.

The new head smiled.

"Oh, Raghav. We didn't know you were joining."

Raghav sat for seven minutes.

Then left.

In the lift, Sameer stood beside him.

Neither spoke until the doors closed.

"This is wrong," Sameer said.

Raghav stared ahead.

"It is organisational change."

"Don't give me HR language."

Raghav smiled weakly.

Sameer shook his head.

"Luck has no manners, yaar."

The phrase did not amuse Raghav this time.

By their mid-forties, career conversations sounded different. Time no longer felt unlimited, and every reversal carried more weight than it once had.

CHAPTER 23
Two Boxes

Raghav left the company after twenty-one years.

His professional life fitted into two cardboard boxes.

A photograph.

Awards.

Books.

A coffee mug.

Two notebooks.

A plant someone had gifted him and nobody wanted.

Dev waited downstairs.

When Raghav appeared carrying the boxes, Dev looked at them.

"Twenty-one years?"

"Yes."

"Excellent storage discipline."

Raghav smiled.

In the car, he did not speak.

The office building disappeared behind them.

For years he had entered through those gates with authority.

Now the security guard had said:

“Visit us, sir.”

Visit.

One word had moved him from inside to outside.

At home, his mother had prepared lunch.

His father took one box.

No speeches.

No advice.

That evening, a relative called.

“So what next?”

“I don’t know.”

“You should have planned.”

Raghav looked at the wall.

He had planned.

That was the unbearable part.

CHAPTER 24

Down

The first rejection surprised Raghav.

The fourth worried him.

The ninth frightened him.

He prepared for each.

Company reports.

Market data.

Role expectations.

Competitor analysis.

References.

He reached final rounds repeatedly.

Someone internal was selected.

A position was frozen.

Another preferred a younger candidate.

One recruiter stopped returning calls entirely.

Dev's phone, meanwhile, would not stop ringing.

He was flying business class to a conference while Raghav sat outside an interview room with six other candidates.

One man was twenty years younger.

One was checking notes.

One was praying quietly.

Another paced.

For the first time in his career, Raghav felt old.

The interview lasted twenty-three minutes.

He knew it was over before he left.

Outside, his phone contained a photograph from Dev.

A huge auditorium.

Wish you were here.

Raghav stared at it.

Then typed:

Kill it.

Dev replied:

Prefer to educate them. Less legal trouble.

Raghav laughed alone in the corridor.

Then sat down.

For several minutes, he could not get up.

CHAPTER 25

Congratulations, Dev

The award ceremony was held in a five-star hotel.

Dev was being honoured for innovation in organisational learning.

Raghav attended wearing the same suit he had worn to two recent interviews.

Under stage lights, Dev looked completely at ease.

Raghav knew he wasn't.

He could tell from the way Dev rubbed his thumb against his index finger.

People applauded.

Photographs followed.

A young founder waited to meet him.

Someone asked for mentorship.

Someone else invited him abroad.

Raghav stood at the back.

An acquaintance approached.

"Raghav! Long time. Where are you now?"

"Between roles."

The man's face changed.

“Oh.”

One syllable.

Condolence disguised as conversation.

Then he pointed toward Dev.

“What a rise! Incredible. Who would have thought?”

Raghav looked at him.

“I would.”

The man moved away.

Afterward Dev found him.

“Tea?”

“Here?”

“No. Their tea costs the GDP of a small island.”

They found a roadside stall.

Dev placed the award on the plastic table.

The tea seller asked, “What is that?”

Dev looked at Raghav.

“Proof that nobody checked my college marks.”

Raghav laughed.

Then Dev asked, “How are you?”

“Fine.”

Dev waited.

Raghav looked away.

“I am not fine.”

Dev said nothing.

"I'm scared."

Still nothing.

"I don't know what I am doing wrong."

Dev moved the trophy aside.

That was all.

The award had occupied the centre of the table.

Raghav needed it more.

By early fifties, both had discovered that career conversations sounded very different when time no longer felt unlimited.

CHAPTER 26

The Lucky Man

Dev's photograph appeared in a business magazine.

His mother bought six copies.

His father bought none.

"You have one," he said.

"Why six?"

"Relatives," she replied.

His father shook his head.

"Yesterday they were asking what he does. Today they want copies."

Dev laughed.

At an event someone introduced him as a self-made success.

Dev corrected him.

"No."

The host looked confused.

"No?"

"I've had parents, teachers, friends, Anand, Arvind, colleagues, accidents, missed trains, a punctured bike and one very good sugarcane juice."

The audience laughed.

Then Dev added:

"Self-made is an arrogant accounting system."

The line travelled online.

People quoted it.

Someone made a poster.

Dev sent it to Raghav.

Apparently I said this.

Raghav replied:

You did. Grammar survived too.

Raghav was struggling financially now.

Savings remained.

His lifestyle was controlled.

There was no crisis.

Yet every month without income felt like evidence.

At a family gathering, someone asked his father:

"Still no job for Raghav?"

His father replied calmly:

"Still the same Raghav."

The man did not know what to say.

Raghav didn't think so either when he heard about it later.

CHAPTER 27
The Lowest Floor

The offer finally came.

Raghav read it twice.

Salary: forty percent lower.

Role: smaller.

Reporting level: two grades below his previous position.

He called Dev.

“I got an offer.”

“Great.”

Raghav told him the details.

Dev became quiet.

“What do you think?”

“You’re asking the wrong man.”

“Why?”

“I’ll tell you to do whatever lets you sleep.”

“That is not useful.”

“Exactly.”

Raghav accepted.

He told himself it was practical.

At the new office, his manager was younger than several people Raghav had previously mentored.

The cabin was gone.

He had a workstation.

No assistant.

No dedicated parking.

None of these should have mattered.

Somehow they did.

On the first day, a young colleague explained a basic process to him slowly.

"Understood?"

"Yes."

"Sure?"

Raghav smiled.

"Very."

At lunch, he sat alone.

The canteen was bright and crowded.

Young employees discussed apps, investments, weekend trips and managers they disliked.

Nobody knew who he had been.

For the first time, his past carried no authority.

That evening he sat in his car for twenty minutes before driving home.

His phone rang.

Dev.

Raghav did not answer.

Dev called again.

Still no answer.

A message arrived.

Alive?

Raghav typed:

Yes.

Dev replied:

Good. Rest can wait.

Raghav put the phone down.

His eyes filled.

He let them.

CHAPTER 28

When Luck Left

Years later, the plots did appreciate.

Considerably.

Raghav's colleagues spoke proudly about them.

One built a house.

Another sold and funded his daughter's education.

Raghav held his.

It became one of his better investments.

Dev never pretended otherwise.

One evening Raghav showed him the latest valuation.

Dev whistled.

"You were right."

Raghav looked suspicious.

"Say it again."

"No."

"You said I was right."

"Once is natural. Twice is performance."

Raghav laughed.

"Your bike is probably worth one-fourth now."

"Less."

"And?"

Dev smiled.

"It has taken me to places the plot hasn't visited."

"That is ridiculous."

"Yes."

"Any regret?"

Dev thought for a moment.

"A little."

Raghav looked surprised.

"Really?"

"Of course. Your land multiplied."

Then Dev looked toward his bike.

"But regret doesn't automatically mean the decision was wrong."

Raghav didn't say anything.

Dev continued:

"Sometimes you choose between two good things. One becomes money. The other becomes memory. Years later, naturally, each makes you wonder about the other."

Raghav smiled.

"That is the first sensible thing you've said about the bike."

"Don't worry. I'll recover."

Dev's success had grown faster than he had expected.

What had started with conversations and a small experiment had become serious work. He now had a small team. Several companies were using his programmes. Workshops were booked months in advance. Two major clients accounted for a large part of his income.

Dev was still Dev, but the work around him was no longer casual.

There were salaries to pay. Office expenses. Travel commitments. Programmes already promised to clients.

Then the market slowed.

Companies became cautious. Training and consulting budgets were among the first to be questioned. Projects that had once been approved in a week now went through several rounds of discussion.

Dev noticed it, but he was not worried.

Then came the email.

One of his biggest clients terminated a major programme as part of a global cost-cutting exercise.

Three days later, another major client did the same.

A few others delayed their renewals.

Within weeks, a large part of Dev's expected income disappeared.

Then came another blow.

Arvind's company entered a difficult financial year. Sales were under pressure and costs had to be reduced across the organisation.

A project Dev had publicly championed was delayed too

Few months later, a newspaper column questioned whether "conversation-led transformation" was measurable or merely fashionable.

The phones did not stop immediately.

That would have been cleaner.

They rang less.

Invitations became enquiries.

Enquiries became silence.

One evening Dev's father placed the magazine with his son's photograph on the table.

"Keep it."

"Why?"

"Good memory."

Dev smiled.

"Past tense?"

His father smiled too.

"Everything becomes past tense eventually."

Dev looked at him.

"You could have been a philosopher."

"I had a family to feed."

Dev laughed.

That night he slept badly.

For the first time, he prepared obsessively for a client pitch.

He rehearsed.

Rewrote.

Checked numbers.

Reached early.

He lost the account.

Outside the building he called Raghav.

"I did everything you do."

"And?"

"Still lost."

Raghav laughed.

Dev laughed too.

Then neither spoke.

Finally Dev said:

"This is a terrible system."

"Welcome."

CHAPTER 29
Enough

By their mid fifties, neither man measured time mainly through promotions anymore.

They met in the old park.

No café.

No conference.

No award.

No office.

Two men on a bench.

Raghav had begun settling into his smaller role.

Dev had begun losing the public identity that had arrived so suddenly.

Children played nearby.

An old couple walked slowly around the track.

A fitness trainer shouted instructions at people who had paid to be shouted at.

Dev watched.

"I miss being wanted."

Raghav nodded.

"I know."

"I thought I wouldn't."

"I know."

"You're enjoying this."

"A little."

Dev smiled.

"Good."

Raghav looked at him.

"I miss being important."

Dev nodded.

"I know."

"I thought the new job would cure that."

"And?"

"It showed me how much I needed curing."

Dev laughed.

They sat quietly.

After a while Dev asked:

"Who had it worse?"

Raghav turned.

"Don't start."

"I'm asking."

"No comparison."

Dev smiled.

"Good."

That rule had survived everything.

Success.

Failure.

Money.

Recognition.

Humiliation.

For the first time, their positions had completed the circle.

The prepared man had learned uncertainty.

The spontaneous man was learning endurance.

Luck had no manners.

It entered without knocking.

And left without thanking anyone.

Years had begun showing themselves in smaller ways.

Parents walked slower.

Friends discussed blood reports more often than promotions.

Children they remembered carrying were now choosing careers.

The city had grown upward.

Old houses disappeared behind apartment towers.

Their favourite streets had new names on navigation apps.

Raghav's father died one winter morning.

No preparation helped.

Dev stayed with the family for three days.

He did not offer philosophy.

Months later, Raghav said:

"Thank you."

"For?"

"For saying nothing."

Dev nodded.

Some years later, Dev's mother fell ill.

Raghav became the organised one again.

Doctors.

Appointments.

Reports.

Medicines.

Dev once looked at him in the hospital corridor.

"I don't know what I would do without you."

Raghav answered:

"Something badly."

Dev laughed.

The laugh mattered.

Life had reduced their grand debates.

Preparation mattered.

Spontaneity mattered.

Money mattered.

Luck mattered.

People mattered more.

One evening Dev asked:

“How much is enough?”

Raghav said, “Enough what?”

Raghav became quiet.

“Everything.”

“That is not a question.”

“It is now.”

They walked through the colony where Raghav had grown up.

Children still played cricket, though the lane was narrower because cars occupied both sides.

Dev said:

“Maybe enough is when getting more starts costing what you already love.”

Raghav looked at him.

“Explain.”

“More money costing health.”

“More recognition costing privacy.”

“More work costing family.”

“More comfort costing curiosity.”

“More certainty costing adventure.”

Raghav added,

“More freedom costing responsibility.”

Dev nodded.

"Exactly."

"That is unusually sensible."

"Age is damaging me."

CHAPTER 30
Luck Has No Manners

Table Seven was still there.

The café had changed owners twice.

The wooden counter was gone.

The menu now contained words neither man understood.

People ordered through QR codes.

Raghav arrived twelve minutes early.

Some habits had earned the right to survive.

Dev arrived eighteen minutes late.

Raghav looked at his watch.

Dev sat down.

“Traffic?”

“No.”

“Then?”

Dev smiled.

“Life.”

Raghav laughed.

The waiter approached.

“What would you like, sir?”

Raghav looked at Dev.

Dev looked at the menu.

"Do you understand any of this?"

"No."

"Excellent."

They ordered ordinary coffee.

It arrived in unnecessarily sophisticated cups.

Dev looked around.

"Do you remember when you said I would lose because I never prepared?"

"Yes."

"You were right."

"Frequently."

"And when I said you couldn't prepare for everything?"

"Yes."

"You were right too."

"Occasionally."

They smiled.

Outside, the city moved past them.

A young executive hurried while speaking into a headset.

A delivery rider searched for an address.

A child stopped to watch a dog.

An elderly woman waited at the crossing.

A couple argued beside a scooter.

Life contained no central character.

That had taken them years to understand.

Dev asked, “Who won?”

“What?”

“Us.”

Raghav laughed.

“Neither.”

“Excellent.”

“Why?”

“I was afraid you’d say you.”

The waiter brought the bill.

Both reached for it.

Dev said, “You paid last time.”

“That was years ago.”

“Interest.”

“Split?”

Dev stared.

“After decades of friendship, your great philosophical conclusion is fifty-fifty?”

“Efficient.”

They paid.

Outside, the evening was pleasant.

No rain.

No convenient rainbow.

No dramatic sunset waiting to endorse their wisdom.

Just a normal street on a normal evening.

They began walking.

Dev said, “Would you change anything?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“I’d worry less.”

Dev nodded.

“I’d prepare more.”

They laughed.

After a few steps, Raghav asked:

“Success?”

“Enjoy it.”

“Failure?”

“Don’t decorate it.”

“Money?”

“Enough.”

“Recognition?”

“Temporary.”

“Preparation?”

“Respect.”

“Spontaneity?”

“Oxygen.”

“Luck?”

Dev thought.

"Badly brought up."

Raghav laughed.

They reached the crossing.

Traffic was heavy.

Raghav waited for the signal.

Dev moved forward.

Raghav caught his arm.

"Wait."

Dev looked at the traffic.

Then at Raghav.

"Preparation?"

"Survival."

They crossed when the light changed.

On the other side, Dev said:

"You know, after everything that happened to us, I still don't know whether life is fair."

Raghav nodded.

"I don't think it promised to be."

"Then what did it promise?"

"Nothing."

Dev smiled.

"That is strangely comforting."

They continued walking.

Neither was where he had once expected to be.

Raghav: “Do you regret not marrying?”

Dev: “Sometimes.”

Raghav: “Only sometimes?”

Dev: “If I say never, I am lying. If I say always, I am also lying.”

Raghav: “Same.”

Dev: “See? Even regret refuses full-time employment.”

Raghav had prepared for a life that eventually ignored several of his plans.

Dev had wandered through a life that rewarded him, celebrated him, embarrassed him and eventually reminded him that luck never signs long-term contracts.

People had called one disciplined.

The other careless.

Then one unlucky.

The other gifted.

Then one resilient.

The other overrated.

The labels kept changing because the outcomes kept changing.

The men underneath them changed more slowly.

They had learnt to prepare without believing preparation was prophecy.

To welcome luck without confusing it with ability.

To accept help without calling themselves self-made.

To endure failure without converting it into identity.

To enjoy success before it became expectation.

And to leave enough room in life for things that had no agenda.

Dev suddenly stopped.

"What?"

Raghav asked.

"I forgot something."

"What?"

"I don't know."

"How can you know you forgot something if you don't know what it is?"

Dev considered this.

"See? Even forgetting requires self-awareness."

Raghav shook his head.

"After all these years…"

"What?"

"You remain impossible."

Dev smiled.

"And you remain prepared for it."

They walked on.

Somewhere along the way, both had stopped trying to prove anything to anyone. Raghav no longer needed the world to

admire his preparation. Dev no longer needed it to approve of the way he lived. They had succeeded, failed, risen, fallen, been praised and questioned. It had taken them years to understand that life was lighter when there was no audience to impress. They still had plans, hopes and unfinished things. They simply had nothing left to prove.